

CitizenFirst & Digital Divide

Monday, 1 September 2008

Access to Information Communications Technologies must be made available to everyone in County Clare if the continued digitalisation of public services is to be deemed a success.

That is according to the Mid West Regional Authority (MWRA), which is the lead partner in a European Transnational project aimed at making eGovernment services more widely accessible and socially inclusive.

The CitizenFirst project seeks to reduce the digital divide that affects communities and citizens in the territories of Mid-West Region (Ireland), Eindhoven Region (Netherlands), West Flanders (Belgium) and Cambridgeshire (UK).

Among the pilot projects being rolled out across the Mid-west is an online dictionary of available and accessible cultural and recreational services, the promotion of assistive technologies in libraries and the provision of Public Internet Kiosks.

The four-year project will culminate with an international conference in Ennis, County Clare on 25/26 September 2008. The event will feature a keynote address by Ms. Máire Hocht, T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for the Elderly.

Entitled "*CitizenFirst...Using Technology To Include All Citizens*", the conference is aimed at public, local and voluntary stakeholders working on providing solutions to social exclusion in local communities by exploring the benefits of ICT.

According to MWRA Chairperson, Cllr. Bernard Hanrahan, "*Services for citizens are increasingly being deployed by public agencies on a supply-side efficiency basis, without actually determining the needs and wishes of the citizen. This has led to low usage of the services by many citizens, especially those with special needs and/or living in rural areas.*"

Ms. Marie Collins, MWRA Project Manager explained that the Authority, in conjunction with Service Providers throughout the Region, had already rolled out numerous successful pilot projects aimed at redressing this imbalance.

'However, despite the success of the CitizenFirst project we acknowledge that some target groups remain at risk of further exclusion with the digitalisation of public services. In the last year, the project has been working closely with these target groups to further gain the participation of hard to reach, marginalised groups and people with special needs.'

The CitizenFirst Project has brought considerable investment into the region through the installation of Public Internet Kiosks located in Doolin, Kilrush, Ennistymon, Thurles, Nenagh and Limerick City, each providing access to local, regional, public and tourism information to the local resident or passing visitor. The Internet information points involved multi-agency cooperation between the Local Authorities, Shannon Development, Health Services Executive, Enterprise Boards and the Regional Authority.

Five other CitizenFirst eInclusion pilots have commenced since November 2007 and are due for completion when the project ends next month.

An online dictionary called “*Access Limerick*” informs people with disabilities, their families and carers of the accessibility and availability of local cultural and recreational services in Limerick City centre. Each venue is assessed by a person with a disability and rated as to the level of their accessibility.

Elsewhere, the MWRA has joined up with Limerick County Library to enhance the lives of their local communities by providing a promotional campaign to highlight the new Assistive Technologies available in the County’s 24 Library Branches. It also involves the loaning of laptops within each library (including the Mobile Library) to enable people to access Internet services using their Wi-Fi/3G networks.

Another Limerick-based pilot focuses on Access and Awareness raising to maximise the effective use of ICTs, and address digital exclusion within socially and economically disadvantaged communities in Limerick City, by supporting community groups to purchase install and manage the resources necessary for delivery of their services. The Limerick City Community ICT Steering Group is a network consisting representatives from the PAUL Partnership and City of Limerick VEC, as well as five community centres in socially and economically disadvantaged areas of the city.

Meanwhile, an ICT initiative in RAPID Areas, including parts of Ennis and Limerick City, is exploring the feasibility of older people using laptops and 3G broadband. The pilot aims to enhance the quality of Older Peoples’ lives through strengthening their relationships to their neighbourhood, family and community of origin by the use of ICT.

The MWRA is also redeveloping its website based on Universal Design principles and General Accessibility guidelines to provide accessibility to the widest user audience, including older users and users with disabilities. The website will be the first fully accessible regional authority website in Ireland when it is launched during the upcoming CitizenFirst Final Conference.

MWRA Director Mr. Liam Conneally pointed out that much progress had been made in successfully concentrating on refocusing local and regional activities from organisation driven services to citizen centric services.

“Electronic service delivery has the potential to fundamentally change the pattern of service delivery in local government. The challenge for the Mid West Regional Authority has been to ensure that the transformation of services puts the citizen first”, he added.

CitizenFirst is a European co-funded project under INTERREG IIIB North West Europe. The Mid-West Regional Authority is Lead Partner. Other partners include Cambridgeshire County Council (UK), Eindhoven Regional Government (NL) and City of Kortrijk (BE) – all public authorities.

Further information on the Citizen First project or the upcoming conference is available from the CitizenFirst website:

www.citizen-first.net

or the

MWRA website: www.mwra.ie

The MWRA can be contacted by telephone **(067) 33197** or by email at info@mwra.ie.

Citizen First...
using Technology to include ALL Citizens

Final International Conference
The Old Ground Hotel, Ennis, Co. Clare, IRELAND
25-26 September 2008

Day 1 – 25th September 2008

19.00h – 21.00h Conference Registration
Civic Reception in the Clare County Council
Address by Mayor of Clare & Chairperson of Mid-West Regional Authority
Display of Mid-West/CitizenFirst ICT eInclusion Projects
Wine Reception & Entertainment

Day 2 – 26th September 2008

08.45h Conference Registration
09.30h Welcome by **Chairperson of Mid-West Regional Authority**
09.40h Keynote address by **Ms. Máire Hctor, T.D., Minister of State with responsibility for the Elderly**
10.00h European Perspective – presentation by **Ms. Michela Marasco, Joint Technical Secretariat, INTERREG IVB North West Europe**
10.20h CitizenFirst Lessons learned through eInclusion projects: recommendations for local & regional policy makers – **Ms. Rebecca Morgan, Cambridgeshire County Council**
10.40h Questions & Answers
11.00h Coffee Break
11.30h **Mr. Liam Conneally, Director, Mid-West Regional Authority**
Introduction to Case-Studies – Setting the Scene
11.45h CitizenFirst eInclusion Initiatives – presentations will highlight the issues faced, solutions undertaken & action needed (what can be done at local level)
Themes:
1. Disadvantaged Areas ~ **Mid-West Ireland**
2. Young People ~ **Cambridgeshire UK**
3. People with Special Needs ~ **Kortrijk Belgium**
4. eCommunities ~ **Eindhoven The Netherlands**
5. eAgeing ~ **Mid-West Ireland & Cambridgeshire UK**
13.00h Panel Discussion ~ Questions & Answers
13.30h Wrap-up
13.45h Networking Lunch
15.00h Close of Conference – **Closing Address by Mid-West Regional Authority**

Citizen First

<http://www.citizen-first.net/>

<http://www.epractice.eu/einclusion>