

Foresight

NORTHERN IRELAND

NETWORKS & SYSTEMS

SUMMARY REPORT



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THE PANEL

Chairman

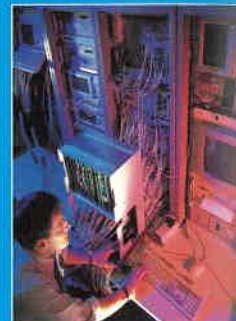
Professor Danny McCaughan Nortel - Satellite Network Solutions

Secretary

Mr Colin Hunter Northern Ireland
Growth Challenge

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<i>Professor John Anderson</i>	<i>University of Ulster</i>
<i>Professor John McCanny</i>	<i>The Queen's University Belfast</i>
<i>Dr Alan Marshall</i>	<i>The Queen's University Belfast</i>
<i>Mr Jim Sayers</i>	<i>Local Economic Development Unit</i>
<i>Mr Stephen Scullion</i>	<i>Mercury Communications Ltd</i>
<i>Mr Nick Stirk</i>	<i>Cabletel Ltd</i>



APPROACH

A Panel of network specialists from the private sector and academia considered how Northern Ireland could best benefit over the next 5 - 10 years from the recommendations made in the Technology Foresight: "Progress Through Partnership" national reports.

The Panel decided on the following strategy -

- to use as its initial source of ideas, the reports from the Technology Foresight national exercise
- to investigate agreed areas of network provision
- to meet monthly to make progress and consider submissions
- to set up a web page to communicate and disseminate progress reports.

The Panel organised a major workshop (on 1st November 1996) when the Northern Ireland community of users and providers of IT, Communications and Software were asked for their views.

FINDINGS

A very strong view emerged out of all the meetings and deliberations that availability of greater bandwidth to the home and office would revolutionise the use of ITEC in Northern Ireland. As a starting point there are many small companies using ITEC to some degree. However, there is a shortage of entrepreneurial people in the ITEC area.

In other countries (especially the US) awareness of IT and E-mail has reached such a level that each year more PCs than TVs are sold, and a high proportion of the population (including pensioners) use electronic mail services. Growth in usage of the World Wide Web is now very rapid.

Northern Ireland's physical communications network infrastructure is currently adequately served by BT, Cellnet, Cabletel, Mercury and Vodaphone (plus Satellite for TV). In addition the Universities are connected to the SuperJanet UK Academic Network and some big companies have corporate "Intranets". These network facilities seem to be adequate for the current limited needs of Northern Ireland. However, any major expansion of the plans for utilisation of networks could pose some major problems. Access to domestic premises is normally by twisted pair of copper cables of limited bandwidth and the core networks are not currently geared to massive public utilisation of bandwidth. While these service companies have plans for expansion of both the core networks and access to them, public use of the networks for anything other than simple telephony is relatively limited and Medium or Broadband access is expensive and a barrier to growth.

Government use of, and initiatives in, IT and communications in Northern Ireland are limited and sporadic. E-mail is becoming widespread but, by comparison with big company "Intranets", Government usage is small. Some in Government would like to see acceleration of this usage. The Departments here are followers rather than leaders in the use of IT in Northern Ireland, and would seem to be behind the position taken by Departments in Whitehall. Each Department should take much more direct responsibility for rapid and effective use of IT and central Government in Northern Ireland should be much more proactive.

In many places in the UK, initiatives are in place or proposed to provide major new services and facilities through Metropolitan Area Networks, linking educational establishments, businesses and service providers in a much more effective way. Despite an apparent early lead in provision in the "STAR" network, the lack of follow-up, lack of applications and of utilisation plans has left Northern Ireland behind other regions.

Northern Ireland has fewer people working in tradable services than other parts of the UK. There are major opportunities for growth in the service sector, and stimulation of service sector opportunities could accelerate disproportionately the take-up and growth in this area. If these issues were to be dynamically addressed, new opportunities for Northern Ireland in the next millennium would be enabled.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- To begin to implement the Metropolitan Area Network ideas more coherently a panel of key network providers should be set up (e.g. under NIGC) , with user involvement to co-ordinate network services to universities, colleges, schools and libraries. The ideas of a Metropolitan Area Network and an internet exchange for Northern Ireland should be taken forward with local service providers specifically, interactive broadband services for education, healthcare, information provision, training, commerce and finance are all vital elements of a (fair cost) local solution.
- One department should take responsibility for co-ordination of the Government approach to IT providing leadership, building on the IRTU Information Superhighway Initiative and taking cognisance of the central Government approach. Government's position as a follower, not leader, does not help the process of rapid take-up and growth of the use of ITEC.
- The service companies should be encouraged in major new steps to expand the use of ITEC facilities. These activities should be co-ordinated with new initiatives in LEDU and IDB and assisted by IRTU. These agencies should put together plans and strategies for the support of new initiatives, services and use of ITEC. This will stimulate major growth of service sector opportunities in which Northern Ireland seriously lags behind the rest of the UK.
- Our universities should be encouraged to grow new "outreach" programmes in ITEC with a special new fund from Government to assist this growth. Possible programmes could be links to schools, community initiatives, new developments in Computer Mediated Learning and Teaching etc.
- The Networks & Systems Panel supports the recommendations cited in the Software Panel report, specifically their mandatory course in use of IT and ideas regarding federation support in individual industrial sectors.



A MORE DETAILED REPORT ON THE WORK OF THIS SECTOR PANEL IS AVAILABLE
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