

Workshop: Regional Initiatives in the South East of Ireland

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Abstract: This paper focuses on a number of ICT, eBusiness, and eWork initiatives in the South East of Ireland. The core theme is that it is essential to develop coherent umbrella regional and national initiatives, with suitable funding, to avoid different initiatives competing with each other instead of co-operating. One example of this integrated approach is the South East Information Society Strategy (SEISS <http://www.seiss.ie>), a body with representation from all the regional authorities, and relevant industries, established by the South East Regional Authority (SERA <http://www.sera.ie>).

For many micro SMEs, which make up the bulk of SMEs in Europe as a whole, access to on-line services is still problematic. Unless there is direct investment in ICT infrastructure in regions the economic trends will draw industry away from regions to central conurbations increasing the digital divide. This is because in central locations more ICT competition leads to lower costs for the same services. Interestingly wireless options (e.g. wireless GPRS, local wireless LAN or WiFi, satellite) may provide cheap low bandwidth always-on connectivity before any fixed wire options (e.g. cable-modem, ADSL) are actually deployed in peripheral regions.

1. Introduction

The Telecommunications Software & Systems Group (TSSG) is a research group in Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT) in the South East of Ireland. Whilst its primary objective has been to push back the boundaries of technological developments, particularly in the area of software services for telecommunications systems, it has also championed a number of technology transfer projects that are focused on promoting the take-up of Information Communication Technologies (ICT) by regional industries, effectively acting as a regional ICT catalyst. Within WIT other departments and individuals (in particular the School of Business) have also championed various ICT business awareness projects.

This paper gives a brief overview of a number of these projects, and focuses on the foundation in the region of an umbrella group, the South East Information Society Strategy (SEISS), to co-ordinate lobbying for regional investment in ICT infrastructure, and ICT take-up measures.

2. Regional Profile: South East Ireland



Figure 1: The South East Region in Ireland

The region is made up of five counties, Carlow, Kilkenny, Tipperary South Riding, Waterford and Wexford, each with a fiercely independent history. The establishment of the South East Regional Authority [3], in 1994, effectively bound these areas together into a coherent region. However, the South East is a homogenous and compact geographical entity consisting essentially of the catchment areas of four rivers—the Slaney, the Barrow, the Nore and the Suir. The region has an area of 9,406 km² (approximately 13.5% of the area of the state). It has a current population estimated at 404,211 or about 11% of the national population. The South East region is predominantly rural in character with the main urban centres being Waterford City, Kilkenny City and the towns of Carlow, Clonmel and Wexford.

3. TSSG Projects with a Regional Role

Many towns and cities in Europe have had projects and groups trying to raise awareness of ICT in general, and in Waterford the local initiative was called WIRE'd (Waterford Information Revolution for Everybody). This lobby group held meetings with relevant parties, received press coverage, and pursued various forms of funding initiatives.

The TSSG (with WIRE'd as a partner) was involved in an EU-funded project NITOURA II (TEN-Telecom, New Information Society to open Up Rural Areas) [1] with partners in peripheral areas of Sweden, France, Germany and Portugal. All co-operated to develop on-line services for SMEs in each region, accessed via the Internet. The Irish regional activity involved over 200 local SMEs signing up, although the active users were only a proportion of these. The gap between stated interest, and actual participation was primarily due to the nature of the participants: most were micro SMEs with little time to participate, or access to suitable physical connectivity. Clearly, there is little point in

developing services that anticipate cheap always-on Internet connectivity, when the local ICT infrastructure cannot provide this. To put these observations in context, when this project was conceived, various organisations were promising such local broadband access (cable companies offering cable modems, and telephone operators offering ADSL). In fact most of these ambitious rollout plans were curtailed, and there is still no always-on broadband access available to SMEs in the region.

At the time the TSSG discovered that there was another EU-funded initiative running in the region, twinning it with Wales, across the Irish sea, WIRECOM (funded by Intereg) [2]. The NITOURA team had some discussions with the WIRECOM team, and we learned from each other. Their focus was on carrying out an evaluation of a number of businesses, identifying areas that could more efficiently and profitably be executed using e-Commerce solutions. This was delivered in the form of a report and a step-by-step guide for participating businesses.

Both projects produced business directories independently, as a major requirement for many of the SMEs was a cheap way of getting an Internet presence (of jumping on the Internet bandwagon). The NITOURA II project provided mechanisms for the SMEs to keep their own entries updated, and provided each business with its own domain name (company.connectkey.com) that linked to this directory page automatically.

So, here we have in the small region of the South East, with a population of less than 0.5 million, two separate projects (amongst others), one with a business focus and one with a technology focus. Of course there were other regional initiatives as well. The umbrella body for chambers of commerce in Ireland (which are private organisations, and not compulsory state organisation, as in some other countries) had their own initiative. Various regional groups and organisation had their own initiatives. Certain commercial companies were also stimulating demand in their own way (e.g. web design companies). Certain sectoral groups had their own initiatives (e.g. the Irish tourism board's sponsored on-line booking system was being made available to local Bed & Breakfast providers). And all the time, the media was deluged with pronouncements from government ministers about the "digital revolution" and Ireland being an "e-commerce hub".

To put it very simply, if I were an SME in the South East of Ireland in 2000 I would not know which way to turn to get information about the so-called "Information Society", not because there was a lack of opportunities, but because there were too many uncoordinated opportunities. How many of these portals and directories would dry up when the funding ran out? Would I be better off getting some school children to do a website for me cheaply, rather than paying high fees to a web development company? In this complex arena, one interesting question is: "Who evaluates whether the monies pumped into regional schemes is actually spent effectively?" The thesis of this paper is not to criticise any of these projects individually, after all the author was directly involved in one of these schemes. The thesis is that, for real co-ordinated development, targeted at SMEs who may not have the expertise to evaluate the various options, umbrella regional initiatives are required which bring together these disparate schemes.

4. Coordinated Regional Initiatives

Having identified that the lack of a coordinated regional programme was leading to dissipation of meagre resources, and confusing messages for SMEs, the TSSG became a founder member of the South East Information Society Strategy (SEISS) [4]. This was a lobby group, established by the regional authority, to coordinate and prioritise regional ICT requirements. The seed funding was from Irish government, Department of Public Enterprise, via its Information Age fund. Initially it drew representatives from public and

private sector groups throughout the region (see Table 1) and established a series of working groups.

| Sector | Participants |
|-------------------------------|--------------|
| Commercial & Retail Services | 23 |
| Education & Training | 25 |
| Mfg. & Intl. Traded Services | 19 |
| Public Services & Utilities | 31 |
| Rural & Voluntary Communities | 31 |
| Tourism | 19 |
| Steering Group | 18 |
| Total Representation | 166 |

Table 1: SEISS Number of Participants by Sector

The Steering Group was established in May 2000, and six sectoral working groups were established afterwards:

- Education & Training
- Manufacturing Industry & Traded Services
- Rural & Voluntary Group
- Public Services and Utilities
- Commercial Retail & Services
- Tourism

These working groups co-ordinated a consultative process that lasted until July 2001; the aim was to develop a coherent regional Information Society strategy. The draft strategy document was released at the end of July 2001, and feedback was sought from all interested parties. These inputs were co-ordinated to produce a Regional Strategy & Action Plan in October 2001, with a 3-5 year implementation period.

5. SEISS Findings, Strategy and Successes

As part of the work of SEISS a number of reports were commissioned. One the main reports was a benchmarking study of the region (Jan 2001). This showed that the South East was lagging behind other parts of the country, and other countries, in many key ICT measures.

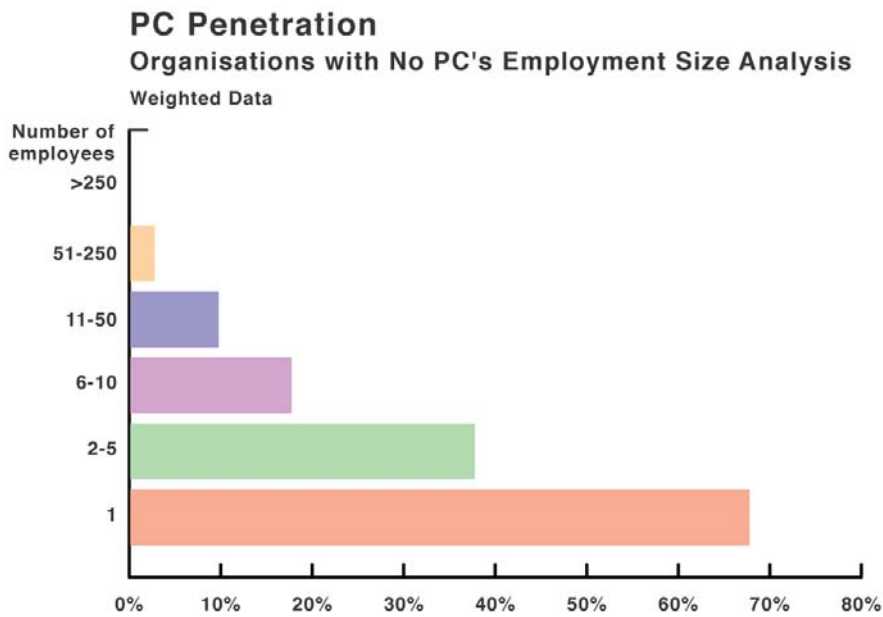
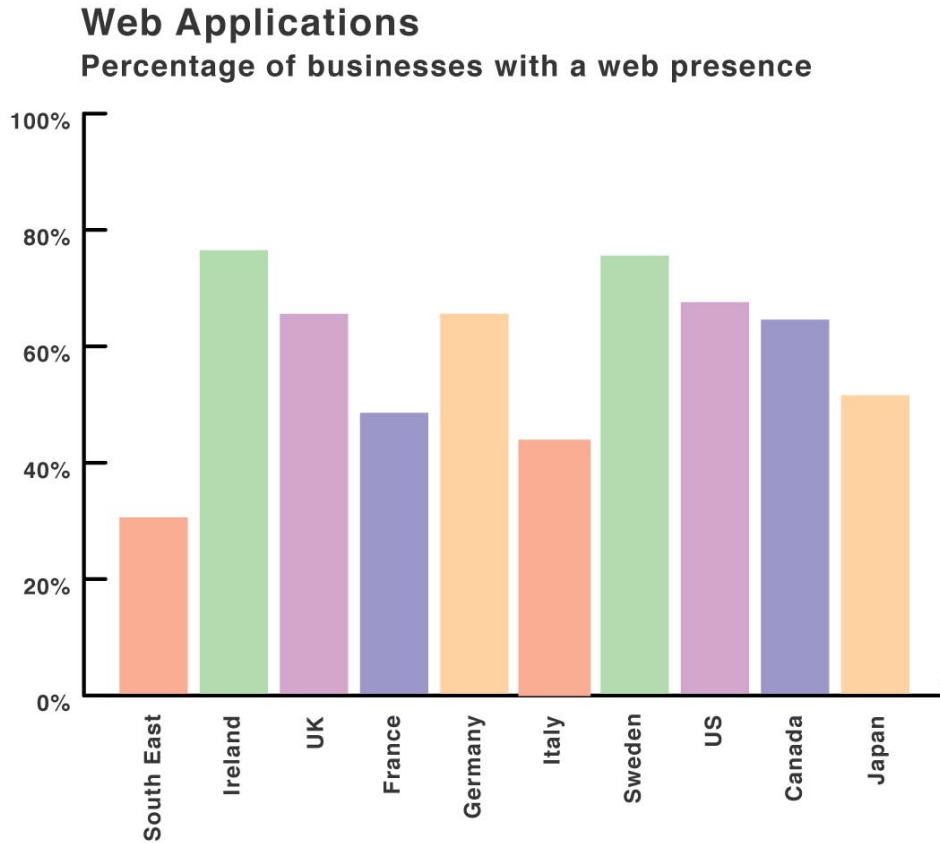


Figure 1: PC Penetration (in companies in the South East of Ireland)

Figure 1 shows the penetration of PCs in SMEs in the region. The vast majority of 1-person companies had no PCs, and 38% of the micro SMEs (2-5 employees) had no PCs.



5.1 Figure 2: Businesses with a web presence

Figure 2 shows that the South East region lags behind the country, and other countries, in the number of businesses with a web presence. SEISS has now published its Regional Strategy and Action Plan. This involves the continuation establishment of five working groups:

- Regional Identity and Co-ordination
 - Securing on-going funding
 - Identifying key catalysts individuals
 - Organising an Information Society conference
 - Establishing a marketing and promotion partnership
- ICT Awareness Raising
 - Develop and co-ordinate a targeted awareness raising programme
 - Establish an Information Society observatory
- ICT Demand Stimulation & Support
 - Provide support for local companies using a variety of mechanisms
 - Encourage key private and sector deployments which will act as catalysts for uptake of technologies
- ICT Skills Development
 - Build partnerships with education and training centres
 - Establish Skills observatory
- ICT Supply Sector
 - Deploy a regional portal with regional directories
 - Encourage key sectoral users' deployments
- ICT Access & Infrastructure
 - Promote public internet access
 - Develop infrastructure though partnerships and direct funding

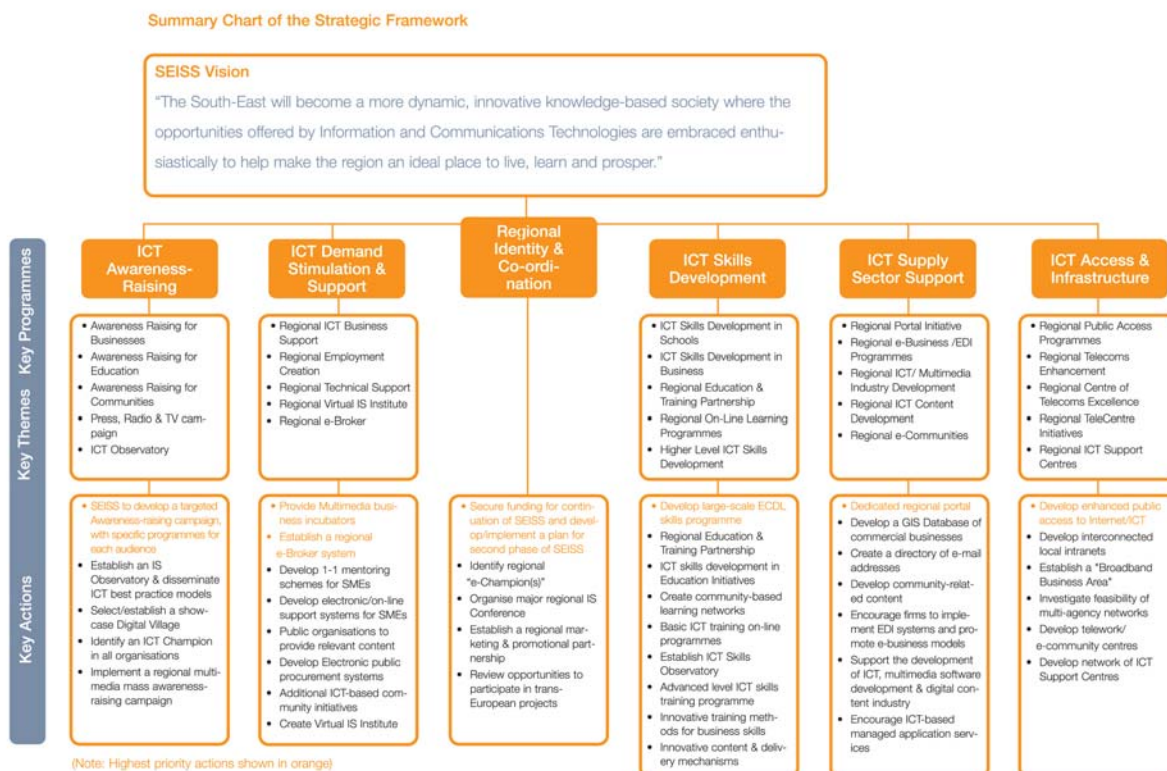


Figure 3: SEISS Strategic Framework

Already SEISS has won significant funding the first of a two-phase proposal for the development within the region of a fibre network (see Figure 4).

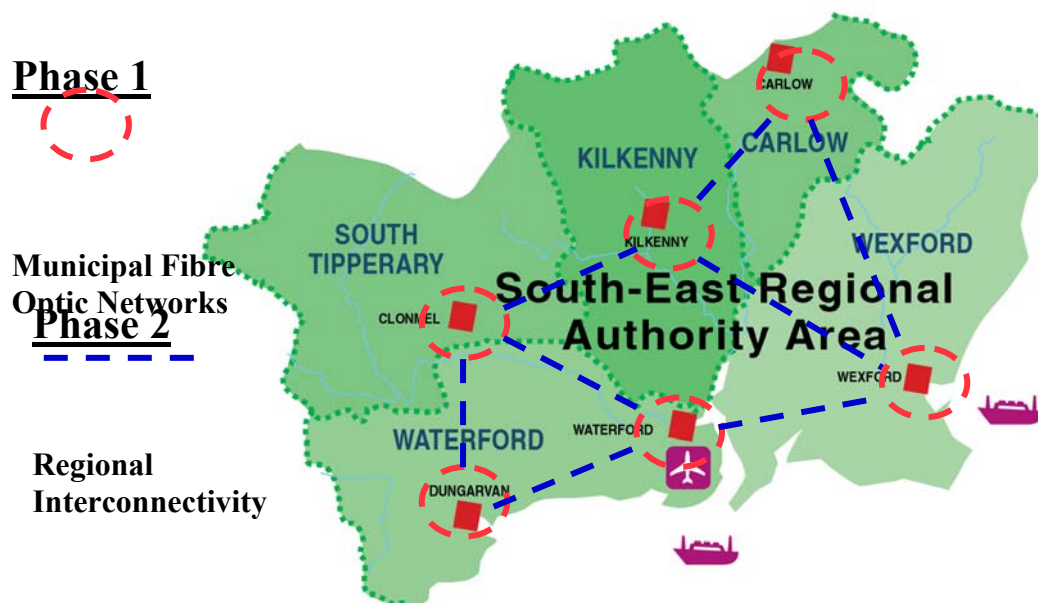


Figure 4: SEISS Regional Broadband Access Network

The first phase involves the establishment of fibre rings around each of the major cities and towns in the region, linking the academic, business and public centres in each location. Provision will then be made for commercial service providers to lease access to these networks.

6. Conclusion

The paper has argued that, in the South East of Ireland, most national and international funding for ICT take-up projects has been sporadic, and while there have been many individual excellent projects, these have limited impact due to their disparate uncoordinated nature. The paper has described a best practice model of a coordinated regional strategy, as epitomised by the South East Information Society Strategy (SEISS), and has presented key findings, strategy, action plan, and successes of this programme.

References

- [1] NITOURA II (TEN-Telecom Project) http://www.nitoura.org/NITOURA_II
- [2] WireCom (Integra Project) <http://www.wirecom.org.uk>
- [3] South East Regional Authority (SERA) <http://www.sera.ie>
- [4] South East Information Society Strategy (SEISS) <http://www.seiss.ie>