



Public Internet Points in Cities across Europe

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Background

Currently 30-40% of the European population, mostly older people, people with disabilities, lower education groups, unemployed and those living in less-developed regions, are still not actively engaged in using ICT and are not part of the Knowledge Society in Europe.

Public Internet Centres, Public Internet Access Points or Telecentres play a strong role in helping the digitally excluded to get on board and assisting citizens to keep up with recent ICT developments.

However, these terms no longer fully reflect the objectives and the activities carried out by the projects as they are no longer simple physical locations to access ICT.

Across Europe, projects are increasing in their complexity; apart from providing an access point to computers and the Internet, training programmes are offered, community activities organised and new services introduced.

The centres often function as a node to activate social capital in the neighbourhood: they empower people at the local level to speak out and to work together with the help of ICT. This increasingly complex and multidisciplinary approach has consequences for the way the centres work, are organised and offer services.

The EURO CITIES Working Group eInclusion focused its meeting on 20 October 2011 on this topic.

The key conclusions of the meeting are summarised in this report.

Speakers

- Andrea Parola: eSkills Association, Telecentre Europe, Belgium
- Alexandra Haché, independent expert, Spain
- Vaino Olev, CIO, city of Tallinn, Estonia
- Martine Delannoy, city of Ghent, Belgium
- Diane Downey, city of Sunderland, United Kingdom

Meeting participants

- Jacek Urbaniak, city of Lodz , Poland
- Deirdre Ferguson, David Kelly: city of Belfast, UK
- Heike-Schuster James, Digital Birmingham, UK
- David Gillanders, city of Ronneby, Sweden
- Julia Lopez I Ventura, city of Barcelona, Spain
- Jan Franke: EURO CITIES
- Alex Haché, independent expert, Spain
- Joep Brouwers, Brainport Eindhoven, Netherlands
- Pekka Pakkalen, city of Oulu, Finland
- Andrea Parola: Telecentres Europe, Belgium
- Ian Clifford: UK online centres, Telecentre Europe (rapporteur), UK
- Diane Downey city of Sunderland, UK

- Martine Delannoy, Jelle Monstrey, city of Ghent , Belgium
- Vaino Olev, city of Tallinn, Estonia
- Dave Carter, Adrian Slatcher, Manchester Digital Development Agency, UK

The working group e-Inclusion is chaired by Martine Delannoy, Digipolis (city of Ghent).

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Meeting summary

The meeting explored the opportunities for cities in engaging with digital inclusion initiatives. The first two presentations from experts in Telecentres, eSkills and Digital Inclusion looked at a number of areas where positive action is yielding results for individuals and communities. Cities were encouraged to connect with their networks of telecentres, which may already be under their management with Library networks, but also in voluntary sector organisations. These activities could support cities to strengthen community cohesion, employability, skills development and the use and uptake of online services.

Opportunities to partner with telecentre networks should be explored by cities as the impact they have could be significant. Work has been carried out, and is ongoing, to measure this impact economically. There are also activities that cities could engage in with telecentre networks focused on recognising the roles of the telecentre professional and develop clearer curricula for telecentre workers..

In the final city case study presentation, for Tallinn, the city technology strategy and implementation progress was explained, and many of the reasons for cities to engage with their local telecentre support networks were evident. Cities' IT departments have a strong focus on service provision, and this clearly requires full citizen participation before full economic savings can be realised from these programmes.

The meeting was an interesting exploration of the topic and highlighted some practical opportunities with which cities could become involved (for example European Get Online Week), and some follow up questions (listed at the end of this report) for future exploration.

Policy background

The Digital Agenda¹ as one of the flagships of Europe 2020 and the Gdansk roadmap for digital inclusion² are key elements of European policy on digital inclusion. In fact, Pillar VI of the Digital Agenda focuses on enhancing "e-skills", including digital literacy and competences. The "new skills for new jobs"³ flagship will also contribute to this.

¹http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/digital-agenda/index_en.htm

²http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/activities/einclusion/policy/competences/gdansk_roadmap/index_en.htm

³<http://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=568>

Which actors are involved?

The idea of Telecentres evolved from so-called Telecottages in Scandinavia and Canada in 80s, and in Asia and Africa ICT4D centres in the 90s. This brought about a variety of actors involved in running telecentres, which include NGOs, non-profit organisations, municipal governments, commercial enterprises, schools and libraries.

Mapping the organisations involved in running and supporting telecentres in Europe is a complex task. A differentiation can be made between formal and informal organizations, where the latter also includes informal Peer-to-Peer and social networks. Third sector actors are often involved actively in managing telecentres

What do telecentres offer?

Telecentres aim increasingly at a complex set of activities rather than just providing access to ICT equipment or the internet. This makes them more dependent on resources to develop services and appropriate human resources (skilled trainers) and accreditation schemes.

Telecentres now provide for skills training, try to increase employability of excluded persons, help accessing online government services and support disabled or disadvantaged groups such as elderly, poor or disconnected. In Tallinn, public libraries take the role of open access centres for people without internet connection and offer assistance in using the country's wide range of eGovernment services.

What is the role of municipal governments and cities?

Municipal governments can take different roles in supporting telecentres in their area. Often however they are not aware or not well connected to existing telecentres or similar initiatives. Many cities run their own digital inclusion programmes, such as the city of Ghent, which connect with third sector organizations in the area. Key to the local strategies is a single contact point combined with a mainstreaming approach. Digital inclusion should have a "Place", a single contact in the administration, whilst at the same time the concept must be mainstreamed across all city services and departments. Third sector organisations must be supported in a fair way and be encouraged to collaborate. Cities and other governmental levels should focus on structural means of support and be careful with funding that might favour competition instead of collaboration between third sector partners.

In Sunderland, public access schemes have a strong community focus. The city acts as facilitator and provides for a technical support team which offers specialist training, lends equipment and links public access schemes to national initiatives such as UK online centres.

In Tallinn, the electronic ID card is a cornerstone of the city's digital strategy which ensures interoperability between services and different divisions of the administration.

Participants of the workshop agree that in the future, cities ought to look at stronger structured support for telecentres and in particular telecentre workers, through:

- Development of training curricula and accreditation of telecentre workers
- Development of micro-finance schemes for telecentre start-ups
- This will only be possible through working together with other governmental levels.

How is the impact of telecentres measured?

Understanding the socio-economic benefits of telecentres is important in order to justify public and private investment and support. However, there is still a severe lack of baseline indicators. Many telecentre initiatives gather data, but a European benchmark is missing and the data is in principle very hard to compare and access.

Therefore, experts and participants of the meeting suggested that a European benchmark for telecentres should be developed, to look at:

- Effects on employability and social inclusion
- The quality of services offered
- Impact on civic engagement and cohesion of the local community

Challenges and open questions

The meeting led to a number of ongoing questions for further exploration. First, participants identified the need to further simplification of European funding programmes. Furthermore, the use of open source software allows resources to be shared and reused over networks such as Telecentres Europe and should be supported further. Sustainable planning and financing of telecentre activities remains an issue, as often projects only run for a period of time with subsidies from public or private bodies and very few robust business models exist.

The following questions were identified with particular relevance to cities and public sector support:

- How can cities engage more with telecentre networks, and wider digital inclusion campaigns?
- What actions could be taken to recognise the role of the telecentre professional?
- How can cities ensure the scarce funding resources reaches the 'frontline'?
- How can the production of useful impact data, social and economic impact assessment be done more systematically?
- How can the profile of 'information worker'/ media worker / 'eFacilitator' be professionalized and accredited?



European Commission

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For more information see: <http://ec.europa.eu/progress>.

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