# Legislative Council Panel
## on Information Technology and Broadcasting
## Digital Divide

## 14 May 2001

## Statement made by Secretary for Information Technology and Broadcasting

I am glad to attend today the meeting of the Legislative Council Panel on Information Technology and Broadcasting to discuss the subject of digital divide. I would also like to thank the organisations attending the public hearing to give their valuable views on the subject.

The Government notes that senior citizens, people with disabilities, housewives, new arrivals, the under-privileged and the grassroots may have less opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICT). In order to bridge the digital divide or avoid the emergence of the divide between various sectors of the community, the Government has developed policies and implemented measures to tackle the issue. In the recently promulgated Digital 21 Strategy, we have included "strengthening the community for digital exploitation" as one of the key result areas.

*Government's Policies and Measures*

To avoid and prevent the emergence of digital divide, the Government has developed policies and implemented measures to tackle the issue. These include-

- enhance the use of ICT in education；
- provide training to enhance the ICT competency of teachers；
- provide funds to secondary schools to purchase notebook computers with free Internet access for loan to needy students；
- provide professional ICT training to secondary students；
- provide vocational training and employees retraining on ICT；
- encourage the market to offer telecommunications connection services at affordable price；
- provide computer facilities for free use by the public at various locations；

- install specially designed facilities and software at various locations to enable people with disabilities to have more opportunities to access and use ICT；
- provide free Internet e-mail service；
- subsidize people with disabilities to purchase personal computers to facilitate them finding jobs；
- provide free ICT awareness programmes to encourage and provide more opportunities for various sectors of the community (e.g. senior citizens, people with disabilities, housewives, new arrivals, the under-privileged and the grassroots) to learn and use ICT；
- enhance the accessibility of Government websites, and promote industry's awareness in ICT and encourage the industry to address web accessibility problems.

To enable people with disabilities to integrate into the community, the Government will encourage and provide support to them for learning and accessing ICT. We also note the importance of cross-sectional collaboration in facilitating people with disabilities to access ICT. The welfare sector also needs to enhance the use of IT so as to provide more efficient services.

*Role of Social Welfare Department (SWD) and its strategy in promoting the use of IT in the social welfare sector*

The SWD will take the lead to promote the use of IT in the social welfare sector through the followings：

- driving the IT strategy of the welfare sector；
- working in partnership with other Government departments and welfare organizations to implement the work set out in the IT strategy；
- undertaking specific welfare IT projects, independently as well as in partnership with other organizations；and
- identifying resources for implementing the IT strategy.

After consulting the Hong Kong Council of Social Services (HKCSS) and other major stakeholders, SWD has set out the IT strategy for the welfare sector, with the following targets：

- encourage the management and staff of all social welfare organizations to enhance and improve their daily use of IT in the

> management of their organizations, communication and service delivery; and

- facilitate welfare services clients and "disadvantaged" individuals to access IT and ensure that they have the capabilities to use IT.

From 1995-2001, the Government has invested over $131 million in implementing IT related projects for the welfare sector. From 1997-2001, the SWD, Lotteries Fund and Social Worker Training Fund have provided $4.7 million for providing IT training to staff of SWD and other welfare organisations.

SWD envisages that the Lotteries Fund will continue to be the main source of funds for promoting IT in the welfare sector. SWD has included an initial estimate of $60 million for IT development in the welfare sector in the estimates of the Lotteries Fund expenditure. At appropriate time, we will also explore other funding sources such as the Jockey Club Trust.

We have consulted the Social Welfare Advisory Committee on 18 January 2001 and the Legislative Council Welfare Panel on 12 February 2001 on the proposed IT strategy for the social welfare sector. The strategy was supported. Detailed implementation of the strategy is in progress. For instance, the Joint Committee on IT for Welfare Sector, to be chaired by the Director of Social Welfare, will be set up in May 2001 to promote the use of IT in the welfare sector, to formulate strategy and oversee its implementation. The Lotteries Fund has also allocated $9 million for the HKCSS to establish the executive arm of the Joint Committee to provide IT support services to non-Government welfare organisations.

*The requirement imposed by Internet Service Providers (ISPs) in using credit card for payment which creates hurdle for the disadvantaged to get online*

In relation to the requirement imposed by ISPs in using credit card for payment which creates hurdle for the disadvantaged to get online, the Government has written to all major ISPs appealing to them to offer alternative payment methods other than credit card payment, e.g. cash, cheque, autopay, EPS and pre-payment method. To date, one large broadband ISP has agreed to accept other payment methods from 1 June 2001. A number of ISPs have also indicated that they will actively consider the suggestions of Government.

*Web Content Accessibility*

To facilitate the access of the blind and the visually impaired to electronic Government services, we have planned to enhance all Government websites by 2002 or earlier in accordance with the internal web accessibility guidelines. These guidelines have also been issued to public bodies and Government subvented organisations for reference and adoption.

The Government has also organized seminars for the ICT industry in order to promote its awareness, and encourage the industry to address web accessibility. Speakers included representatives of the Hong Kong Blind Union, the Equal Opportunities Commission, universities and the Government. We will organise similar seminars, and invite representatives of public bodies and Government subvented organizations to attend.

The Government has included in the "Digital 21" website (www.digital21.gov.hk) a section on "Tips for improving accessibility of web pages" which provides guidelines on the needs of users who have impaired vision or hearing. We are also in close liaison with industry associations like the Webmasters (Hong Kong) Association to promote the adoption of web accessibility guidelines in the private sector.

*Cyberpoints and public kiosks of the Electronic Services Delivery (ESD) scheme*

The Government has installed computers with special equipment (such as screen enlarging software, voice synthesizer software and power braille) at individual Cyberpoints to facilitate the use by the blind and visually impaired. Screen enlarging software will also be installed at various kiosks of ESD by the second quarter of this year for use by the visually impaired. It may not be practicable to enhance all public kiosks with special equipment to make them accessible to the blind and visually impaired. Currently, the ESD website is fully accessible through personal computers at home. We will also consider increasing the number of specialized personal computers at the Cyberpoints for the blind and visually impaired to facilitate them to gain access to ESD services.

In the further implementation of the ESD scheme in 2001-02, the Government will supervise the operator to introduce improvement measures in the design of the ESD website and other ancillary facilities. We will also consult representative bodies of the blind and visually

impaired with a view to further improving the scheme and facilitating all members of the community to use ICT and obtain ESD services.

**Information Technology and Broadcasting Bureau**
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