

OFE Release: OFE welcomes BECTA Report promoting Open source and Open Standards and calls on UK Government for action

London – 10 January 2008

OpenForum Europe (OFE) welcomes the recent publication by Becta, the education technology agency, of a major report on Microsoft Vista and Office 2007 and document interoperability. In the report, which analyses the suitability of both software packages for adoption by schools and colleges, Becta urges schools and colleges to avoid rushing into upgrades while strongly supporting and recommending free-to-use products and the Open Document Format (ODF). OFE calls on the UK Government to recognise Becta's conclusions and provide evidence of leadership in this crucial area.

Becta concludes that the lack of interoperability caused by using proprietary systems such as Microsoft's is a major obstacle to encouraging learning in the home, one of the Government's key objectives. Improving interoperability would mean ensuring software available in the home can be used to access coursework or resources for learning.

OFE Chief Executive Graham Taylor, speaking from the BETT show, said "OpenForum Europe is a strong supporter of the only ISO-certificated standard on electronic office documents, ODF, which allows documents to be opened, read, edited and resaved in a common format by software applications from different providers. We know that interoperability is an important concern for the education sector, and we are happy that the report is so unambiguous in its recommendation of ODF."

The report is also clear in its advice to educational establishments to exercise caution before upgrading existing ICT systems to Microsoft Vista or Office 2007 and recommends that no widespread deployment of Office 2007 should take place until schools and colleges are sure that they have in place mechanisms to deal with interoperability and potential digital divide issues. To ensure widest compatibility of files between different applications, users of Office 2007 should not save in Microsoft's new Office format (OOXML), and due to limitations in Microsoft's implementation of the Open Document Format (ODF) international standard, users should in the short term continue to save files in the more widely adopted .doc, .xls and .ppt formats.

The report further asks Microsoft to provide 'native' support for the ODF file format increasingly used in competitor products including those that are 'free-to-use'. Pupils, teachers and parents should also be made aware of the wide range of free-to-use products currently available and on how to use and access them.

Graham Taylor added, "I can only agree with the statement of Becta's Executive Director of Strategic Technologies, Dr Stephen Lucey. Schools and colleges deserve to get the best possible value for money, and there should be a strong business case before upgrading to these products as the costs are significant and the benefits remain unclear."

The benefits of interoperability, and easier access to a range of competitor products, which are innovation and choice are demonstrated by the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) project, present at the OFE stand at BETT this week. (<http://openforumeurope.org/press-room/press-releases/one-laptop-per-child-comes-to-bett-show-through-openforum-europe>) It acts as a highly visible illustration of innovation, and the opportunity at low cost to bring functionality to all. All week the stand has been overwhelmed from interest across the whole of Europe as well as the countries it has been originally targeted at.

It is a sad fact that despite recognition of the benefits of open source by this project, across Europe and even by Becta, the national education technology agency the UK Government are continuing to ignore both the opportunity being offered by wider adoption of Open Source, and the importance of strong adherence to Open Standards, such as that for Document Exchange Formats. The UK is being left behind in Europe, with country after country not only reinforcing its importance as part of their strategy for citizens, but giving strong practical advice on the usage. In the UK it is left to Becta to take a pragmatic position on behalf of the educational community. With such a focus on educational issues, it seems strange that the Government should continue to ignore a system that promotes innovation and rely on one which has been shown to block off other options, increase cost and hold a danger of lack of access in the future.

ENDS

Issued by Open Forum Europe through Chelgate Ltd.

Notes to editors:

- **OpenForum Europe, is not-for-profit, independent of any organisation and was launched in March 2002 to accelerate, broaden and strengthen the use of Open Source Software in business and government. OFE pursues the vision of an open, competitive European IT market by 2010 in line with the European Commission i2010 Strategy, with the mission of facilitating open competitive choice for IT users. OFE is supported by major IT suppliers and works closely with the market, both direct and via national associates and partners.**
www.openforumeurope.org
- **Becta published two interim reports at BETT last year. The first report was concerning Microsoft's Academic Licensing Programmes and was interim as it was subject to ongoing negotiations with Microsoft. The second report concerned Vista and Office 2007 and was interim as it was based on beta products. The further research for the this report was conducted by Becta and Oakleigh Consulting Ltd on the fully released versions of the packages.**

For further information please contact Graham Taylor, Chief Executive of OFE, on +44 (0)1372 815168