



House of Commons
Committee of Public Accounts

Government on the Internet: Progress in delivering information and services online

Sixteenth Report of Session 2007–08

*Report, together with formal minutes, oral and
written evidence*

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pac>. A list of Reports of the Committee in the present Session is at the back of this volume.

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Summary

For many millions of people the internet has become the preferred way of conducting many everyday transactions, from banking to booking a holiday. The internet is often faster, easier to use and more convenient, with services available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. It has also become an important way of improving the delivery of public services. The government spends an estimated £208 million a year on delivering services and related information online, such as the renewal of vehicle excise duty, the filing of tax returns and for the matching of applicants to jobs.

In 2002, our predecessors concluded that there had been a lack of progress in implementing the recommendations from an earlier report.¹ Five years on, a quarter of government organisations still cannot provide data on the cost of their websites. And, where data were provided, over 40% of organisations provided only estimates. Further, 16% of government organisations do not have a good knowledge about the users of their websites. Even where user data are being collected, they are not always being used to inform and improve websites.

Generally, the public consider government websites to be satisfactory, and some, such as the Transport for London website, are well regarded. Overall, however, the quality of government websites has improved only slightly since 2002, and a third of sites do not meet the Cabinet Office's own user accessibility standards.

The government has embarked on an ambitious strategy to move most citizen and business facing internet services and related information to two websites, Direct.gov.uk and businesslink.gov.uk, by 2011. These sites are well regarded by the public and industry and both have received awards. The government also aims to rationalise websites by closing almost 1,000 unnecessary sites. Departments will continue to run their own, smaller websites containing policy and research information only.

For government, internet services are cheaper than traditional ways of delivering services and information. However, 75% of socially excluded people and 51% of people on low incomes do not use the internet. There is a risk that these groups, who are often major users of public services, will not benefit from the government's drive to expand the use of the internet.

Based on a report from the Comptroller and Auditor General,² we took evidence from the Cabinet Office and the Central Office of Information on the Government's progress in the management and oversight of government websites, the overall quality of sites and the drive to rationalise them.

1 Committee of Public Accounts, Sixty-sixth Report of Session 2001–02, *Progress in Achieving Government on the Web*, HC 936; Committee of Public Accounts, Twenty-first Report of Session 1999–00, *Government on the Web*, HC 331

2 C&AG's Report, *Government on the internet: progress in delivering information and services online*, HC (Session 2006–07) 529

Conclusions and Recommendations

- 1. After ten years of uncoordinated growth, the Government does not know exactly how many websites it operates, although it could be as many as 2,500.** The Cabinet Office and the Central Office for Information are reducing the number of websites, beginning with the closure of 951 by 2011. To prevent a recurrence of the proliferation of government websites, no new ones should be established without the agreement of the Government's Chief Information Officer in the Cabinet Office.
- 2. Over a quarter of government organisations still do not know the costs of their websites, making it impossible to assess whether they are value for money.** The Chief Information Officer (CIO) Council should agree a methodology for identifying the costs of websites, to be applied by all departments and agencies by the end of the next financial year. An analysis of these costings should be included in the Delivery and Transformation Group's Transformational Government annual report.
- 3. 16% of government organisations have no data about how their websites are being used, inhibiting website improvements.** The Central Office for Information, together with the Cabinet Office, should develop a methodology and a single set of measures for analysing user data such as that used by Transport for London to make improvements in its services. The agreed methodology and the measures should be applied by all departments by the end of 2008–09.
- 4. The quality of government websites has improved only slightly since 2002.** The Cabinet Office and the Central Office for Information should establish and agree with the CIO Council a single set of quality standards for government websites, which should be implemented by all departments. These should include the performance of internal search engines and facilities that allow the public to provide feedback on public services.
- 5. The website Direct.gov.uk is set to become one of the main ways of delivering public services and so must be reliable and maintained to a high standard.** In taking over responsibility for Direct.gov.uk from April 2008, the Department for Work and Pensions should commission regular independent reviews of the risks and progress of the site's development. Given the importance of Direct.gov.uk to public service delivery, the results should be shared with the Cabinet Office and the National Audit Office.
- 6. One third of government websites do not comply with the Government's own user accessibility standards, making it difficult for people with disabilities to use the sites.** In moving services and information from departmental websites to Direct.gov.uk and businesslink.gov.uk and reorganising the material left on departmental sites, all government websites should meet the accepted industry standard of accessibility by 2011.
- 7. The Government does not know how much it is saving through internet services, nor whether any savings are being redeployed to improve services for people who do not or cannot use the internet.** Expansion of online services must not lead to a

diminution of services for those without internet access. Government organisations must establish how much they should invest in each of the range of delivery channels at their disposal. The CIO Council should require all departments and agencies to develop channel strategies, which take into account the needs of those without internet access, by the end of the next financial year, and to update them every three years.

- 8. There is a risk that some people will not benefit from the Government's drive to expand the use of the internet for delivering public services and social exclusion may be reinforced.** The Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills sponsors 6,000 UK online centres to help people, including those on low incomes and with low levels of education, access public services online. The Department should specify the levels of service that users can expect from the centres, such as basic IT training and personal support in accessing and using government websites.
- 9. Government organisations have yet to decide how they should engage with intermediaries, such as family members, friends or representatives, who access online services on behalf of others.** There are risks associated with establishing intermediaries' identities and their right to act on behalf of others. In 2007, the Cabinet Office commissioned research on this subject, which the CIO Council should use to agree common principles for engaging with intermediaries, to be adopted by all government departments.

1 Progress in improving the management and quality of government websites

1. For many millions of people, the internet has become the preferred way of conducting many every-day transactions, from banking to booking a holiday. It is often faster, easier to use and more convenient, with services available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The internet has also become an important way of improving the delivery of public services. The Government spends an estimated £208 million a year on delivering services and related information online, such as the filing of tax returns, the matching of applicants to jobs, and the renewal of vehicle excise duty.³

2. The number of government websites has grown rapidly, driven by a Prime Ministerial target set in 1997 to provide access to all relevant services in electronic form by 2005, and the trend in the wider economy to provide services and information over the internet. There has been over ten years of uncoordinated growth in websites and the Government does not know how many government websites exist. The National Audit Office estimates there may be as many as 2,500 sites.⁴ The number of websites in existence has contributed to making information and services hard for users to find.⁵

3. In 2002 our predecessors identified a need for improved knowledge on the costs of website provision.⁶ However, in 2007 nearly a quarter of departments and agencies were still unable to supply the National Audit Office with this data, and even where they could, over two fifths gave only estimates (**Figure 1**).⁷ The Cabinet Office has tried to improve knowledge on the costs of websites in departments and agencies, but it has proved difficult because websites are funded and accounted for differently across government. Some organisations fund websites through communications budgets, some through IT budgets, and others from policy budgets. In some cases, website provision is included with other IT services in a larger contract, making it harder to disaggregate website from other IT service-related costs. The Cabinet Office plans to issue guidance in early 2008.⁸

4. The Committee's previous report recommended that departments should monitor the usage of government websites.⁹ There are some examples of good practice in tracking use in the public sector. For example, Transport for London analyses data on how people use its site to help change the design of its website in the light of patterns of usage over time.¹⁰ Direct.gov.uk combines user data with information from regular customer satisfaction

3 C&AG's Report, para 14

4 Qq 2, 96–97

5 Q 96

6 Committee of Public Accounts, *Progress in Achieving Government on the Web*

7 Q 28; C&AG's Report, para 2.47

8 Q 30

9 Committee of Public Accounts, *Progress in Achieving Government on the Web*

10 Q 14

surveys.¹¹ However, one in six government organisations still gather no such data and many of those that do, do not use it to improve their sites (**Figure 1**).¹²

Figure 1: Quality of information on usage of main corporate websites and the cost of website provision and support returned by departments and agencies

<i>All figures are percentages</i> Data on costs of website provision	Data on number of unique visitors to the website						TOTAL (%)	
	No data		Partial data		Full data			
	All	Depts	All	Depts	All	Depts	All	Depts
No data	7	3	11	11	9	11	27	24
Partial data	6	16	20	17	18	13	44	46
Full data	3	3	7	8	19	19	29	30
TOTAL (%)	16	22	39	35	45	43	100	100

The column "All" includes the dataset for the whole population of organisations responding to the survey (N = 129). The column "Depts" includes only Ministerial departments and non-ministerial departments (N = 37).

Technical note: The NAO asked organisations to provide annual cost figures for the most recent year and previous five years. Each response was assessed using the following criteria. **Full data** – organisations could provide at least 4 out of 5 years including the most recent and could provide full data for the breakdown for the current year. Organisations less than five years old were required to provide full data for each year of existence. **Partial data** – organisations could provide 1 to 3 years of data and at least a total for the current year. **None or negligible** – no data provided or figures that seemed grossly unrealistic. A judgement was made on borderline cases between Full and Partial in favour of Full (i.e. benefit of the doubt).

Source: NAO survey of departments and agencies

5. The public are generally satisfied with government websites, although overall the quality has improved only slightly since 2001 and one in six sites has become significantly worse (**Figure 2**).¹³ The public also compare government websites unfavourably with commercial sites, particularly those of banks and travel companies.¹⁴ The Government's own service transformation strategy requires services to be designed around the needs of the customer or citizen, rather than the service provider.¹⁵

11 Q 12

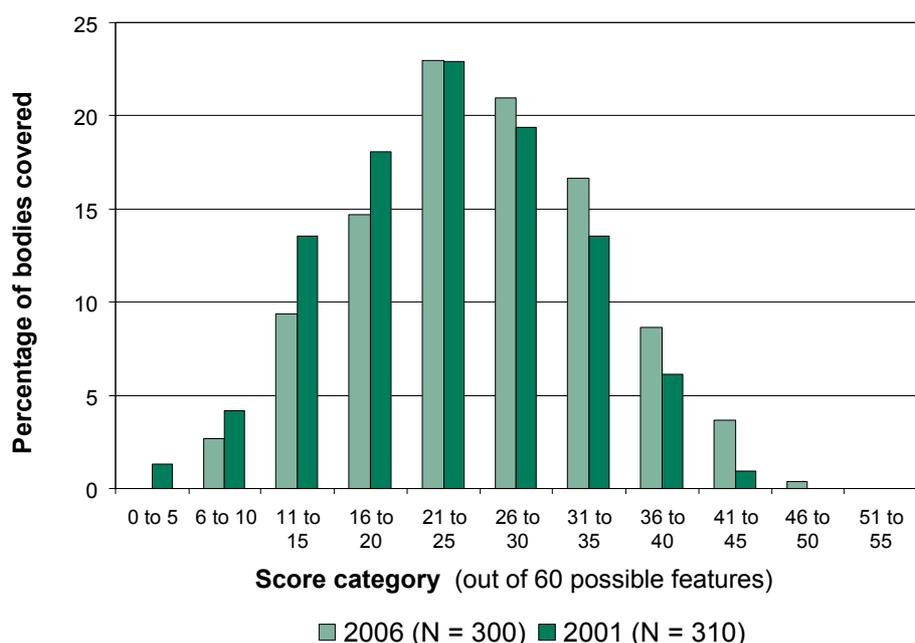
12 Qq 12–14

13 Q 17

14 Qq 14, 17,41–42; C&AG's Report, para 4

15 Q 17

Figure 2: There were slightly more higher scoring websites in 2006 than in 2001



Source: NAO Census of government organisations' websites

6. Research in 2006 found that a third of government websites fail to meet the government's own accessibility standards.¹⁶ These include making it possible to adjust the size of text, providing text alternatives for non-text content and making all content readable and understandable. Direct.gov.uk and businesslink.gov.uk meet these standards and the Central Office for Information is consulting with representative groups about ways in which other government websites can be made more accessible. This will be a priority for the Central Office for Information in 2008.

7. Search engines to help users find services and information are generally poor on government websites. The Direct.gov.uk search engine, for example, only searches within the site itself, whereas the US Government search engine covers the whole of the US government (from Federal to state to local and tribal levels—over 22,000 sites).¹⁷ The Cabinet Office is working with Google to develop a stronger search function as part of the wider strategy of reducing the number and complexity of government websites.¹⁸

8. Government websites should offer facilities to enable users to provide feedback about public services and information made available online.¹⁹ The National Audit Office found that many government websites have yet to adopt approaches now commonplace among leading private sector websites. These include allowing users to post content onto websites and to provide comments about the services and information provided. Fewer than 4% of government sites inform users of the most popular sections of their site or of the most commonly downloaded documents.²⁰ Some government sites are piloting such facilities,

16 Q 18; Adam Field, Southampton University, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4853000.stm>

17 Q 16

18 Q 56

19 Qq 48–49

20 C&AG's Report, para 1.17

and some are well established including the online petitions facility on the 10 Downing Street website and the Department of Health's feedback and testimonials site for NHS patients.²¹

21 C&AG's Report, para 1.17

2 Risks to the accessibility of public services

9. The Government's strategy for the delivery of public services is informed by Sir David Varney's review of service transformation. The strategy is set out in the Transformational Government Strategy and in the 2007 Service Transformation Agreement which was published as part of the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review.²² Delivering services over the internet is just one of a range of channels that government can use to deliver services and information to citizens, customers and businesses. Others include call centres, mail, face-to-face meetings, mobile phones and digital television.

10. The internet, however, is not always the most appropriate channel for all citizens or all services. This may be because some services are better suited to face to face transactions (such as being interviewed for a passport) or because a particular service is aimed at a social group likely to not have ready internet access such as those on low incomes. The Transformational Government Strategy sets out the Government's plans to invest in websites alongside other channels, based on an understanding of their customers' needs.²³ This understanding is intended to form the basis for government organisations' channel strategies, setting out how they plan to deliver online service improvements. At present, however, a third of government organisations do not have such strategies.

11. The Government is promoting the use of electronic channels such as the internet and contact centres for routine transactions such as renewing vehicle excise duty. Online delivery can be more efficient than more traditional means of service delivery. The Varney review estimated that up to £400 million could be saved from greater use of electronic service delivery.²⁴ The money released in this way could be used to fund services for those people who do not, or cannot, use the internet, such as the socially excluded. For example, The Pension Service, local authorities and the voluntary sector provide joint face-to-face services for those who cannot access services in other ways.²⁵

12. The Cabinet Office does not know how much money is being saved through the delivery of services over the internet. Internet transactions are administratively cheaper, but most departments do not know the costs per transaction and how they compare with the costs of other channels. The Government also does not know whether any savings from moving central government services to the internet are being used to improve more traditional service channels for those who cannot use internet services or whose needs may be complex and require a more targeted, tailored service that involves human interaction.²⁶

22 HM Treasury, *Service Transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer* http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/4/F/pbr06_varney_review.pdf

23 Qq 19, 38

24 HM Treasury, *Service Transformation: A better service for citizens and businesses, a better deal for the taxpayer* http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/media/4/F/pbr06_varney_review.pdf

25 Ev 13

26 Qq 76–77

13. Some government organisations are reducing face-to-face contact, as demonstrated by the increasing use of telephone contact centres by The Pension Service. The impact of this change on socially excluded citizens is unknown.²⁷ There is a risk that the drive to deliver more services online could increase social exclusion if more personalised means of delivery are not also promoted with the same degree of vigour and enthusiasm.²⁸ Those who use government services the most tend to be people on lower incomes and the socially excluded.²⁹ They are also much less likely to have either the skills or the access to technology to use the internet. For example, 79% of people receiving means tested benefits lack ICT skills and 75% of socially excluded people do not use the internet. Around half of those earning less than £10,400 a year have never used it.³⁰

14. The Government wishes to make internet access available to as many people as possible. To meet this objective, the Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills sponsors some 6,000 UK online centres providing free or low-cost internet access. These are used by around three million people every year.³¹ Most centres are located in public libraries, and many help people to access public services online. However, the level of support and training on offer varies and, in some cases, is very limited.³²

15. Local authorities are also developing shared services. For example, the Rushcliffe First Contact Signposting Scheme and the One-Stop-Shop services provided jointly by Staffordshire Moorlands County Council and District Council.³³ These provide joined-up public services at a single location, offering advice and guidance on employment, benefits and pensions.

16. 45% of contacts with the Disability and Carers Service and around 23% of contacts with The Pension Service come through intermediaries. Government departments have found it difficult, however, to establish online communications with intermediaries, and the Cabinet Office has been cautious about the use of intermediaries because of fears about identity fraud. In 2007, the Department commissioned research to explore how such links could be developed in the future. This work is being reviewed and the Cabinet Office plan to develop a strategy for engaging with intermediaries in 2008.³⁴

27 Qq 62–69, 85

28 Qq 61, 69

29 Q 19

30 Qq 61, 82, 91

31 Qq 19, 57

32 Qq 57, 59, 60, 82

33 Ev 13

34 Qq 82, 91–92

3 Rationalising the number of government websites

17. To make online services and information easier to find, as well as assure the quality of government websites, the Cabinet Office and the Central Office for Information are reducing significantly the number of websites. Some 951 sites have been identified for closure and 90 have already been closed. They are also moving most citizen- and business-facing services and related information on to two websites: Direct.gov.uk and businesslink.gov.uk.³⁵ Transferring key government services and large amounts of information, whilst at the same time upgrading and reconfiguring them, is a complex and ambitious programme and the Cabinet Office does not expect to complete the work until 2011.³⁶ Departments and agencies will still have their own websites, but these will be small, and dedicated to providing policy and departmental information.

18. Both Direct.gov.uk and businesslink.gov.uk are now established and well regarded by the public and business. Direct.gov.uk alone has over five million visitors a month and both sites have good reliability records. The site businesslink.gov.uk was available for use 99.99% of the time in 2007 and Direct.gov.uk 98% of the time in late 2006 and early 2007. Both sites comply with the government's accessibility standards and both have won awards.³⁷ To make information as easy to access as possible, Direct.gov.uk aims to present it in a format that is designed around the needs of users and structured around 'life events' such as education and learning, motoring and employment, and other subjects such as health and wellbeing and rights and responsibilities.³⁸

19. As part of moving the existing content of sites to either Direct.gov.uk or businesslink.gov.uk, all services and related information will be reviewed and redesigned to meet the required standards and structure of these two main sites. One risk to the delivery of this programme is the capacity of the Direct.gov.uk team, which is smaller than that running other large websites such as the BBC website. There is a risk that this could lead to a reliance on external consultants.³⁹

20. In 2007, ownership of businesslink.gov.uk was transferred to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs and, from April 2008, Direct.gov.uk will be based with the Department for Work and Pensions. The total annual budget for Direct.gov.uk in each year over the period of the Comprehensive Spending Review is up to £30 million. For the last four years, departments have contributed to the funding of Direct.gov.uk, but the majority of costs will, from April 2008, be met from this central budget as part of the Service Transformation Agreement under the 2007 Comprehensive Spending Review. Departments will still fund from their own resources the development and maintenance of

35 Qq 55

36 Qq 9, 15, 21, 24, 53

37 Qq 27, 44

38 Qq 24, 27, 55, 49

39 Qq 15, 39, 51

services and related information around the different life events and subjects that make up the structure of Direct.gov.uk and businesslink.gov.uk.

Formal Minutes

Monday 31 March 2008

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon

Mr Alan Williams

Mr Keith Hill

Phil Wilson

Mr Don Touhig

Draft Report (*Government on the Internet: Progress in delivering information and services online*), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 20 read and agreed to.

Conclusions and recommendations read and agreed to.

Summary read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the Sixteenth Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

Ordered, That embargoed copies of the Report be made available, in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 134.

[Adjourned until Wednesday 2 April 2008 at 3.30 pm.]

Witnesses

Wednesday 28 November 2007

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Ms Alexis Cleveland, Director General, Transformational Government,
Mr John Suffolk, Chief Information Officer, Cabinet Office, and
Mr Alan Bishop, Chief Executive, Central Office of Information

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Third Report	Building for the future: Sustainable construction and refurbishment on the government estate	HC 174 (Cm 7323)
Fourth Report	Environment Agency: Building and maintaining river and coastal flood defences in England	HC 175 (Cm 7323)
Fifth Report	Evasion of Vehicle Excise Duty	HC 227 (Cm 7323)
Sixth Report	Department of Health: Improving Services and Support for People with Dementia	HC 228 (Cm 7323)
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Oral evidence

Taken before the Committee of Public Accounts

on Wednesday 28 November 2007

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Ian Davidson
Angela Eagle
Nigel Griffiths

Keith Hill
Mr Austin Mitchell

Sir John Bourn, KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, **Tim Burr**, Deputy Comptroller and Auditor General, **Keith Holden**, Director, National Audit Office were in attendance.

Marius Gallaher, Alternate Treasury Officer of Accounts was in attendance.

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL

GOVERNMENT ON THE INTERNET: PROGRESS IN DELIVERING INFORMATION AND SERVICES ONLINE (HC 529)

Witnesses: **Ms Alexis Cleveland**, Director General, Transformational Government, **Mr John Suffolk**, Chief Information Officer, Cabinet Office; **Mr Alan Bishop**, Chief Executive, Central Office of Information, gave evidence.

Chairman: Good afternoon. Welcome to the Committee of Public Accounts where today we are considering the Comptroller and Auditor General's Report, *Government on the internet: progress in delivering information and services online*. I will be introducing our witnesses in a moment but first of all I would like to welcome to our Committee the Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury, Angela Eagle. You are very welcome. She of course uniquely, although a government minister, is a Member of this Committee but that has been a custom since time immemorial and is a very delightful custom. It is not part of her duty to sit through all these Committee meetings so she will be leaving in a moment to go back to the front bench. However, as she has just joined our Committee as a new Member, we have to deal with her interests and I just want to ask if there is any change to her interests as published in the Register of Members' Interests.

Angela Eagle: No.

Q1 Chairman: Thank you very much. We welcome to this hearing Alan Bishop, who is Accounting Officer and Chief Executive of the Central Office of Information, John Suffolk, the Government's Chief Information officer, and Alexis Cleveland, Director General of the Transformational Delivery Group in the Cabinet Office. Perhaps I could start with Alexis Cleveland, if I may. As you know, we did a Report in 2002 and we found then that very few of these government websites could give us any reliable information as to cost. This was a formal recommendation of the Committee. It was formally accepted by the government in a Treasury Minute. It is all noted down in the appendix to this Report but until this recent inquiry by the NAO unearthed these costs apparently government had very little information so that rather begs the question as to

whether your office took seriously the Treasury Minute in the first place, because until the NAO came back to this issue the government appeared to be unaware of the cost of these websites.

Ms Cleveland: The Cabinet Office takes very seriously any recommendation from this Committee as we will the recommendations at the front of this Report as well. We have tried in the past to get a good grip on the costs of these websites. It is very difficult to get a clear view. In some departments they see it as part of a communication budget; in other parts, they are in an IT budget. Trying to break those down to get the full costs of individual websites and then the applications that run across them is just very difficult. It is partly because of the view of trying to get a better grip on costs and to secure better value for money for the taxpayer that we have adopted the new strategy which is looking at combining many of the websites.

Q2 Chairman: I am sure we will be making a similar recommendation. It is absolutely essential, to understand whether you are achieving value for money, to know what the costs of a particular project is. If the NAO can provide a guesstimate, as they have in this Report, I would have thought that the government or its resources could do so as well. John Suffolk, could I ask you the next question about the number of websites? We are already a bit vague about what they cost. Apparently, we are also rather vague about how many there are. I am told in a briefing by the National Audit Office that nobody knows for certain how many government websites there are. There could be 2,500 but nobody quite knows. What we do know is that again, despite recommendations we made in our Report, there are no fewer than 1,000 surplus websites. Is that right?

Cabinet Office & Central Office of Information

Mr Suffolk: In relation to the number of websites, it is difficult for us to identify all the government websites because they are not always with the extension .gov.uk. Those are the ones we can easily identify. If a department or an agency or a non-departmental public body puts a different extension on, that can be quite difficult to track. This really is one of the reasons why we are going down the website rationalisation process which is about getting a handle on how many websites we have, what value they are adding to citizens and also coalescing our resources around our two key websites, which are direct.gov and business link.

Q3 Chairman: Why has the government allowed ten years of uncoordinated growth in the number of websites?

Mr Suffolk: I do not think this is a government issue. When we look at website growth around the world, what has happened is that people have automatically created a website for a particular purpose. You see this in every walk of life. There is a balance that we have to strike between central, how many websites do we have, versus very targeted websites such as Talk to Frank. Therefore, when we look at the new work that we are doing, it is about saying let us look at things through the eyes of the citizen or the business. This is where the citizens are saying to us that we now need to coalesce and reduce the number of websites that we have.

Q4 Chairman: What is Talk to Frank about?

Mr Suffolk: Talk to Frank is about people avoiding taking drugs.

Q5 Chairman: Alan Bishop, surely the key now is to link more and more of these websites to direct.gov, is it not?

Mr Bishop: Absolutely. It is the main driver for direct.gov.

Q6 Chairman: If that is right, the next question is why are so few linked to direct.gov?

Mr Bishop: The programme is now well under way. There were 951 central government websites identified. Of those, 551, 56%, are already scheduled for closure. So far, there have only been 26 agreed exceptions out of the 951 and they are mainly for the single, departmental, corporate websites which will continue on into the future.

Q7 Chairman: That all sounds great but, as we read in paragraph 3.13, "Links to the Directgov website are found in fewer than a third of other government sites although Directgov is relevant to the work of most government organisations."

Mr Bishop: That is absolutely right, but right now what we are doing is, rather than creating links from those websites, we are closing them down.

Q8 Chairman: It sounds very grand but I understand the only thing you can do at direct.gov is renew your car tax. It is more like "Not me, gov". It is hardly a very awe inspiring site, is it, if the only thing you can do on it is renew your car tax?

Mr Bishop: I would say this, wouldn't I, but it is seen by people to be a far more useful website than that. First of all, just the idea of having information about the whole of government gathered together in one place gets tremendous enthusiasm.

Q9 Chairman: Let us assume for a moment that this works and you do manage to concentrate everything onto two websites. Are we not just letting ourselves in for another IT disaster in a few years' time when the whole thing crashes?

Mr Bishop: No.

Q10 Chairman: How can you be so sure about that?

Mr Bishop: Obviously it is always difficult to say you are absolutely, 100% sure, but everything in direct.gov is replicated so there is back-up for everything. We have hardly any outage over the last four years. The only time availability has gone below the high 99 point something per cent over that period of time has been when we had the change of platform back in February. At that time, it was still 96% availability.

Q11 Chairman: As well as knowing the costs of your websites, how many you have and all the rest of it, it is absolutely crucial to know what the usage is or what is the point of having one if you do not know who is using it? We see in paragraph 2.8 that unbelievably one in six government departments, despite the fact that the Committee of Public Accounts in their last Report recommended that departments should improve their knowledge of their website use level, still have no data and where data has been collected many organisations are not analysing them to inform the design of sites. This is absolutely key, is it not?

Mr Bishop: It is.

Q12 Chairman: You have to know what are the costs of your websites, how many people are using them, what are they using them for and then you can improve the service. It is unbelievable that one in six of these websites have no data.

Ms Cleveland: The direct.gov website itself does have good metrics and does know about the number of people visiting it.

Q13 Chairman: I did not ask you about direct.gov. I asked you a specific question, in a Report that you have agreed on. One in six of these websites have no data at all.

Ms Cleveland: That is why we are not looking to expand those websites. It is much better value for money to build around direct.gov where we do have those and then we can have common standards across the whole of government.

Q14 Chairman: This is just good practice. I understand even in the public sector Transport for London has a very sophisticated website. They know exactly who is using it; they can trace how many people are buying Oyster cards for what reason and all this sort of thing. In the private sector nobody would dream of designing a website if they did not

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know exactly what its purpose was and how many people were using it. Often these websites are deliberately designed, as you enter them, to find out about your consumer preferences. This is central, is it not? Why should we be less professional in the public sector than in the private sector?

Ms Cleveland: We should not be. We should be absolutely as professional and that is part of what we are looking to get through the internet channel, so we need to have insight into our customer usage there, as we do with all our other channels, so that we can say how do we influence people to use our services in a cost effective way.

Q15 Keith Hill: Let me take up this issue of direct.gov, the super site which is evidently regarded as a radical—I presume that means potentially impressive—development. The Report does find that the team supporting the super sites is small compared with those managing commercial sites and other large sites such as the BBC website. It concludes there is a risk that the capacity behind the sites will be insufficient to support the sites' expansion. What is your reaction to that and what are you going to do about it?

Mr Bishop: The capacity is there. It is scalable for what we are anticipating to be the level of usage in the future.

Q16 Keith Hill: I notice that in contrast to the USA.gov site in America, which can search all federal, state, local tribal and territorial websites, the direct.gov search engine only searches within the site itself. Would it be helpful to have that extension to other government and quasi-government websites and, if not, why not?

Mr Bishop: It will be helpful to have that extension. On the other hand though, if we are ultimately going to be closing down the vast majority of other government websites, it is essentially unnecessary. As long as the direct.gov site is easily navigable, easily searchable—and it is—that will be the most important thing.

Q17 Keith Hill: The Report is pretty negative on the quality of government websites which probably explains why you are aiming to close them down. It notes that one in six has become significantly worse since the last Report. Why have these websites got worse?

Mr Bishop: I suppose in one sense, when you know that you are going to be closed down, there might naturally be less attention to making an investment in resources and money to keep it up to speed.

Ms Cleveland: Also, there are some issues about how you measure the quality of the sites, so it might be the number of clicks you have to use to navigate a site. I think it is true to say that some of the sites have grown a bit like Topsy, so they become more complex to navigate through. One of the virtues about moving into the direct.gov domain—and the same with business link—is that we are going to try to design the service around the citizen rather than around the supply side, which is a feature of many of the sites we have at the moment.

Q18 Keith Hill: That sounds like a good idea because on accessibility Southampton University research has found that a third of departmental agency websites have failed to meet the government's own accessibility standards, which again is not very good.

Ms Cleveland: I personally take accessibility very seriously. Again, being able to concentrate on just two sites that we can impose standards within, there is a lot of work that Alan's people have been doing with various representative groups who I think are very pleased with the sort of accessibility standards that we are looking to put into that. There have been criticisms about being too text heavy so we are looking at ways we can make them more accessible, but you always have to get the balance about how you make it accessible for someone perhaps with partial sight that also makes it usable for someone with normal abilities.

Mr Bishop: I would like to underline that. That is an absolute priority. Direct.gov is currently of double A standard which is the recommended standard and, as Alexis says, we are constantly in consultation.

Q19 Keith Hill: The issue is not only those with physical disabilities like partial sight; it is those with low skills because so much of what is on offer from government is precisely directed at people whose internet skills may be very limited. What work are you doing to try and open up the internet to all of those people? We have been thinking in this Committee a lot about Welfare to Work people who want to get on to education and training programmes and that sort of thing.

Ms Cleveland: The main element is working with the experts in the other sectors to look at what is best practice in terms of design of these sites, but we have to recognise that the internet will not be the channel of choice of some people. Therefore, it has to form part of a whole channel strategy that we need to build up, based on what we understand about our customers. While we want to make internet access as accessible as we can, we have to recognise there will be some people that will need either face to face telephony or paper channels to deal with this.

Mr Suffolk: The UK online centres play a very important role in terms of bringing in other communities. They do have over 6,000 centres in some of the most deprived wards in terms of the UK. Many of those centres are staffed with people providing one to one support. You find a fair proportion of those people are unemployed or have numeracy and literacy issues. Places like the UK online centres play a big role in terms of bringing people to the technology as well.

Mr Bishop: UK online centres are bringing two to three million people through their doors every year. We have a number of other strategies where direct.gov is in a place where people go to, to help that place use that tool. Citizens' Advice Bureaux would be a great example.

Q20 Nigel Griffiths: Can you just talk me through what steps you are taking to prune redundant websites within government?

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Mr Bishop: Yes. There is a plan going ahead where websites have to be closed down and converge on direct.gov or business link, unless you can prove an exceptional case. As I said, so far, out of the 951 central government websites, there are 26 agreed exceptional cases so it is a very, very small proportion indeed. As I said earlier, most of them are the remaining departmental, corporate websites.

Q21 Nigel Griffiths: Has the plug been pulled on some of the redundant sites already?

Mr Bishop: Yes. Already 90 have closed so we have made a good start.

Q22 Nigel Griffiths: When do you expect this process to be completed?

Mr Bishop: By the end of 2011.

Ms Cleveland: We may keep the address because people will have it bookmarked as part of their favourites already, but it will just automatically feed people through into direct.gov. You might still find the address but it will just be a front end to direct.gov with no content in it.

Q23 Nigel Griffiths: Explain to me why it is going to take another four years on sites that are agreed as having redundant information.

Mr Bishop: First of all, it is very important that we safeguard a huge quantity of information that is on that vast array of sites. One of the questions that was originally asked this year was to say, "We must make sure that important information is not lost for ever", so there has obviously been consultation going on with the parliamentary library, the chief librarian, and with the national archives to make sure that we do not lose any of the data that is in that wide range of sites.

Q24 Nigel Griffiths: I can imagine that some sites have historical records which you would not want to lose. I take it they are not being treated in the same way as a site that perhaps contains yesterday's housing benefit scale tables.

Mr Bishop: That is absolutely correct. If you like, the citizen facing content is what needs to be converged and made available on direct.gov and business link. That is a very big project and we need to do it very carefully, first of all so that we get it right and, secondly, so we do not overload the process while we are doing it.

Mr Suffolk: The key issue here is what is it that the citizen and the business want? It is not about just translating what we have from site A onto direct.gov. Otherwise, it serves no purpose whatsoever. This is about saying, first of all, how do citizens look for information? Is it by health, family, going on holiday or emigrating? Then it is about taking that information and putting it into a format that they find the easiest to deal with, not too text heavy but not too rich in terms of content. It is about the indexing and the signposting. It is about dealing with other organisations like Citizens' Advice Bureaux and putting it in as a package. When we look at this, we have a lot less information but the

information is more useful to the end user and we have to go through that process from a design perspective.

Q25 Nigel Griffiths: I have just written a booklet for senior citizens on the 15 key things they might want to apply for from the veterans' badge to tax credits. I used a well known search engine to get into that. Most of it was exceptionally helpful but certain sites like tax credits did not give information on how much capital you should have, stuff that should be readily available in a scale of figures. Do you have the chance to monitor the quality of information at that level?

Mr Bishop: We do indeed. We have an ongoing customer satisfaction study which is monitoring exactly that sort of thing. It is the usability of the site, whether it gives anybody any problems. We get very good scores on that, by the way, but it does allow us also to turn the dial and make improvements.

Q26 Nigel Griffiths: In a case like that, do you find departments receptive to your independent monitoring suggestions?

Mr Bishop: Yes. It is a rather different situation from independent monitoring because we are working in conjunction with departments at that point to try and make sure that what they want to put out is as user friendly as possible.

Ms Cleveland: This is one of the advantages of trying to put these into groupings because you might be pulling tax credit information together with housing benefit information for someone to see them together. When looking at designing that site, you would want to make sure you had the similar information for all the benefits that someone might be entitled to.

Q27 Nigel Griffiths: I recollect that the business link website was an award winning site. Are you aware of having other sites of that nature?

Mr Bishop: Direct.gov has also been an award winning site. Over the last few years we have had six or seven major awards.

Q28 Nigel Griffiths: Which of the Report's criticisms do you think are the most serious in terms of ones that you regret showing up that require the most urgent attention?

Ms Cleveland: The issue of not understanding the costs and how customers use it are the two that I would pick out.

Q29 Nigel Griffiths: When do you think that will be resolved?

Ms Cleveland: The strategy we have is migrating onto a site which has those metrics, so it will take the full roll out period that we have for direct.gov to really address it.

Q30 Nigel Griffiths: We could have a critical Report in the meantime?

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Ms Cleveland: I would hope not.

Mr Bishop: I would also hope not and I would hope that the migration to direct.gov and business link would be fast enough to avoid another one.

Ms Cleveland: We are also issuing some new guidance to people that run on the websites on the sorts of metrics and how we think they could cost up their websites. That is going out I think in the new year. I am hoping that we will have the feedback from that in time for any further NAO scrutiny.

Q31 Nigel Griffiths: Does each of the websites have a website manager or director or something like that?

Mr Bishop: Direct.gov and business link?

Q32 Nigel Griffiths: No, the present set-up.

Ms Cleveland: There will be an owner in each department or NDPD.

Q33 Nigel Griffiths: How many people are you dealing with?

Ms Cleveland: At the moment we are mainly dealing with the ones directly in the programme so it will be a couple of thousand.

Mr Bishop: If each department has a large number of websites, that would be a relatively small number of people because there would not be that many web managers within each department.

Mr Suffolk: One of the challenges that we face in terms of the web world is that it is all pervasive. When we are producing content for the internet, we are frequently producing the content for paper. It is the same information. We are frequently using that on other systems. Whilst we may be talking about the web here, one of the challenges of everything to do with the internet is that it is all pervasive and therefore I think, as the Report says, on average each team has four in a team supporting their websites but you do have marketing people, production people, technology people, people dealing with other channels. Part of our role when we are doing the rationalisation is to bring all of those in as well in terms of what does this mean from a closure perspective.

Q34 Nigel Griffiths: Finally, when you look at the way websites are run by other governments, do you look with envy at any one in particular of comparable size to the UK?

Mr Suffolk: We deal with America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada as our primary sites, and we deal with Singapore as well. Every country is fundamentally different. If you take America, they have 22,000 websites and they watch with some interest our closure programme because they say to me, "We wish we could go down that route but with 22,000 we do not even know where to start." They have gone for the different route, which I think you mentioned earlier, which is this very hand built, sophisticated search across the government websites. Canada is very good from the Service Canada perspective and they have invested a significant amount of time, effort and money from a citizen perspective, which is the key issue in terms of positioning their citizens on their Service Canada.

When you look at the European research that came out in September, the UK is positioned in the top five in terms of all of the European states. We have the second highest penetration in terms of internet usage. The UK does very well across all other governments.

Q35 Chairman: You say that but if you look at figure 4a on page 15 you will see that we are behind. "The proportion of the population who have used an internet site to look for government information": we are behind Iceland, Sweden, Finland, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Denmark, Norway, Germany, Estonia, Austria and Slovakia. We are not that high up, are we?

Mr Suffolk: From the ONS statistics published in terms of September, I think the latest figure was 67% of the UK population have used the internet every day or almost every day. When I compare the latest ONS figures to this Report, we can see how quickly the world is shifting from an internet perspective.

Q36 Mr Mitchell: Mr Suffolk said at the start that it was not a government issue. What did you mean by that? What were you saying?

Mr Suffolk: From a technology perspective and the internet, whether you are public sector or private sector—I have just come from 25 years in the private sector—we are all addressing the same issues from the pervasive nature of technology.

Q37 Mr Mitchell: You were not saying there is not a central policy and a central driver?

Mr Suffolk: No.

Q38 Mr Mitchell: You are head of transformational government. You could be a head of super power status. What does that mean your role is? To get them all to use these systems in common usage or what?

Ms Cleveland: I am responsible for the delivery of the service transformation agreement that was published alongside the Pre-Budget Report and the PSA targets in there. Very much what we are looking to do there is encourage departments to really have a much better view of their customer insight and to have channelled strategies to meet those customer needs.

Q39 Mr Mitchell: There is therefore a central government drive to provide more information and to provide it in a more effective fashion. How is it done in individual departments? In my office, I am fortunate to have a lad who knows something about this. I look at the website and all sorts of rubbish appears. Eventually, I found it necessary to employ a consultant. Is it always done by the employment of outside consultants coming in?

Ms Cleveland: No. I cannot give you the split.

Q40 Mr Mitchell: Do most departments use that?

Ms Cleveland: A lot of departments have their own in-house resource that works at building up their expertise. I am sure some are supported by external help but—

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Q41 Mr Mitchell: Why are commercial sites so much superior and so much more efficient?

Ms Cleveland: Some are and some are not. Is it true we are further behind some at the moment?

Q42 Mr Mitchell: The Report says that people find commercial sites easy to deal with and more useful. I just wonder why that is. Are you employing the wrong people or is it the usual tendency of civil servants to cover their backsides and deluge people with words to obfuscate what they are really doing?

Ms Cleveland: Is there part of the culture that probably puts too many words in? At times, yes, I think I would certainly concede that. A lot of it is to do with the complexity and the scope of things that government departments cover.

Q43 Mr Mitchell: And the regulations presumably?

Ms Cleveland: Absolutely, and they are much broader than many private sector companies would have.

Q44 Mr Mitchell: Mr Bishop was about to demur on that.

Mr Bishop: I was not going to demur at all. In our brand tracking study, we do measure ourselves versus other popular, commercial websites. For example, on that particular measure, easy to use, we get a score slightly below Ebay and the same as Amazon. We are well ahead of Tesco.

Q45 Mr Mitchell: What is wrong with the COI? Why is not the COI doing this? Why has it been transferred to Work and Pensions?

Mr Bishop: The rationale for that was that it should have one of the major departments.

Q46 Mr Mitchell: Surely you are the Central Office of Information? You are the ones who should be doing this and who have all the expertise.

Mr Bishop: As you can imagine, it breaks my heart in some ways but I understand the rationale.

Q47 Mr Mitchell: Does it break your heart because you are doing it inefficiently? Were there complaints about the service you provided?

Mr Bishop: Far from it. I think we have been doing an extremely good job, so I am sorry to be handing it on at this stage.

Q48 Mr Mitchell: Why is there so little provision for user responses, either abusive or helpful? Why are not users invited to say how they find the service?

Ms Cleveland: I personally would like to see far more of that coming through. I am not sure what is planned for the future, but direct.gov—

Q49 Mr Mitchell: Surely you should provide that universally. My wife handles all this. When I saw the vituperative stuff that was passing from her (a) to a bank and (b) to Scottish Gas or whatever, I was appalled but you need that kind of response to know how people find the sites, do you not?

Ms Cleveland: From my perspective and from a transformational government point of view I would like to see more of that because you can use the citizen's experience as a way to drive the way we develop not just the internet channel but all our channels to give them a better service.

Q50 Mr Mitchell: Has that not been provided by the COI as well, user response? Is it to open yourself to abuse, the kind of abuse that comes from my wife, or is it that you have not thought of that?

Ms Cleveland: There are feedback sites.

Mr Bishop: No. We do get feedback and we constantly monitor customer satisfaction on an ongoing basis.

Q51 Mr Mitchell: I see that the Report considers direct.gov understaffed. Why is that? Is there not enough money being provided for it? Who is paying for direct.gov?

Mr Bishop: Currently it is being paid for essentially by subscription from all the departments who are contributing to it. One of the reasons again for the transfer to the DWP was to secure better funding going into the future.

Ms Cleveland: Direct.gov is now going to be centrally funded rather than through subscription.

Q52 Mr Mitchell: When it goes on to direct.gov, will there still be departmental sites as well?

Ms Cleveland: There will be departmental sites relating to some of the nature of the departments for publication and consultation. They will link in where appropriate but they will be much smaller sites than they are now and there will not be what I would call customer or business facing transactions within them. They will all be on to direct.gov.

Q53 Mr Mitchell: There is going to be a massive transfer therefore?

Ms Cleveland: Yes, there is a big programme of work.

Q54 Mr Mitchell: Is it within the resources of the system to cope with that?

Ms Cleveland: Those were the resources we bid for as part of the spending review settlement.

Q55 Mr Mitchell: I see that the Report is critical about departmental search engines. What will happen when you have one overall site? Who will provide those for references between things?

Ms Cleveland: I am not going to pretend to bluff my way on the technology of the search engines. I will let John perhaps give you a bit more detail on that but we are working a lot on search engines. There is no point in putting all the information together if people cannot find it. It should be a lot easier because of the way we group the information together. One of the problems you have with some of the external searches is that you have to know what you are looking for to be able to find it. Part of the construction of the direct.gov site is that if you are going on holiday, you should be able to find everything you need, your passport, visas,

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inoculations, insurance. In an external search engine you might have to look for all those things separately. What we are hoping with the structure of direct.gov is you will find those things all together but there is a lot of technical work going on on search engines which is beyond my capability.

Q56 Mr Mitchell: We should have a note from the Treasury saying, "In view of the balance of payments, do not go." Mr Suffolk, what is the main nature of search engines?

Mr Suffolk: We probably all use searches in this room and if you key in almost anything you will get two million references and 1,999,000 are complete gobbledygook. That is because all the search engines do not really know in a sensible way what you are looking for. This comes back down to the website rationalisation which says that, for you to be able to search, the engines must know the structure of the information you are searching for and it has to be designed in such a way. When we are moving all the information over, the first thing we do is to structure it in a way that the search engines can find the information. The Report talks quite a lot about the more external links that you have the better it is. That is fine but that is only one very small element in terms of what is going on. We structure the information correctly. We begin to make sure it is written correctly from the information you wrap around it and the third thing we do—this is what we are doing now—is we work with Google themselves to come up with a model.

Q57 Mr Mitchell: I see there are 6,000 centres where people can go. Where are these and what assistance do people get? The problem, I would imagine, with usage is older people and deprived people who do not have internet access. What are the centres?

Ms Cleveland: These are the UK online centres that my colleague mentioned.

Q58 Mr Mitchell: Where are they?

Ms Cleveland: Libraries. They are freely available where people go in communities.

Q59 Mr Mitchell: That could be public toilets.

Ms Cleveland: When my 80 year old parents went to their UK online centre to learn how to use the internet, they went to a course that was run in their local library very successfully. They have been browsing ever since.

Q60 Mr Mitchell: So it is libraries where people can drop in. Is there any support there for them?

Ms Cleveland: Some of them run specific courses as well through their local authorities and UK online.

Q61 Mr Davidson: I wonder if I can follow up the point that my colleague was on and that is the question of access. The figures that have say 79% of people receiving means tested benefits lack ICT skills. 51% of adults earning less than 10,400 a year have never used the internet. The worry I have about this, representing a relatively poor constituency, is that we are creating two types of society, two groups

of people, those that can use all this and those that cannot. Most public services like the National Health Service respond to demand. It is the chattering classes that know how to work the system, that get most out of it, and you respond to that sort of pressure. Those that cannot access this just simply get left further and further behind. How do you respond to that?

Mr Suffolk: Our starting point has to be what are the needs and wants of citizens. How do they want those needs and wants to be fulfilled? Let me give you an example. It has been quite topical in the media recently that in many parts of the UK citizens speak 100 different languages. We should not assume, because someone speaks a language, they can read or write in that language. Therefore, the internet in many respects serves no purpose for that. As you quite rightly say, the whole issue in terms of rural economy is it may not be appropriate in terms of some situations to provide services on the internet to serve sections of the population. The work we are doing in terms of what is it that citizens want and how they want it delivered drives how we deliver those services. Our strategy absolutely is not to put everything on the internet because that will not fulfil certain segments of the population.

(The Committee suspended from 4.18pm to 4.25pm for a division in the House)

Q62 Mr Davidson: I am not sure that I entirely either understood or accepted what you were giving me there. You would accept that the services are likely to be driven by demand, which is clearly going to be disproportionate for those who are internet and computer literate, which is clearly unrepresentative of society as a whole. There is nothing you have said so far that has assured me that the people I represent are not going to be even more disadvantaged than they are at the moment. Can you help me?

Mr Suffolk: If your starting point is working out what citizens want, every kind of citizen, not just the ones in the majority, you will obviously work out the needs of those who do not understand technology or do not wish to use technology. Again, the latest ONS research says there is a segment of society, 30 plus per cent, that sees no need to use the internet. By definition, we have to provide other channels of access, whether that is over the telephone, face to face or even personal visits. Alexis can talk more in terms of the way they dealt with access to citizens in the Pension Service. Our starting point is always around understanding the needs of all the citizens, not just a segment of citizens, and then providing the channel of access that is right for them.

Q63 Mr Davidson: What evidence have you that the group about whom I am most concerned are not being disadvantaged by this?

Ms Cleveland: I am trying to think of it in terms of internet usage.

Q64 Mr Davidson: Basically, that is a none. There is no evidence that the development of this system, structure and so on is not further disadvantaging the people about whom I am concerned.

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Mr Bishop: Would it not be true that it could only disadvantage them if other channels of access for those people were being run down as a consequence? Because that is not the case, the other channels are still there.

Q65 Mr Davidson: No, they are not. The Benefits Agency for example have been moving much more onto phone provision rather than face to face provision. Part of the advantage of this, which I understand, is that it is greatly cheaper, but there is no evidence as far as I can see that the money thus saved is being spent on efforts to reach those who are not being reached by this system. Is that not correct?
Ms Cleveland: Certainly Jobcentre Plus has been rationalising some of its outlets but it still provides a face to face service.

Q66 Mr Davidson: No, it does not.

Ms Cleveland: Their first point of contact is often the telephone.

Q67 Mr Davidson: Absolutely but it is clearly not as accessible as it was before it rationalised.

Ms Cleveland: That is true.

Q68 Mr Davidson: They are now providing a worse service than they did before while they are placing increasing emphasis on the internet thereby widening the gulf between those who are computer literate, who by and large tend to be the most demanding of public services, and whose need is least.

Ms Cleveland: I do not see this as being a specifically internet issue. It is about understanding your customer base. We are not a commercial organisation who can pick and choose who we serve. Therefore, we need to have a look at what is our customer base and what are the appropriate channels or ways in which we—

Q69 Mr Davidson: I understand that but I have asked a couple of times now whether or not you can provide me with any assurances that the other channels are being developed with the same degree of vigour and enthusiasm that these channels are being developed, and nobody has said so. I think we are in danger of having a technology which has its geeks, its enthusiasts, its proselytisers and so on, which will develop, and the other channels, which are perhaps more old fashioned and less at the cutting edge and less likely to get people promotion are going to be neglected, and the groups that need those other channels most are going to be left behind still further.

Mr Suffok: When we look at it in terms of where the effort is going, in terms of the Sir David Varney work, which is about looking at every channel of access, whether it be on the Internet, on the phone, local authority face to face, or the local authorities, I think the work that we are doing in terms of the local authority delivery council is about taking a holistic view to how we deal with all citizens from all channels. My belief is that we are getting to the people.

Q70 Mr Davidson: I understand that. I can speak for hours on these things as well and not say anything, but what I am seeking to clarify is what steps specifically are being taken to compensate for the development of service in this way, and unless I am mistaken you cannot give me any.

Ms Cleveland: What we can do is at the point of actually trying to build up, encouraging departments that understand their customer base—

Q71 Mr Davidson: Give me an example of what has been done?

Ms Cleveland: We have set up a customer insight forum that runs across departments—

Q72 Mr Davidson: How many people does it see? How many constituents of mine is the customer insight forum likely to have provided a better service for?

Ms Cleveland: That is a forum; it is a central forum of government—

Q73 Mr Davidson: That is right. I am not interested in all that stuff, the internal workings; what I want to know is whether or not you can identify some examples of customer facing, dealing with the public in areas like mine where it has actually improved, because it is not my impression.

Ms Cleveland: An example I would give is services to older people through joint working between DWP and local authorities where they in all but one of the primary tier local authorities across the country now offer a joint service where they can go out and visit people in their homes or appointments—

Q74 Mr Davidson: So they can go out and visit people but they do not automatically do it.

Ms Cleveland: For the appropriate customers, so if it is someone who needs a home visit they have now rationalised the service so that it could be someone from a local authority visiting on behalf of DWP or someone from DWP on behalf of the local authority.

Q75 Mr Davidson: I am aware of some of that, you have given me one example.

Ms Cleveland: So it increases the total resource available.

Q76 Mr Davidson: Is there any evidence that the money that has been saved by providing the information more cheaply through the Internet has been redirected towards boosting the channels to reach those that do not access the Internet, or is it just being saved?

Ms Cleveland: Given that we have not been able to identify fully the costs of this we cannot give any audit trail that would show how money that maybe had been saved in this area has been redeployed somewhere else.

Q77 Mr Davidson: So there is no evidence of redeployment and there is no evidence of expansion of money on the alternative routes?

Ms Cleveland: Not a direct audit trail that we could demonstrate to you.

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Q78 Mr Davidson: Is there any evidence of money being directed into the alternative routes?

Ms Cleveland: Certainly in terms of the development of frontline services in local authorities.

Q79 Mr Davidson: Can you provide that to the National Audit Office and we can maybe get an addendum in due course?

Ms Cleveland: We can certainly give you a note of what is happening on the front office shared service area and the local office.¹

Q80 Mr Davidson: And how much that is costing. I want to be clear that money is being spent on the people that need the services most rather than those—

Ms Cleveland: I understand the issue, yes. Certainly if you looked where they do have evidence in some areas obviously the cost of a home visit is considerably higher—

Q81 Mr Davidson: Absolutely.

Ms Cleveland: --- than dealing with someone over the telephone.

Mr Davidson: Absolutely. Thank you, Chairman.

Q82 Chairman: If I can put this to you, Alexis Cleveland, this is dealt with in paragraph 1.18 of the Report, page 22, where it says: “79% of people receiving means-tested benefits lack practical ICT skills and 51% of adults earning less than £10,400 a year have never used the Internet. Also that 75% of socially excluded people (suffering from three or more forms of deprivation) are non-users of the Internet.” The obvious thing is to help these people through intermediaries, is it not? So we read later in paragraph 1.19, “The government subsidises some 6,000 UK online centres, run by libraries, community groups, colleges . . . ” That is okay. However, we read later at the end of paragraph 1.19, that some centres are only able to offer minimal support. Then if we read paragraph 1.20 we see that, “Government websites are naturally cautious about providing links to external, non-governmental websites. This presents a lost opportunity to signpost citizens to where they can find useful, relevant information as many non-government organisations offer advice and support that would be useful to visitors . . . ” I think Mr Davidson has a very powerful point here. A very high proportion of people in receipt of means-tested benefits—79%, we are told in the Report that you have agreed—lack practical ICT skills and there is very little apparently that you are doing to help them use intermediate centres either.

Ms Cleveland: The issue with people in receipt of means-tested benefits, it is very much being promoted through a telephony channel and face to face. That covers two things: one in terms of education and training—

Q83 Chairman: You are very much promoting face to face.

Ms Cleveland: I said it is dealt with—if we are talking about people on means-tested benefits they are dealt with either face to face or over the telephone.

Q84 Chairman: Did you say that you are very much promoting face to face?

Ms Cleveland: There is a face to face channel for people on means-tested benefits, like job seeker’s allowance, where you would actually be seen.

Q85 Chairman: I am sure there is a channel but I doubt very much if you are very much promoting it.

Ms Cleveland: If I said very much promoting then I withdraw that comment.

Q86 Chairman: I think Mr Davidson has a point here. People in receipt of these benefits want to be assured, following Mr Davidson’s questions, that traditional ways of communicating with them, face to face, are promoted as actively as are these websites, which may be very difficult to use for people who may have disability problems or any other problems.

Ms Cleveland: The work that DWP has done on its customer insight has actually demonstrated that the vast majority of older people, for example, want to use the telephone. We are certainly not promoting the Internet for that group; telephony is their preferred choice of channel, but some of those will need to have a face to face service, and I think this year they will visit 600,000 people in their own home.

Q87 Mr Davidson: Just on that, my understanding was that the vast majority of elderly people wanted face to face contact; they were prepared to accept the telephone because the government was cutting the number of facilities that offered face to face and concentrating on telephones for cost reasons. But it is not true to say that that is what elderly people wanted.

Ms Cleveland: The customer insight that was done in the Pension Service in DWP was that the majority of people wanted to use the telephony.

Q88 Mr Davidson: The majority of people, yes, but not the majority of elderly people.

Ms Cleveland: This was the elderly population, so the over pension age.

Q89 Mr Davidson: If you let us have that. But not, as it were, the *elderly* elderly? I am certainly aware from my constituency that the vast majority of those that you would consider frail and needed assistance and so on did not want to do it over the phone and many of them in fact do not have phones, and therefore they are doubly disqualified or doubly in difficulty in these circumstances when you are taking away their access to face to face contact.

Ms Cleveland: In that case their face to face service is actually delivered through the pension service local service, which is actually a peripatetic service based in communities, which goes to the place where people want to go. So if it were appropriate for a home visit other people do not want you to go to their home but might meet somewhere else.

¹ Ev 13–14

Cabinet Office & Central Office of Information

Q90 Mr Davidson: I understand the point as well about where people want to go but quite often many of those in greatest need are not themselves active in community groups and organisations.

Ms Cleveland: That is why they do visit people in their homes coming through and they have a good system of referrals from local authorities, from Age Concern, people like that who can actually refer them through to the Pension Service for a home visit, and certainly to my knowledge when I was Chief Executive there we never turned down a referral.

Q91 Chairman: I want to go on to pursue this point with you because again reading it, as I have already said to you, 51% of adults earning less than £10,400 a year have never used the Internet. Then we see in paragraph 1.20, something I have not quoted to you yet: "Those who do not have Internet access themselves will often use intermediaries (such as friends, family, care workers or advice centres) in their contact with government departments. For example, Department for Work and Pensions has found that 45% of contacts with the Disability and Carers Service and 23% of contacts with the Pensions Service come through intermediaries." So I put to you a question I do not think you have yet answered, that there has to be a very much more sophisticated signpost helping people on these intermediaries and it does not seem to be happening at the moment because government, it says here, is cautious about providing links to external non-government websites.

Ms Cleveland: I think for the disadvantaged groups the referrals through to intermediaries, to alternate offices actually will not be necessarily directed through the web channel—it will not be those people that are accessing through that. So you need to get your information lines to those people through word of mouth in communities, which is often the best way, and through local authorities because they are the people that contact a lot of the most disadvantaged people anyway. So I do not think it would be the web channel that you would use for this group.

Q92 Chairman: Apparently you are doing research on this, how to develop such links; so that is happening, is it, at the moment?

Ms Cleveland: Yes.

Q93 Chairman: When you come back to us again this will be much more developed, will it, to meet the point that Mr Davidson has been putting to you?

Ms Cleveland: When we come back again I would be very happy to talk about the whole customer insight—

Q94 Chairman: I am sure you would be happy to talk about it but we would like some action as well. Thank you very much. Mr Mitchell.

Ms Cleveland: There is nothing between us on that point, Mr Chairman.

Q95 Mr Mitchell: I have now found a channel called something like TalktoThem.com, or something, which allows people to communicate with their MPs and I am now receiving enormous amounts of abuse every day—every day there is fresh abuse!

Ms Cleveland: I can assure you it was not from us!

Q96 Mr Mitchell: Perhaps you have that in government, but I get the impression—and a question for Ms Cleveland—that it is transformation of government. Certainly in my case I rushed round to the Internet too soon because there was all this hoo-hah before the 2001 election about this is the future means of communication and the election will be fought on the Internet. So I set up a site and provided all sorts of rubbish on it and there was a means for people to talk back, which nobody did, and published photographs; and it cost a lot of money and nobody looked at it—I think the number of hits was minute, and I do not know how many of those came from the country. I get the impression from this Report and the earlier Report that that has also happened with government, that it became a subject of fashion—everybody must do this—and they rushed in too quickly. It is only now really, having made all those mistakes and having handled it inexpertly and, for the public, confusingly, that they are able to really get to grips with this issue and provide a decent service, for those middle class people who will use it. Would that be a correct interpretation? The mistakes arose from goodwill and over enthusiasm?

Ms Cleveland: Do I think we are improving the service? Yes.

Q97 Mr Mitchell: No. Do you think mistakes arose from following fashion?

Ms Cleveland: I think where we ended up with multiple websites was because we took it from a supplier viewpoint rather than a citizen viewpoint—every little bit of business had to have its own website with its own brand in there. I actually think that the competence of the production of those websites at the time was actually quite good, but when you come to look at it from a citizen's perspective joining them up was very difficult. So I think we did go into the "everyone had to have a website", yes.

Q98 Mr Mitchell: So now the future is clear and there will be fewer mistakes?

Ms Cleveland: The technology has moved on; we are looking to have two portals, two routes into the government through two websites that we can direct people to much more easily.

Chairman: That concludes our hearing. We are very grateful; thank you very much.

Memorandum submitted by the Royal Mail Group

In advance of tomorrow's evidence session on Government delivery of information and services online, I enclose a summary of research the Post Office recently commissioned from Demos into digital social exclusion, with a particular focus on the over 50s. The report is due to be published in mid December.

The Demos research is focused on the over 50s age group, but many of the barriers to getting online and recommendations for helping this group to gain internet access are common to other socially excluded groups.

Recent research conducted by BMRB/TGI in the 12 months to 2007 shows that online communications are particularly ineffective at connecting with groups such as the elderly and long-term disabled. The BMRB figures reveal that over 13 million UK adults, or 27% of the UK adult population, have not been online in the past 12 months. This figure rises to 42% of adults with a long-term disability and 65% of adults over 65s. The same research shows that over two-thirds of non-internet users are not in employment, and that these individuals are likely to be retired or disabled.

BRIEFING FOR PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMITTEE EVIDENCE SESSION:

Government on the internet: Progress in delivering Information and Services Online

INTRODUCTION

The Post Office recently commissioned Demos to conduct research into digital social exclusion, with a particular focus on the over 50s.

The research is focused on the over 50s age group, but many of the barriers to getting online and recommendations for helping this group to gain internet access are common to other socially excluded groups, too.

Demos conducted desk research and held four focus groups in Leeds with both users and non-users aged 55+.

The topline themes from the research report, which is due to be published in December, are below:

1. Common perceptions about older people's attitudes to the internet.
2. What the over-50s really think.
3. Recommendations to help the over-50s go online.
4. Where the internet isn't the only solution.

SUMMARY

1. *Common perceptions about older people's attitudes to the internet*

— Older people don't want to use the internet

The barrier to internet use, rather than lack of interest, tends to be motivation. Some older people are yet to find a compelling reason to get online. Either older people do not see relevance in an everyday sense or in more deprived contexts the mainstream benefits of internet use simply do not pertain to their more complex needs.

"You can't miss what you've never had."—Jean (65 non-user)

— Older people are not digitally literate

"Silver surfers" are seen as exceptional not only because they buck the trend of non-use of the internet; but because they are thought to have uncharacteristically high IT skill levels. But once older people are online they become some of the most enthusiastic, able users. However, there are problems related to where they can learn the right skills. There was reliance from focus group participants on peers and family members and one-to-one, continuous tuition.

"I think younger people are definitely better at dealing with the technicalities, but our generation is still competent using the internet."—Warren (64, user)

— Access to technology leads to productive use of technology

We should be wary of the assumption that access to technology means productive or beneficial use. Older people can feel more hesitant about taking risks online, often for good reason. They are on the verge of using technology in exciting ways, but they often lack the know-how and confidence to make the leap.

2. *What the over-50s really think*

— Enthusiasm for online services

Across all the groups there was an underlying enthusiasm. However, there were also some telling differences. The line between non-user and passionate advocate can be thin, and is often determined by triggers like encouragement from a family member. The oldest users we surveyed were the most enthusiastic and most adventurous, while the youngest group of non-users were the most defensive. They clearly felt that they “should” be online, and felt the need to justify their decision not to participate.

“I’ve only been using computers for a couple of years, and it took some convincing to get started, but now I love it.”—Vera (76, user)

— Lack of trust in the internet

Even the participants who were more enthusiastic brought with them some real fears and reservations. There was a general lack of trust in the internet. This was coupled with a desire for tangible, trusted products. That was strongly connected to the idea that the internet might gradually replace human contact, drawing people into a relationship with a screen instead of the people around them. They find more in the sort of transactions they could do online than simply the functional value of purchasing or service delivery, and worried that the social experience might be at risk.

“I find it all too daunting and I feel insecure.”—Sheila (82, non-user)

— The internet is a “luxury”

There were mixed feelings about the centrality of the internet to everyday life. Many teenagers and children have made the internet such a central part of their life as to be almost irreplaceable. The same could not be said of older users. Despite this, many of the people we met found it easy to anticipate a time when services would only be available online. They could see the benefits this might bring, but recognised that it would make it even harder to opt out of the “information revolution”.

“The internet isn’t vital. It’s just like other forms of technology: people say that cars are vital, but you can always walk.”—Mike (61 non-user)

— Support from family and friends

We asked internet users to map their social networks of support and it was clear that most had at least one trusted “digital mentor”. This could be a friend who was confident technically, but most commonly it was a member of their family who they could call on when frustrated. There was a sense that younger relatives’ patience levels might not be suited to teaching their older relatives technology, sometimes from scratch. However, without the reassuring back-up provided by family members many older people would not feel confident venturing online; the majority of those who had tried the internet relied to some extent on support and ideas from their relatives.

“Older people just don’t know where to start looking. I turn to my children when there’s a problem.”—Simon (76, user)

3. *Recommendations to help people go online*

— Call on Local and Central Government

To provide priority broadband seats in libraries and other public access points—the places that older people are likely to visit.

To stimulate and support markets for excluded users so that they can purchase affordable solutions, eg by offering incentives to ISPs who actively target this group.

To encourage the creation of easy read versions of every website.

To offer adult learning courses to older people through local colleges.

— Call on industry

To provide age awareness training to IT sales staff.

For ISPs to provide dedicated technical support for older users.

“In PC World there’s so much choice you can’t tell if you’re being ripped off. And so much design is based on gaming power, too, which costs money.”—Warren (64, user)

— Call on community and social enterprise

To create a “PledgeBank” for older people, so communities offer training and to support older members of their town or village.

To create online mentoring sites to create a safe environment to link older groups with younger people who can offer guidance and advice about getting online and using the internet.

To develop digital buddy schemes to meet older people’s desire to learn from people they already know, who have the time and patience to repeat instructions.

“If I had the time and the right teacher I would probably get involved, but I don’t want to be the dummy in the class room again and I don’t want to play the fool. What I need is a teacher who speaks my language, who speaks English, not all the jargon, and who can go slow at my pace.”—Peter (59, non-user)

4. *Where the internet isn’t the only solution*

— There is no doubt that digital exclusion does exacerbate social exclusion, but strategies aimed at tackling isolation for older people need to treat technology as a significant piece of the puzzle rather than the solution. Many older people have a range of complex needs and an internet connection is highly unlikely to address all of these in a meaningful and sustainable way.

— Closing the digital divide has slowed to a standstill with no more people using the internet now than in 2004, according to UK Online Centres.

— The overall proportion of adults who are digitally excluded is only expected to decline from 39% in 2005 to 31% in 2015.¹

— Some of the barriers that remain are those that are harder to tackle through the provision of hardware: more sophisticated strategies will be needed to address poor confidence, disability, extreme financial hardship or limited social capital.

“If the government ends up only delivering information through the internet then people like me will definitely begin to lose out”—Jane (58, non-user)

28 November 2007

Supplementary Memorandum submitted by the Cabinet Office

Questions 73–79 (Mr Ian Davidson): *Joint Working Partnerships for face to face visiting services; The Pension Service and Local Authorities*

A Joint Working Partnership is a local operational partnership between The Pension Service Local Service, Local Authorities (LA) and the Voluntary Sector. Its aims are to deliver face to face services to people who cannot access services through other channels, to minimise the number of times someone has to provide financial / benefit related information to the partner organisations, and to promote take up of related services.

Customers may be seen when they call in at a LA or Voluntary Sector office, through an appointment at a location in their community, eg at a library, or through home visits. Visits are usually carried out by a member of the joint team that covers the geographical area of the Local Authority and the team member may be from the Pension Service, the Local Authority or the partner organisation.

The customer provides information only once as one member of staff within the partnership conducts the information gathering and assistance with claim completion across all state benefits and entitlements.

The joint team also helps customers to access additional complementary services such as home adaptations, home insulation, mobility aids, audio books and home gardening services. Between 1 April 2007 and 30 November 2007, nearly 221,000 customer referrals were made for complementary services.

¹ Understanding digital inclusion, UK Online centres/Fresh Minds, April 2007.

CUSTOMERS BENEFITING FROM THE SERVICE

The joint team visits vulnerable, hard-to reach customers who may not always be aware of the benefits and services they are entitled to. Most joint teams cover all age groups but the majority of the visits are to older people. Referrals come from social care workers, health professionals, carers, the voluntary sector and The Pension Service contact centres. In addition the Pension Service uses its customer records to offer visits to people it believes may have an unclaimed entitlement.

A vast majority events that can lead to a change in benefit, such as bereavement or hospitalisation, result in the customer contacting social services or voluntary organisations rather than The Pension Service. The development of partnerships within the local community has resulted in an increase in referrals from partners direct to The Pension Service Local Service, thereby improving access for the most vulnerable pensioners.

Nearly 900,000 home visits were carried out during the 2006/7 financial year.

SERVICES COVERED DURING HOME VISITS

During home visits, customers are offered benefit entitlement checks, provided with information on a range of benefits such as State Pension, Pension Credit, Disability Living Allowance, Attendance Allowance, Housing and Council Tax Benefit and are helped with completing appropriate application forms.

This maximises the opportunity for customers to discuss all of their financial needs in one face-to-face meeting and also receive help, and with access to the complementary services, such as referrals to Warm Front Home Energy and home adaptations.

EXAMPLE OF FRONT OFFICE SHARED SERVICE

You asked me to provide you and the NAO with a note showing evidence of how the usage of the internet has led to the redeployment of resources to meet citizens' needs. I did say that there is no direct audit trail but there is evidence of the development of front line services in local authorities. This evidence can be found in a report produced by the Improvement & Development Agency (IDeA) on Front Office Shared Services (FOSS).

The full FOSS report can be found on the IDeA website at:

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6414747>

There are also a number of case studies on the IDeA website at:

<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/core/page.do?pageId=6440795>

These case studies include examples of:

- Website rationalisation at the local level (see Dorset for You—<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6424429>)
- Multi-agency service access through a single gateway (see Rushcliffe First Contact Signposting Scheme—<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6424468>)
- One-stop-shop services (see Staffordshire Moorlands Councils Connect—<http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6424495>)

The case studies in the FOSS report all show developments in shared services provision with the emphasis on improving front line services provision in response to the needs of service users.

For specific evidence of how usage of the internet can transform service provision I would like to draw your attention to the "e@sy connects: e-services for South Yorkshire" case study <http://www.idea.gov.uk/idk/aio/6424583>. In this case study local authorities work with primary care trusts, emergency services and the third sector to deliver services over the web, digital TV and mobile telephony.
