



House of Commons

Committee of Public Accounts

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

Sixteenth Report of Session 2007–08



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

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The Committee of Public Accounts

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The following were also Members of the Committee during the period of the enquiry:

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Mr John Healey MP (*Labour, Wentworth*).

Powers

Powers of the Committee of Public Accounts are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 148. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publication

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.

Committee staff

The current staff of the Committee is Mark Etherton (Clerk), Emma Sawyer (Committee Assistant), Pam Morris (Committee Assistant) and Alex Paterson (Media Officer).

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Contents

Report	<i>Page</i>
Summary	3
Conclusions and Recommendations	5
1 Progress in improving the management and quality of government websites	7
2 Risks to the accessibility of public services	11
3 Rationalising the number of government websites	13
Formal Minutes	15
Witnesses	16
List of written evidence	16
List of Reports from the Committee of Public Accounts 2007–08	17

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

