Progress in making e-services accessible to all - encouraging use by older people

REPORT BY THE COMPTROLLER AND AUDITOR GENERAL
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summary &
recommendations

1 Older people are major users of a wide variety of public services **(Figure 1)**. For example, 50 per cent of social security expenditure is spent on those aged 65 or over[1], and some 40 per cent of NHS expenditure[2]. Although it is hard to generalise, many older people have contact with public services because they:

- tend to have greater need for them than younger people (for example, health and social care);

- tend to have less money than other age groups;

- experience significant life changes (for example, retirement or bereavement of a spouse);

- may be offered services, for example, preventative 75 year health checks; and

- have more time available than other age groups, offering the chance, for example, to use libraries or community facilities.

2 Traditionally, public services have been provided face-to-face (for example, in a local office), by correspondence, or by home visit. Information on government services has been supplied in leaflets (available, for example, in Post Offices) or advertising in national or local papers. More recently, the public sector has sought to develop new options, recognising that no single means will satisfy every circumstance. This has led to the creation of, for example:

- one-stop-shops, where visitors can receive advice in one place on a wide range of different services provided, for example, by a local authority;

- the establishment of call centres such as NHS Direct; and

- services tailored for those who do not speak English. For instance, the Department for Work and Pensions' Pensions Direct call centre has access to interpreters who can speak in a variety of languages.
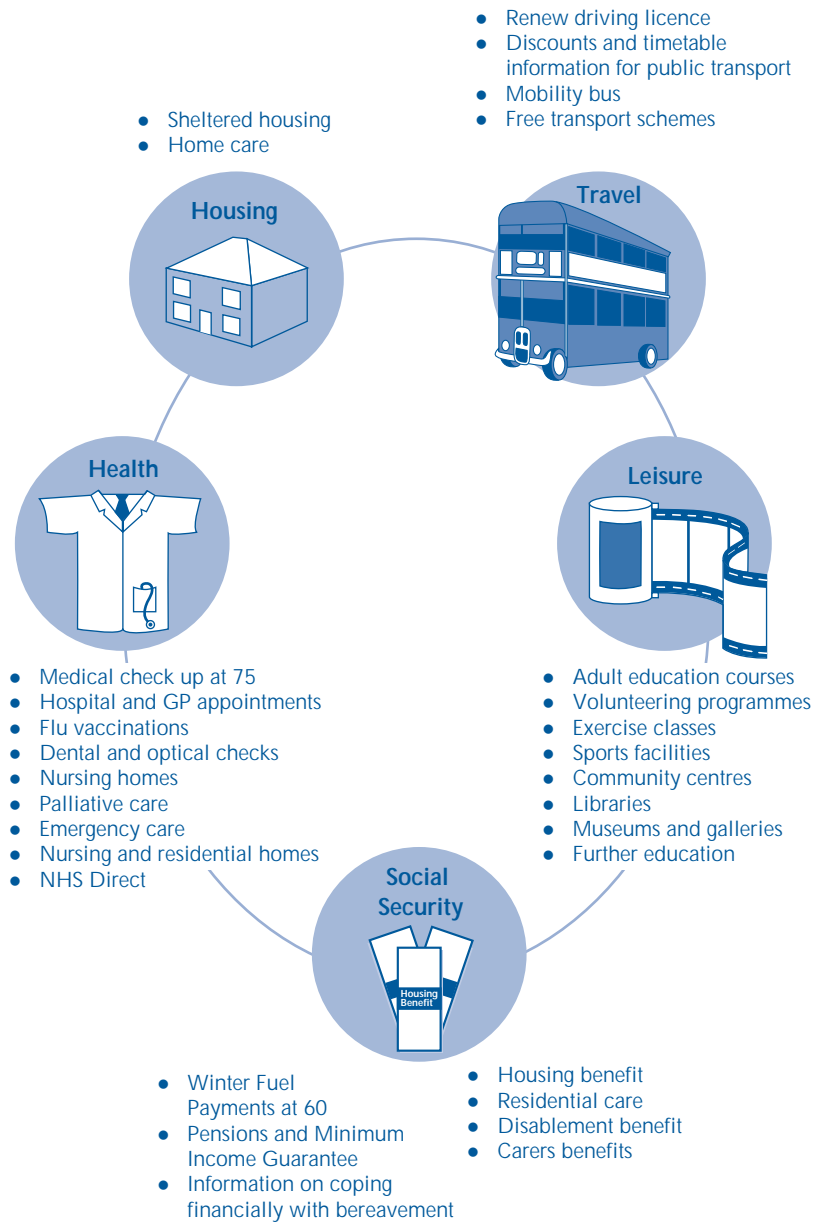

3 In addition, Government has increasingly looked to offer electronic services (e-services) to widen choice further. Most public organisations now have websites. A small number of departments and local authorities are piloting digital television and electronic information kiosks. And there are initiatives to increase use of e-services via public facilities and by providing cheaper internet access from home. These run parallel with developments in the private sector. Many banks allow customers to transact electronically, and retailers have created websites so customers can order from home.

1   *National Statistics, Social Trends UK (2001).*
2   *Department of Health, National Service Framework for Older People (2001).*

1   **Examples of common services used by older people**

- Sheltered housing
- Home care

- Renew driving licence
- Discounts and timetable information for public transport
- Mobility bus
- Free transport schemes

Housing

Travel

Health

Leisure

- Medical check up at 75
- Hospital and GP appointments
- Flu vaccinations
- Dental and optical checks
- Nursing homes
- Palliative care
- Emergency care
- Nursing and residential homes
- NHS Direct

- Adult education courses
- Volunteering programmes
- Exercise classes
- Sports facilities
- Community centres
- Libraries
- Museums and galleries
- Further education

Social Security

- Winter Fuel Payments at 60
- Pensions and Minimum Income Guarantee
- Information on coping financially with bereavement

- Housing benefit
- Residential care
- Disablement benefit
- Carers benefits

Source: NAO

4 Previous NAO reports[3] have examined the management of websites and call centres in order to meet the target that all government services are available electronically by the end of 2005. This report examines progress towards another Government objective - that of ensuring that everyone who wants it can access e-services by the same deadline. It focuses on older people, who to date have been low users of such facilities, and looks in particular at:

■ what government has done to extend opportunities for older people to access a range of electronic media (Part 2); and

■ what departments and a range of other bodies are doing to ensure government e-services are accessible to older people (Part 3).

As well as older people, the messages are also relevant to other groups of citizens, such as those of all ages with disabilities or those on low incomes.

E-services potentially offer older people a range of valuable services

5 It is not realistic to expect everyone to use new technology. In particular, many older people do not see the internet as relevant to them, and prefer traditional channels of contact. However, certain characteristics of many older people suggest innovative e-services could benefit them if developed and marketed appropriately. In particular, many:

■ **are less mobile due to illness or disability:** call centres and interactive services allow people to handle their affairs without having to travel. For example, the Pensions Direct call centre has ensured many unnecessary visits to benefit offices are avoided;

■ **need information on a wide range of issues but are unsure how to find it:** internet portals and electronic kiosks could enable older people to gain information on health, consumer rights and benefits from a single source, saving them time and inconvenience;

■ **live alone or are far from relatives:** some 60 per cent of women and one third of men over 75 live alone. E-mail would keep them in touch with friends and family easily;

■ **wish to maintain their independence:** technology exists for people to consult doctors and monitor their health using telephone and video links, so avoiding the need to move into a home; and

■ **wish to be involved and consulted on issues relevant to them:** in 2002 an online consultation (Seniorspeak) was organised by the Hansard Society to convey the views of older people, their families and carers to politicians in the Westminster and Edinburgh Parliaments on the subject of long term care and health.

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3   *Government on the Web II (HC764, Session 2001-02), Better Public Services through e-Government (HC704-1, Session 2001-02), Call centres (HC134, Session 2002-03).*

The Government aims for everyone who wants it to have access to the internet but must be proactive to overcome barriers to take up

6 The Government expects to invest some £6 billion in e-services by March 2006 to achieve the Prime Minister's goals that all government services are available electronically and that everyone who wants it has access to the internet, both by the end of 2005. The latter target assumes that some will use e-services at home, and others in public places such as libraries. It also acknowledges that some may not want access. Meeting this target is not an end in itself, but would help achieve other government objectives such as avoiding social exclusion, encouraging lifelong learning and promoting equity in service provision.

7 To optimise the return on the investment and to secure value for money, the Government needs as many people as possible to utilise e-services. The number of households with access to the internet trebled between 1999 and 2002, and by October 2002, some 28.6 million adults in Great Britain had used it somewhere[4]. However, use varies significantly according to characteristics such as age, income and location. These variations are often referred to as the 'digital divide', with age perhaps the most pronounced. While 94 per cent of 16-24 year olds have accessed the internet, only 47 per cent of those between 55 and 64 and 17 per cent of those over 65 have. The main barriers that discourage usage by older people are summarised in **Figure 2**.

| 2 | **Barriers that discourage older people from using electronic services** |

- Physiological effects of ageing, including loss of dexterity or diminution of vision or hearing.

- Lack of confidence or familiarity with new technologies, resulting in lack of awareness of potential.

- Cost, or concern about anticipated cost, especially for people in low-income households.

- Style and language used which can be a deterrent if, for example, it is overly formal or technical.

- Lack of knowledge and skills leading to some reluctance to seek assistance to access online services.

- Belief that e-services are of no relevance to them.

- Inconvenient or inappropriate locations putting off potential users because of discomfort using such services in public or fear of being unable to deal with problems at home.

- Inaccessible web designs that cannot be read by the access technology that people with disabilities rely on.

summary and recommendations

4   *National Statistics Omnibus Survey (October 2002).*

8   A 'digital divide' could undermine progress towards widespread use of government e-services, but there are some grounds for optimism that age will become less of a barrier. The 55-64 age cohort makes significantly greater use of the internet than those over 65[5]. Many retiring now have used computers at work, although those who did not work in an office remain unlikely to have much IT experience[6]. There is also evidence of an unwillingness to accept that new technology is only for the young[7], although health factors - such as poor manual dexterity - are likely to persist as a barrier. This may place a natural limit on take-up, although even this may be more about perceptions, since technical solutions to help those, for example, with poor sight are available.

9   Previous NAO reports on e-services (Better Public Services through e-Government (HC 704 Session 2001-02) and e-Revenue (HC 492 Session 2001-02)) have highlighted the potential savings for Government from development of e-services. In addition, there could be significant benefits to individuals from well designed e-services, but only if they are convinced of their value. Given current low levels of take-up among older people, finding incentives is particularly important with this group.

There are some limited signs that older people are taking advantage of government initiatives to increase access to e-services

10   The Government has developed a number of initiatives to provide access from public places and from home, and to provide and encourage training. The Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport have jointly established a network of **UK online centres**, for which older people not engaged in learning are a key target group. The Prime Minister announced that the target of 6,000 centres by the end of 2002 had been met ahead of schedule in November 2002. Sustainability is an issue for some centres, and progress in setting them up in deprived areas was slower than planned (750 by August 2002 compared with 2,000 planned). However, 2,840 such centres had been opened by the end of 2002. The Department for Education and Skills have also launched a Wireless Outreach Network which provides laptop training facilities for adult learning and community centres.

11   Many users have been pleased with their experience of the UK online centres. To date, some centres have found it more difficult than expected to attract older people and the disadvantaged, but early management returns from centres located in deprived areas show that 70 per cent of clients are from the target groups. An evaluation found that around 80 per cent of users already have access to the internet elsewhere[8], although the New Opportunities Fund consider it is not unusual at an early stage of a funding programme for the most disadvantaged groups to remain wary of computer training opportunities.

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5   *National Statistics Omnibus Survey (October 2002).*

6   *Participants in our focus groups who did not use computers regularly said that their previous and current employment did not require them to use IT.*

7   *For example, our focus groups found that older people generally had positive feelings about using computers.*

8   *Hall Aitken, UK online centres (CMF funded) - initial report (September 2002).*

12 Many centres have done good work in drawing in new users, but others could be more proactive. An online marketing toolkit and dedicated centres support website have been set up to assist centres. Poorer performing centres will be offered support to increase quality, but where not considered compliant with grant contracts, funds will be reclaimed and the grant terminated. To date, information on attendance levels and the quality of centres is limited, and arrangements are only now being introduced to monitor them. Without closer attention to the profile of users there is a risk that resources will not be spent on target groups. It is also important that centres are equipped appropriately to meet the requirements of people with physical disabilities such as blindness and partial sight. Centres should be able to provide learners with disabilities with appropriate support.

13 **Information kiosks** have been installed in public places such as shopping centres and hospitals, offering information through a touch-screen facility. The Department of Health have installed 180 kiosks, providing advice on medical conditions and healthy living, but it is unclear whether funding will continue. An initial evaluation found that, although 42 per cent of people in the surrounding area had visited the location, of these, just 7 per cent had used the kiosk[9]. In 2001 and 2002 a separate pilot scheme installed kiosks in 212 Post Offices in Leicestershire and Rutland. These offered a broader service, providing advice and, in some cases, the opportunity to interact with organisations such as the Department for Work and Pensions, the Inland Revenue, local authorities, voluntary bodies and commercial bodies. Although popular, in October 2002 ministers decided not to take forward a publicly funded service on the grounds that it would neither significantly improve government departments' ability to meet their objectives nor generate a viable level of income for Post Office Limited and its branches. However, there is commercial interest in placing kiosks in Post Offices and a service is likely to be piloted in Cornwall in 2003.

14 The Government has sought to encourage wider home access, but this has raised some legal and practical issues. The Department for Education and Skills distributed 24,000 **refurbished computers** to disadvantaged groups in 2000-01, including older people, at a cost of £7.1 million (£296 per machine). These costs reflect delivery, installation, maintenance, software, a printer and an operating system. The project encountered problems in sourcing and distribution, as well as legal problems, and there are currently no plans to continue. However, most participants were satisfied with their computer. Another scheme - Wired Up Communities - which has so far connected 9,000 homes and other locations to the internet, experienced similar problems.

15 The Government sees **digital television** as an additional platform for delivering services to citizens. In May 2002, MORI estimated that 43 per cent of viewers had access to digital television[10], and a significant number are older people. The Government will maintain existing analogue services until everyone who currently receives public service broadcasting channels can receive them digitally and switching over to the digital service is an affordable option. The target timetable for meeting these criteria is 2006-2010. As a measure of affordability, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport consider that 95 per cent of consumers should have access to digital equipment before analogue transmissions can be switched off.

9   *University of Plymouth, Evaluation of NHS Kiosks (December 2001).*
10   *MORI, Digital Television 2002 Final Report (May 2002).*

3 Digital television services being developed by government departments

UK online This is the digital television version of the UK online internet portal. The Office of the e-Envoy envisage that the service will provide a single point of access for viewers wanting to obtain information from and interact with government departments.

The Pension Service Information is available on planning for retirement, approaching retirement and being in retirement, including private pensions and related services. Interactive features include ordering leaflets, online survey and state pension age calculator. For those who receive State Pension into their bank accounts, there is a 'change of circumstance' reporting facility.

NHS Direct Four separate services have been tested, including programmes and videos on healthy living and a television version of the NHS Direct website, offering advice on common medical conditions.

16 Two departments - the Department of Health and the Department for Work and Pensions - as well as the Office of the e-Envoy are piloting public digital television services (at a cost of £9 million), and a further 19 departments and agencies plan to do so. The services are at an early stage **(Figure 3)**.

17 Departments and agencies already rely heavily on **call centres** (examined in the NAO report *Using call centres to deliver public services* HC 134 Session 2002-03) to deliver electronic services and they have been successful in attracting older people. We examined three Department for Work and Pensions centres aimed specifically at older people. One of them, the Pensions Direct centre, received 1.1 million calls in 2001-02, and of the estimated 490,000 people due to retire in 2001-02, 63 per cent chose to complete the retirement pension claim form over the telephone. NHS Direct now have a target to increase awareness and usage among older people from 11 to 20 per cent.

18 The success of all these initiatives will depend on how the benefits are promoted. Departments and agencies spent at least £14 million in 2001-02 advertising e-services, but understanding of the **UK online** brand among older people remains low despite a national campaign in 2001. While national advertising may help to raise awareness, local UK online centres need to encourage older people to use their facilities by demonstrating the potential benefits and opportunities for training. A number of public and private initiatives offer IT training for older people, but the closure in 2001 of the Individual Learning Accounts scheme (covered in the NAO report Individual Learning Accounts HC 1235 Session 2001-02) has closed off one avenue for support that had been used by some older people.

summary and recommendations

19 Older people are more likely to use government websites if the content is perceived as interesting and relevant to them. The governments of the United States of America and Canada, for example, have set up 'portals' specifically for older people. Such an approach provides a focus for marketing of e-services to older people and allows government to consult with users online and provide tailored information and services. There is no general government portal for older people in the United Kingdom, although The Pension Service website, as well as providing information on state and private pensions, does provide links to other services that may be of interest to older people. The Office of the e-Envoy are currently looking at candidates for developing services around different customer groups, one of which is older people. In addition, the UK online website contains a pensions and retirement information portal.

Government is making progress in providing accessible electronic services for older people, but there is room for considerable improvement

20 The impact of the ageing process can prevent older people from accessing e-services. Like other people, older users value interesting and easily found content, and simple navigation. In addition, many with poor vision are looking for larger than normal font size. The Office of the e-Envoy expect departments and agencies to make their websites accessible and usable by everyone. They have issued guidance on the accessibility of websites that incorporates best practice. The Office promote their own website (www.ukonline.gov.uk) as an exemplar, and have begun to review departmental sites and discuss necessary improvements. Many public bodies have voluntarily taken steps to enhance accessibility, and the Disability Discrimination Act 1995 makes it a requirement to provide services for disabled people of the same standard as for other users.

21 The accessibility and usability of government websites is improving, but many of the 65 we examined (considered likely to be of interest to many older people) do not yet meet widely accepted best practice standards. None fully complied, and most met between four and six of the 10 criteria we scored against. Performance was best on physical appearance factors, such as clear navigation and the ability to alter the size of text, but only 25 per cent passed testing using software that checks automatically whether a website complies with important elements of accessibility guidance. Very few public bodies had yet implemented technical guidance from the Office of the e-Envoy on, for example, standard access keys, or have a PICS rating, which would have a bearing on whether people can find and use government websites. Nevertheless, there is evidence that a considerable number of government websites are now being upgraded to make them more accessible.

22 Existing government websites might be more accessible if older people were able to use a third party to act as an intermediary. Such an approach would enable the customer to use a suitably qualified person to complete the details on-line on their behalf. The 'Citizens Connect' project is at the forefront of such initiatives and aims to use Citizens Advice Bureaux to provide wider access to government e-services. Wider roll out of the £20 million project in early 2004 will depend on whether the 2,000 bureaux in England and Wales are convinced of its benefits and are able to support the training and other associated running costs.

23 Delivery of information and interactive services via digital television is still developing, and has considerable potential to provide services for viewers with sensory and physical impairments. The Digital Television Action Plan developed by the Department of Trade and Industry and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, in partnership with public and private sector stakeholders, includes consideration of the needs of people with disabilities, many of whom are older people. However, the way in which interactive services are delivered currently via on-screen menus makes them largely inaccessible to many older people who are blind and partially sighted.

24 Piloting work by the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department of Health of their digital television services has identified a range of problems, and is allowing these Departments to understand better how they will need to develop the service. The piloting of information kiosks has also identified a range of improvements. In neither case have accessibility standards yet been developed comparable to those for websites.

Recommendations

25 Encouraging greater use of computers and the internet is a major challenge. To try to attract more older people and other low users, we recommend:

The Office of the e-Envoy should:

(i) clearly define and publicise how they intend to measure progress towards the target of universal access by 2005, and the criteria for assessing when the target is achieved, as well as consider setting and monitoring a specific target for usage among older people to focus attention on this group (paragraph 1.13);

(ii) undertake periodic surveys of the public (of which older people would be a key subset) to ensure that they continue to understand the barriers to using e-services (which may change as technology and the characteristics of the population change), and to identify what features and services are attractive to them. Research on client group characteristics should be disseminated widely to departments and agencies likely to provide services used by older people to avoid unnecessary duplication of effort (paragraphs1.15-1.18 and paragraph 3.4);

(iii) encourage organisations - for example, registered social landlords - in regular contact with hard-to-reach groups, such as older people and those on low incomes, to build on existing innovative developments, such as the training and facilities provided through the London and Quadrant Housing Trust, to introduce older people to the benefits of new technology (paragraph 2.34, Figure 17);

(iv) undertake a targeted marketing campaign with specialist voluntary sector organisations, such as Age Concern and Help the Aged, and in media most commonly used by older people, including television, magazines and local newspapers, to highlight the benefits from using e-services and draw attention to the main services available electronically, including NHS Direct, online pensions advice, local government information sites, as well as the availability of training. This should take account of lessons learned from previous e-services campaigns, and evidence of what kind of marketing works with groups of older people (paragraphs 2.31-2.33);

(v) consider the business case for developing an attractive government portal for specific customer groups such as older people, in the light of experience elsewhere, as the focus for a marketing campaign aimed at encouraging use of e-services by older people (paragraph 2.38);

(vi) encourage departments to explore more vigorously the scope for using intermediaries to deliver services on their behalf, for example, voluntary bodies with existing skills and knowledge of the client group (paragraph 3.18);