

Report on Ten Focus Groups conducted for the ‘Difficult Forms’ NAO report

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The purpose of this report

1. Between December 2002 and March 2003, a team from LSE Public Policy Group and the School of Public Policy at University College, London carried out ten focus groups and a set of qualitative interviews in London, Leeds and Edinburgh to investigate how citizens used six major UK government forms. The groups formed part of a 'value for money' study carried out for the National Audit Office and published by them as *Difficult Forms: How government agencies interact with citizens* (London, The Stationary Office, 2003), HC 1145 Session 2002-2003, published 31 October 2003. The report can be downloaded free from the Publications pages of www.nao.gov.uk or from the site at www.GovernmentOnTheWeb.org which is run jointly by LSE and UCL.

2. For each focus group or set of groups we provided a confidential report of our findings to each of the government departments or agencies concerned, setting out what our participants had said about each form. We hope that this feedback may be of use to agencies thinking about any revisions or changes to their existing forms or about the design of any new forms being introduced.

3. By contrast, in this report we have tried to provide information that will be helpful for public bodies or agencies *in general*, especially those considering whether and how to use focus groups in evaluating and updating their own forms. The analysis looks at some overall findings from across the ten focus groups and additional qualitative interviews conducted. Because this is a general review, we have anonymized which forms participants quoted were referring to. The analysis here should be read in conjunction with Part 3 of the *Difficult Forms* report and the results from our census of government forms, also available for free download from the Web sites above.

How the focus group discussions were conducted

4. Focus groups offer a way of systematically acquiring qualitative data on specific topics. Our approach in this project was to focus group discussions on individual government agency forms. Our facilitators worked through each form in detail with a relevant group of between 8 and 18 individuals: most groups had 10 to 12

participants. Most of the groups were undertaken with customers, but in addition we ran two groups with intermediaries who help people fill in the most difficult forms (in this case care workers with elderly people). We recorded each group using audio and video recorders and additional members of staff sat in on the discussions in the background and made detailed notes of what was said and of how discussions developed. All quotes from participants given below are verbatim. We paid participants who took part in our focus groups a small fee for their time, partly because our sessions were quite lengthy (at least 1.5 hours of discussion) and partly because we asked participants to look through or fill in forms in detail before attending the discussion session.

5. Focus group sessions were chaired by a facilitator, who began by introducing the form and explaining the reasons for our study. We usually began discussion by asking participants to give their initial impressions of the forms and the form packs (that is, including all supporting materials, such as reference leaflets, fees leaflets, reply envelopes, etc). We then began on the front page of the form and worked through the whole of the form in chunks covering sections or pages, asking participants for comments or any points of difficulty. These discussions were very detailed, focusing on precise wordings and possible meanings of questions, explanations and guidance.

6. Participants would often ask ‘Why do they ask us this?’ or ‘Why do they say that?’ Our facilitators never attempted to explain why departments or agencies were including questions, because it could tend to compromise their neutrality. In addition the facilitator might inadvertently ‘lead’ participants by giving a response, and if an apparently ‘authoritative’ answer was given then it might also undermine the discussion nature of the sessions. Instead our facilitators would ask participants: ‘Why do you think they [the agency] want to know this?’ Alternatively they might ask participants to look up in the explanatory notes or guidance leaflets provided to see if these sources gave an explanation of why particular types of information were needed.

7. At the end of our detailed discussions about forms we also asked participants about their experiences of assembling data or materials needed to fill in the forms; supplying photographs or supporting documents; getting documents or photographs counter-signed for some of the forms; supplying the names of other people who could give evidence to agencies about their identity (or state of health or medical condition in some cases); and any other elements integrally involved in fully completing forms. We also asked people about different ways of submitting forms; whether they used ‘premium fee’ services at the Post Office (available in some cases); whether they used intermediary services; if they had ever submitted forms via the Internet; and their experience of getting help to fill them forms in over the phone or directly from agency staff or local offices. We also covered all contacts that people had had with the agency issuing the form. And we asked people to relate what they had said on the form to their experiences of other central government forms. Sometimes people would introduce comparisons with other sectors, especially local government and large private sector service providers, like insurance companies and banks. We closed discussions by asked participants for their overall impressions of the form covered, and any scope for improvement.

8. For the European elections ballot paper we used a more individualized approach, asking people to first fill in an actual ballot paper from the 1999 contest and then to cast their 'vote' in mock polling station (complete with ballot box and posters from the actual election). Immediately following the stimulus provided in this way, we interviewed people individually for around 10 minutes each about how they had filled in the paper, detailed aspects of its design, and what they understood from the ballot paper or other general knowledge about how the election was conducted. We also asked whether they had used the advice and guidance on the ballot paper or in notices in the polling booths (actually not noticed by most people) and what kinds of improvements or alterations they felt might be useful or necessary in the ballot paper for the forthcoming 2004 European Parliament election. Thus the same approach of focusing on specifics was used here, and as in other cases respondents' qualitative comments were recorded in full. But for this form alone there was no element of group discussion.

Participants' initial impressions of forms

9. Many forms are delivered to citizens as part of a pack. In addition to the form itself these packs will usually contain a leaflet or pamphlet that explains in detail what people need to do to fill in the form. Packs are often being quite bulky. The longest leaflet we looked at for this study ran to 68,000 words of text, although most respondents would not need to look at all or even most of it. In addition form packs often contain other elements, such as pre-addressed reply envelopes (always appreciated where they were supplied), and additional sheets drawing people's attention to some especially important requirement or setting out fees for submitting forms in some cases. (Fees are often handled on a separate sheet so as to avoid having to reprint the bulkier forms or guidance leaflets if fee levels are increased).

10. Three of the forms we studied were long ones, covering multiple pages and many questions. Our participants often reported feeling overwhelmed by the initial bulk of the form packs, and by the length or apparent complexity of the official forms included. 'My God, I thought, it's so big...' was one elderly person's reaction, which produced sympathetic laughter from the rest of the group. Other responses included:

- 'It's too much to take in at one time'.
- 'I didn't attack this in one go'.
- 'I am just horrified by it, because I don't know where to begin. I understand the words. I know it is written in English. But they need to put it in sentences that the average person can understand'.
- 'Too much wording'.
- 'It puts people off... Nine times out of ten people won't even look at it again'.
- 'My God! All the £ signs [for financial details] make me sick'.
- 'Who is going to have time to fill these in and have time to do other things? It's a full-time job'.

Comments of this kind were often followed by reflections on whether it could conceivably be worthwhile filling in a form so extensive.

- 'I hope I get it right first time, because if not I'll just throw up my hands. I can see why people say: "I'm not going to bother" '.
- 'I spent ages looking at it. The .. help book is not self-explanatory'.

Respondents often mentioned that after taking long forms out of their envelopes, or doing a quick visual check on what was needed, they were discouraged from filling them in. These people would then put the form on one side for tackling later on, when they felt stronger, or had access to help from another family member.

11. Several of the forms had prominent instructions that advised people to read bulky accompanying leaflets or guidance *before* completing the form. This approach was particularly likely to lead people to defer filling the form in, and most of these instructions were anyway self-defeating. Even on our short forms a few super-conscientious people who did try to read the whole instructions before looking at the form said that they soon gave up. They found that the initial guidance material was so lengthy that by the time they reached the end they had forgotten what were the instructions for the early questions, which they had read at the beginning. Nor did respondents anyway find the guidance notes taken in isolation to be very understandable. They needed to see what specific questions asked for in order to make sense of the guidance. Agencies should recognize that advising people to read instructions en bloc before tackling the form is counter-productive and impractical even for ‘model’ citizens, let alone the large majority of form-users. The only feasible way for users to relate guidance to form questions is on a piecemeal basis, cross-referring where they need specific help.

How participants tackled forms

12. A lot of respondents reported looking over forms first to see what was entailed and they rarely found them helpfully set out. Instead they complained that the starts of forms were over-laden with multiple messages, warnings and bits of advice that departments often see as priorities – often reminders not to commit some commonly occurring mistake. Thus the starts of forms were often not clear, and some looked messy or over-compressed. Some forms began by asking people to declare which of several different versions of a permission or license or document they were applying for, triggering an immediate need to refer to guidance materials, before people had even written their name and address down. People looked to the guidance leaflets for a quick overview of what they would have to do but felt that they encountered instead large and dense-looking blocks of text.

13. Only one of the forms that we looked at, the European elections ballot paper, was designed for ‘quick start’ use, with simple instructions on the form itself and a single simple response required of users. Voters did not by any means fully understand all the information on this form, but everyone knew what to do with it. On the other forms people complained that the guidance leaflets did not provide a list of materials that they would need to fill in the form – for example, they did not say clearly that they would need to have documents or photographs or would need to look in their records for pieces of reference information that might not be to hand. Because people often glance over forms and often defer completion on the basis of a ‘quick look’, inaccessible starts to guidance leaflets can be off-putting. Respondents who either sat down at once to try and complete the form or who had a quick look but then came back to the form after a gap both found it frustrating to suddenly discover in mid-flow that they needed an element that was not mentioned upfront. Often this produced another deferral in completing the form, although some people did persevere with all

the bits that they could fill in, hoping to have an all-but-complete form requiring only one or two missing elements to send off. Some of this last set of people then reported forgetting later on to insert the missing element and hence sending off an incomplete form that agencies then returned to them for correction or resubmission.

14. In starting off on their form respondents almost universally wanted to get into the form quickly by filling in familiar elements such as names, addresses and date of birth, thereby racking up some 'easy wins' and gaining a sense of progress. The longer this initial 'straightforward' section could be sustained the more people feel optimistic that their task can be completed, and the more sense they gain of what an unfamiliar form is about and of why and how the agency needs to know information. They also wanted a very simple, minimal explanation on the form itself and for the opening page of the accompanying guidance leaflets to be designed as a 'Quick Start' guide. Several respondents in different focus groups referred to instructions for electrical appliances or personal computers where manufacturers previously used to issue very bulky and text-heavy instructions on their appliances, which most consumers found too detailed, off-putting and inaccessible. But now manufacturers almost universally have the first pages of their guidance (or a separate leaflet) focus in very simple terms on how to get the appliance powered up and running, without going into any unnecessary details or refinements. Often this section uses pictures or icons that can be understood very easily. Our respondents suggested that by analogy the first page of the forms guidance should have clearly visible initial checklists (ideally illustrated with photos, icons or diagrams) of all the materials they would need for the form. For example, it could show what documents are necessary, photos, witnessed elements, information about other family members, and also official numbers (like National Insurance numbers) that people might have to dig out from their records.

Where problems occurred

15. At some point in forms respondents in all our focus groups reported encountering a request for information that raised problems for them. In long forms some of these things that made people pause were just unexplained questions that they had not expected to see, or requests for information whose relevance to the form was not obvious. Particularly alarming are elements that seem incongruous (such as nationality or country of origin details on a form that does not seem on the face of it to require them, or information about other benefits received on a form for a non-means-tested benefit). In several groups respondents puzzled over simply incongruous questions, especially ones which seem relevant to only a small minority of form users but which nonetheless come early on in the mainstream of questions that everyone must fill in.

16. Forms that are directed to multiple groups of users are particularly likely to create problems for users because people moving through the form they inadvertently begin answering questions that are not actually meant to be relevant for them. Forms catering for multiple user groups are of course longer and more complex to understand than forms that are single-purpose and where people can be advised to fill in all the questions in a single sequence. In groups looking at multi-user forms most of our respondents reported beginning to answer sections that they should have left blank or struggling to respond to questions that were not meant to apply to them.

- ‘Trying to work out what to ignore is very difficult’.

Many respondents only appreciated that they had made mistakes when they came to the focus group itself. Part of the problem here is that although some guidance is provided on forms themselves it is often solely in the form of text instructions and is itself often quite hard to understand.

- ‘I found the information is a one-way thing. It raised more questions than it answered’.

17. Multi-user forms are often divided into numbered sections, as well as having questions that are prominently numbered, and page numbers on long forms. Thus respondents can have at least three different numbering systems ‘live’ at one time. Agencies often use section numbers to direct people which bits of multi-user forms to fill in. But the ‘sections’ are the least visible numbers to users, with most people focusing on question or page numbers when looking forwards or backwards in forms.

- ‘It was confusing because you forgot what page numbers you were looking for or which book’.
- ‘I found the page numbers quite difficult, especially when you wanted to find out where the help was’.

In our set of forms the ‘official’ or recommended sequence sometimes asked people to turn forward or backwards and fill in pages not in a ‘straight run’ sequence – advice that was most often either not noticed or ignored. People complained here that:

- ‘The instructions are going backwards and forwards’.

18. Our respondents complained of multi-user forms that they did not use obvious ways of showing them which sections to fill in or ignore, like colour or shading differences. Most of the forms we covered were a single colour throughout and none of them used visual variations within pages to show different types of users which parts of forms to fill in or pass over. Nor did any of the guidance leaflets for these forms use photos or pictures of these different sections to show different groups of users what to do.

19. Some forms did have helpful graphics showing people things like how to fill in letter-spaces in forms that would be photo-imaged, and how to fit signatures within the spaces provided. Respondents liked these elements a lot, but wanted them to ideally be present on the front pages of forms themselves, or as part of the very visible ‘quick start’ page of the guidance. For some of our forms helpful material of this kind was already present in guidance leaflets, but buried away on inside pages where very few respondents had actually noticed its existence. When pointed out in group discussions in the relevant pages in the guidance, participants frequently commented that these tips would have been useful if only they had known they were there.

20. Apart from the confusions inherent in multi-user forms, the next most common things that respondents said caused them problems were:

- *Questions with ambiguous wordings*, where people could not be sure if their situation was covered or not. Often forms ask questions in rather a blanket way with users being officially supposed to look up in the guidance leaflet provided for more details of who is or is not covered. When people cannot work out what is meant they can have strong reactions, one person commenting that a ‘confusing’ form section was like ‘going mad in circles’.

- ‘I don’t know how to answer that. I wouldn’t know what to do’.
- ‘[This] section.. totally confusing’.
- ‘If this question was more clearly written, you wouldn’t have to keep going back to the book’.
- ‘The information is not in the document [guidance leaflet]. It should at least be in brackets on the form’.
- ‘Can’t they put this down in a simpler way?’
- ‘It opens up things that should not be asked about for this claim’.

Some forms have two tiers of questions, a filter question designed to indicate if a whole section applies to a user, with more detailed questions within it that only need to be read through if users answered yes to the filter question. However, participants said that the initial filter questions were often poorly worded or too broad, so that they reported having to plough through the detailed questions anyway to determine that they did not apply to them.

In other forms the problems arose because very similar questions were duplicated or even repeated multiple times, causing many people to worry that what they had already filled in somehow reflected a misunderstanding of what was wanted:

- ‘Each time you are constantly struggling in the same thing, over and over and over again’.

- *Open-ended questions about people’s histories*, for instance asking if they had *ever* had health problems, or *ever* been overseas, created serious anxieties amongst participants. People were keen to be honest, not least because forms often included warnings of penalties for mistakes or non-declaration of relevant information. But people’s memories only stretch so far and unless they could see the relevance of such requests for the specific form they were tackling they were reluctant to get into complications whose point was not obvious to them.
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- *Questions about people’s plans* or things that had not come about yet created difficulties.
 - ‘I can’t predict what the future will be’.
 - ‘It depends on your circumstances at the time’.
 - ‘It would be a hassle if you changed your mind later’.
 - ‘Which box do you tick? At the stage we are at, you just don’t know’.
- *Questions containing unfamiliar, official or technical concepts* always created difficulties where they occurred. Overall they were not all that common on the forms we studied, but usually where they occurred the obscure terms were actually quite critical - in two cases they were fundamental to people completing the form correctly at all. People found especially confusing cases where ordinary or familiar terms were used as labels in schemes or regulations to which they did not ordinarily seem to refer at all.
 - ‘It’s not what you think it is. It’s about not about [X, names word used in scheme label]. It’s about [Y]’.

- *Questions on financially orientated forms that seem too small to be worth bothering about.* Here people often saw a disproportion in effort between the lengths they needed to go to find information and the implications for the agency concerned.
 - ‘It is not worthwhile in many cases. The amounts are too small to be relevant and are not worth bothering about’.
 - ‘This is ridiculous. I didn’t realize that if it came to anything it was going to be so little’.

- *Questions that did not fit with how people saw things or did things in their own lives.* Forms are often far more difficult for people to understand where an agency has a strong internal culture or requirements that do not mesh with their current occupation or situation.
 - ‘My problem was that these things are so widely away from what I do..’
 - ‘These are not things you do yourself, basically. Bits of information you need for this,.. but not based on [their] categories’.

- *Questions that seem contradictory or with obvious answers* often provoked comments. Examples included:
 - ‘ [quotes from form] “If you have a problem communicating”... It’s comic that you’ve just filled in that whole form!’
 - ‘Look at the guidance! How could you provide your [document] number when you’ve lost your [document]?’
 - ‘How could I possibly submit it [my old document] because it’s gone?’

21. In most of our groups there were one or several different discussions about what to do in any of these circumstances, in which people joined sympathetically even if the problem was not one relevant for them. Our facilitators would also ask groups to look up the guidance leaflets accompanying forms, so as to check if they helped resolve people’s problems. The guidance was helpful on a majority of the occasions where the problems was officialese, although some explanations provided took a lot of figuring out and re-explanation by other participants for some people to grasp. But we found virtually no cases where the guidance leaflets shed any light at all on ambiguously worded or open-ended questions. Indeed guidance leaflets often said nothing at all about problematic questions. Respondents often complained that they turned to the guidance after becoming stuck or anxious only to find that it was silent on their problem. Some groups compared this approach with other outside bodies also using complex forms but whose reference guides always contain a note of explanation about each questions included, however straightforward it might seem on the surface.

22. There seemed to be two or three common strategies amongst our participants for coping with problematic questions. One was to defer filling in the form until they could consult someone else, such as a family member, an advisor or intermediary, or other friends or members of a peer group filling in the same form. Another approach was to leave things blank, or rule out or write ‘not applicable’ against anything where participants did not know how to answer. In long forms participants often said that once they started on this approach they quickly generalized it, often moving through the rest of the form with decreased attention ticking or ruling through boxes,

especially if they felt that they had already answered the ‘core’ questions of the form. This pattern of behaviour was especially common where long forms ended with extensive sections not relevant to the individual, or with long lists of qualifications or declarations accompanying an eventual signature box, which participants often said that they skim read or just signed without reading. There was some discussion in groups when people explained that they had done this, with more cautious or conscientious people saying that they felt that they had to fill in everything, or felt cross-pressured when they felt questions did not apply to them. Participants generally appreciated forms that gave some guidance on the form itself about how to handle non-relevant boxes, especially an official permission to leave things blank. The third common approach was that participants used their common sense with ambiguous or open-ended questions, making a judgement of what seemed to them to be relevant information, given their understanding of the purposes for which the form was issued. For example, on open-ended health questions people who had suffered from a problem that had now gone away generally ticked the ‘No’ box, and on open-ended questions about overseas residence people might mention only a recent period without going into earlier periods.

23. In other aspects of our research (on this project and on other topics) we were struck by how reluctant civil servants and agency officials often are to commission focus groups, partly because they fear that people will be very hostile or critical and unappreciative of the difficulties that agencies face. However, our clear impression from the focus group discussions is that participants generally and quite strongly wanted administrative process to work well, in their own interest and that of others. Our respondents wanted passports to be issued only to citizens, wanted other people to pay their taxes, and felt that access to welfare benefits should be restricted to those who are eligible – and they accepted that this had implications for the way that forms impinged on them as a result. Participants were quite strongly sympathetic to the difficulties faced by the agencies issuing forms, a consideration that came up spontaneously in discussions and which our facilitators did not comment on (as noted above).

24. But at the same time our groups often included periods where people discussed what to do on questions that seemed threatening or liable to create difficulties for their application. Participants’ attitudes here were closely related to their feelings about the form in general. In most groups odd-seeming or unexplained questions elicited reactions about ‘trick questions’ from some people, especially where questions seemed to repeat or to come at very similar issues from different angles.

- ‘They’re trying to trick you so they can turn you down’.
- ‘They try to make everything as difficult as possible’.
- ‘They are trying to catch you out somewhere’.
- ‘It’s a way of judging us’.
- ‘They want to save money’.
- ‘It’s deliberate, so less people apply’.
- ‘The more you fill the pages the more you feel they want to trip you up’.

Especially where forms create this impression there was a general tolerance in our groups of people not declaring information where questions were ambiguous, too open-ended, obscure or not clearly relevant.

- ‘If you want a [names government document] you just lie [here]. You don’t know what information they will come back for’.

- ‘Never volunteer any information’.
- ‘Say “Don’t know”, so you don’t have to complete that bit’.

Views of agencies’ advice services

25. A minority of participants in each group reported problems when they tried to submit forms at local offices or Post Offices, quite often meaning that they had to start again or redo forms from the start, especially with forms that are not fault-tolerant, such as those which are scanned-in by optical character readers. Participants speculated quite a lot about how agencies would react, and what warnings on forms meant when they spelt out reasons why your application could be ‘rejected’. On the other hand, people who had been phoned back by agency personnel, or had had their forms returned and then phoned up specific officials to try to work out exactly why, all reported that staff were helpful. Many were pleasantly surprised at this stage by the straightforward and helpful answers they got from staff.

26. The interactive help and advice provided by agencies during the form completion process was more cautiously or ambivalently evaluated. Many participants in group discussions lamented that helpline numbers and Web addresses were not given at the bottom of form pages, and in several groups there was a discussion about their lack of prominence in guidance leaflets also. It was common for people to miss seeing helpline numbers amongst crowded or text-heavy leaflets, and Web site addresses were even less visible. Telephone advice was seen as the best, but in many groups people expressed scepticism that they would ever find their calls connecting, and swapped experiences of trying multiple times to reach advisors.

- ‘If you can get through! They put you on hold!’

With long forms people who did get through were sceptical that advice services were really practicable:

- ‘You’ve been on the phone for a long time, and you are trying to write down everything. It’s very difficult’.
- ‘I came out more bamboozled than before. I felt such an imbecile that I said: “Thank you very much”. She was as helpful as she could be under the circumstances, but she could not do any more than she did. Unfortunately it was not useful for me’.

By contrast in one of our groups several people had been able to attend a briefing organized by the agency concerned, dealing with how to fill out their long form. This evoked very positive reactions, because it was interactive and involved personal contact, where people could ask questions and felt that they could properly understand the issues.

Participants’ overall views of forms

27. In undertaking work for this study we found that in many cases agencies do not seem to have any clear idea of how onerous or time-consuming it is for citizens to complete their forms. Partly this is because people’s circumstances vary a lot, especially on multi-user forms directed to disparate audiences. Users’ own personal styles can have a great deal of influence upon how they respond to questions about how long they took or how difficult they found forms. Questions of this kind asked in

mass surveys may trigger responses that reflect a concern by people to seem in charge of their situation or to appear as cognitively sophisticated and competent individuals. It was a common occurrence in our groups for some male participants to declare that long or complex forms 'did not cause me any problems' or were 'straightforward' so that they completed them in relatively brief periods, such as 20 minutes for long forms or 10 minutes for short forms. Other participants then seemed hesitant to offer estimates, but would gradually give much longer time estimates, often of the order of several hours for long forms.

- 'You need at least 5 hours to do it properly. You need that amount to get it done because it involves research and getting documents'.

Numerical elements in forms were seen as especially time consuming:

- 'Working out the amount of money might take a bit of time'.

Participants who took longer often seem reassured to learn that they were not alone and became more confident of their estimates as discussion continued. In addition to actually answering questions, completing the forms often involves people assembling supporting materials and these stages often took considerable extra time. Where completing forms was deferred, re-accessing paperwork sometimes added to the time and effort reported.

28. When people were asked how they felt about the time and effort needed to complete the form, a few respondents reported no problems at all. Others were tolerant of agencies' need to gather information, arguing that:

- 'It's got to be done'.
- 'They wouldn't ask you if they didn't need to know'.
- 'Too harsh? They are just trying to make sure that you get it right'.

Others saw the form as difficult but unavoidable:

- 'It's as complicated as it could get. But I don't know that there is any way around it? The number of combinations and permutations in there [indicates a long form] must run into millions'.

29. However, some of our groups as a whole felt that their forms were poorly laid out, badly phrased and inaccessible. Many participants were frankly critical, observing that it took 'a lot longer than it should have' and describing the forms they tackled as 'fearsome', 'overwhelming', or 'scary'.

- 'I feel cross that I can't do it myself'.
- 'It can put people off'.
- 'The form is too complicated and long.. there is duplication'
- 'It's really daunting'.
- 'It's like a book'.
- 'It could be cut in half'.
- 'This could be consolidated with other sections'.
- 'Yes! I finally finished!'
- 'It took up my life for three weeks. I woke up in the middle of the night worrying about it. It's so irritating because you are quite confident .. about your own personal circumstances, but this thing lands and you are reduced to a cowering heap'.
- 'I found it very difficult because if a form has got my name on it, I panic, as usually happens with government forms. Even though I kept what I had done [before], I found it very, very daunting'.

Even quite short forms could be seen as cramped, confusing or badly sequenced.

30. A common pattern was that people phrased their complaints in terms not in terms of problems they personally faced but in terms of the problems that they could foresee that it would cause for others. Participants usually mentioned here people who were less well educated than themselves, perhaps had literacy or numeracy problems, or had less understanding of what agencies wanted, as well as people who were elderly or ill or had less grip on English or less experience of living in the UK.

- ‘How would relatively not so literate people cope? Everyone has to do it. It made me angry’.
- ‘Enormous great long form. You need to be articulate to fill it in.. Stressful and intimidating’.
- ‘People feel very intimidated by these forms’.
- ‘So many people get these forms wrong. It must cost a lot of money to send them back’.
- ‘The form is too much for foreign [people] who don’t speak good English’.
- ‘If you have a learning disability, a mental health problem, some other problem?.. People often do not remember what their needs are [in this detail]’.
- ‘They could make this form a lot smaller, which is less daunting. Because they [names vulnerable group] see all this information, and they go into panic mode, don’t they?’

31. Finally many of our participants were worried about what would happen to all the often sensitive information that they communicated to agencies. Many people commented that government forms told you little or nothing about what would happen to information given, although several forms did mention that it could be passed on to other agencies. The absence of any explicit data protection or privacy statement on agency forms and Web sites was seen as an area where the public sector lagged behind private companies.

- ‘It’s not right that you are left to assume that it won’t be passed to other people’.
- ‘This form made me question, why do they need all this information? It’s only a [names document]’.
- ‘If information is passed to other people, it should state who these people are’.

Conclusions

32. The problems and reactions set out here show that citizens as focus group participants have a lot to bring to improving government forms. We found that almost all our participants were interested in and involved with the problems of improving wordings, layout and clarity (although there might be a ‘selection bias’ here). Their comments constantly brought out aspects of forms that we had not ourselves noticed as problematic. Often on any particular difficulties would arise for one or a few people but in discussion it would emerge that other people had analogous or related problems, either on the same form or on another government form. Above all it is important to record the reservoir of good will towards government in undertaking what are recognized as inherently difficult tasks that underlay all our discussions. Although many groups produced criticisms and suggestions for change, the

discussions took place in a very positive atmosphere and were always lively and good-humoured.

33. Perhaps two general impressions of the groups are also worth recording. On the one hand, many participants were pleased to have been asked to give their views and recorded positive evaluations of the sessions when they came to a close. They were impressed at the amount of material covered and the detailed attention that they had sustained as a group. We were often told that we had done the right thing in consulting citizens directly and that the government should do far more of this kind of exercise. On the other hand, participants were often more critical of forms at the end of the group sessions than they had been at the beginning. Partly this change seemed to reflect a feeling that if ten or twelve 'ordinary people' had been able to turn up so many and such salient points where improvements were feasible, then government agencies with their large budgets should be a lot better in communicating to citizens than they seemed to be.