



National Audit Office

REPORT BY THE
COMPTROLLER AND
AUDITOR GENERAL

HC 1048
SESSION 2012-13

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The Cabinet Office

Digital Britain 2: Putting users at the heart of government's digital services

Key facts

The online population

83% of people are online

91%

Age: 15 to 64 years

51%

Age: 65+ years

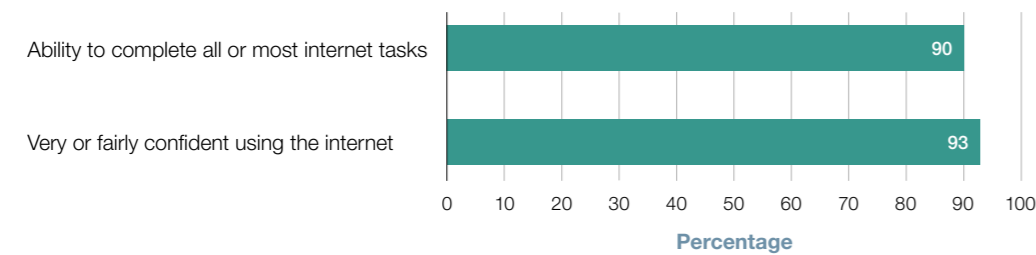
91%

Social class: ABC1

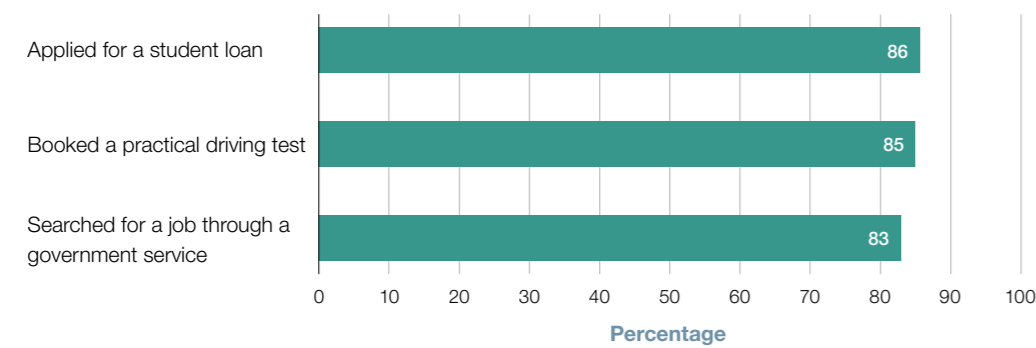
74%

Social class: C2DE

People online are largely confident and capable



The top three public services, by proportion of transactions done online, in the past 12 months by people we surveyed



Use of online public services

There is high satisfaction with online public services

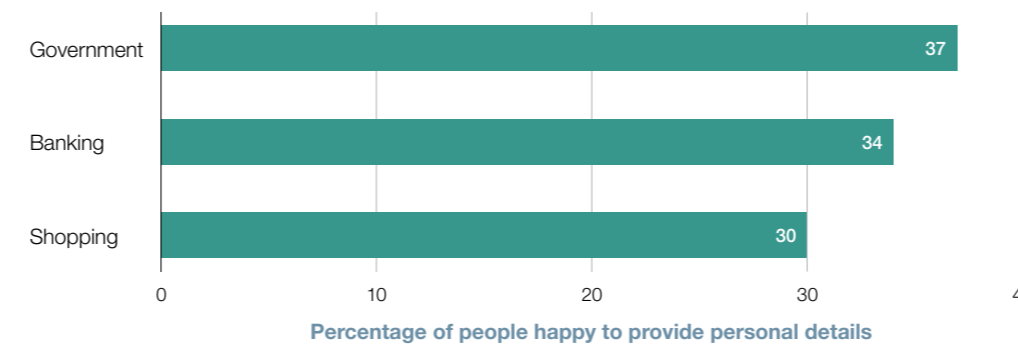
4.4 out of 5 is the average score for ease of use of online public services

Awareness of people online of an online public service but who chose to use an offline option

47% ordering a copy of a birth, death or marriage certificate offline were aware of the online option

89% filing a self-assessment tax return offline were aware of an online option

People are generally not happy providing personal information online, although trust in government is higher than for banking and shopping



The offline population

17% of people are offline

9%

Age: 15 to 64 years

49%

Age: 65+ years

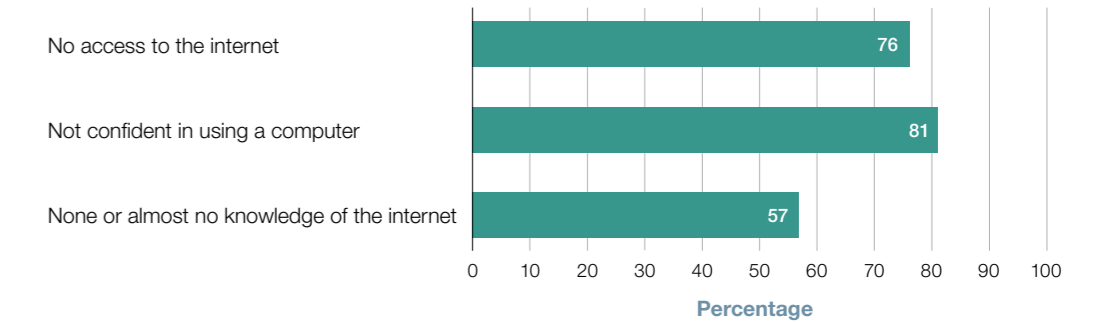
9%

Social class: ABC1

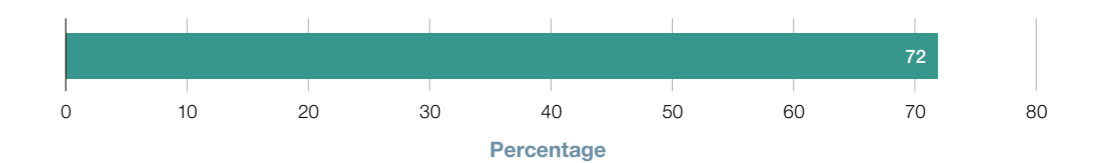
26%

Social class: C2DE

People offline have low levels of IT capability and confidence



Many people who are offline do not intend to go online over the next 12 months



Many of those offline have help from family, friends and work colleagues to go online for them

48% have someone go online on their behalf

Summary

1 This report is about the government's strategy for moving public services to 'digital by default', published in November 2012. The strategy incorporated data on 1,298 users from a government survey in August 2012 as data on citizens and small and medium-sized businesses use of, and willingness to engage with, public services online was limited.¹ To give the Committee of Public Accounts assurance about the digital strategy, and that its approach to assisting those who are offline to use digital services is based on sound assumptions about the preferences, capabilities and needs of users in England, we commissioned independent research. This included a face-to-face survey of over 3,000 people, an online survey of 130 businesses and eight focus groups in England.

2 The government started to move to online public services in 2000. In December 2011, we reported on the key developments over the previous decade.² While we found progress in making it easier for people to find government information and services online, we did not find robust data on the costs or benefits of spending. Therefore we could not conclude that the government had achieved value for money in working towards its objectives.

3 When we last reported, the Cabinet Office had set up the Government Digital Service ('GDS') to accelerate the move towards digital public services. We made several recommendations for the GDS that they progressed in 2012. In particular, we recommended that it should lead on integrating digital plans across government and improve its analysis of the costs and benefits of going digital. We also recommended that the GDS should have the authority to set and implement policy and work closely with stakeholders to provide digital services that put users first.

4 The GDS is working to make services 'digital by default'. Digital by default is defined as "digital services that are so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use them will choose to do so while those who can't are not excluded".³ However, the strategy also highlights the savings that can come from switching to digital channels. The GDS has identified more than 650 public services that central government provides (excluding the NHS, local councils and the police). These could yield total potential annual savings of £1.7 billion to £1.8 billion if they were provided digitally. In 2011-12, according to GDS, these services cost between £6 billion and £9 billion to operate and more than 300 have no digital channel.⁴ The savings estimate does not include the costs that may be required to create or redesign digital services. However, it also does not take into account the government's new approach to becoming digital, set out in its strategy, which could lead to greater savings being achieved more quickly.

1 The Cabinet Office, *Digital Landscape Research*, November 2012.

2 Comptroller and Auditor General, *Digital Britain One: Shared infrastructure and services for government online*, Session 2010–2012, HC 1589, National Audit Office, December 2011.

3 The Cabinet Office, *Government Digital Strategy*, November 2012.

4 The Cabinet Office, *Digital Efficiency Report*, November 2012.

5 In this report we have tested the assumptions made about users in the government digital strategy. Our future audits will evaluate value for money as government redesigns services and moves them online.

Key findings

6 The government has made more ambitious plans over the last year, for making public services digital. It is 13 years since the government first announced that it would move public information and transaction services online; a move it initially intended to complete by 2005. Since we last reported in December 2011, the government's interest has broadened from consolidation of government websites to the more fundamental need to redesign public services with users at the heart. In July 2012, the *Civil Service Reform Plan* committed the government to becoming digital wherever possible.⁵ In November 2012, the *Government Digital Strategy* was published, which includes ways to help those who are not online to engage with government online (paragraphs 1.1, 1.7 and 1.9).

7 Set up in 2011, the Government Digital Service established firm leadership of this digital agenda. In particular it has:

- started to improve the Cabinet Office's digital capacity, and establish digital leaders in departments;
- replaced the Directgov and Business.gov portals to public services with a single website – GOV.UK a single point of entry to online public services;
- analysed and published cost and performance information on online public services; and
- published the *Government Digital Strategy* (paragraphs 2.2 to 2.9).

8 The *Government Digital Strategy* is based on sound evidence that many people and small- and medium-sized businesses can access and have the skills to use online public services. From our surveys we found that 83 per cent of people use the internet. Whether people live in a rural or urban area appears to make little difference to their internet use. Age, socio-economic group and disability do affect internet use. Over 90 per cent of those we surveyed who were online were experienced internet users who felt confident about completing online tasks without help. However, 7 per cent of those online lack confidence and may need help to use the internet (paragraphs 3.2, 3.3, 3.8 and 3.11).

⁵ HM Government, *Civil Service Reform Plan*, June 2012.

9 There are challenges in persuading more people and businesses that are online already to use online public services. Most people have access to the internet and can do the types of transactions required by online public services. However, in some areas this is not translating into the government's online services being used. For example, for the 20 public services covered by our research (Appendix Two) we found that the proportion of online transactions ranged from less than 50 per cent to over 80 per cent by service. GDS has, in calculating potential savings, assumed that 82 per cent of transactions will be carried out online, in line with its research finding that 82 per cent of the population is online. However, it also acknowledges that the take up of online services will vary, as some services have a higher proportion of users who are offline than others. Although our research indicated that users found online public services easy to use and had few problems completing their transactions, there were three types of barrier to people choosing to use more public services online:

- **People's behaviour rather than their awareness of an online option could be a significant barrier.** Of those people who had used one of the 20 public services covered by our survey offline, between 80 and 90 per cent of users were aware of an online option for five of the services. Some of the people who attended our focus groups said they preferred face-to-face contact, even if they knew they could use the service online.
- **People are generally not happy with providing personal information online.** Although trust in government is higher than for online banking or shopping among online users, only 37 per cent are happy to share information with government online. Seventeen per cent have some security concerns, and 5 per cent do not share information with government because of these concerns.
- **There is low awareness of some online public services.** Across the 20 public services in our research, the proportion of people online using services offline, who knew that there was an online option ranged from 47 per cent to 89 per cent across the different services (paragraphs 3.12, 3.13, 4.14, 4.18 and Figures 7 and 8).

10 The Government Digital Service has set out plans on how it will support people who are offline to use online public services. Those we surveyed expressed some concerns about the impact of putting more public services online on the elderly, and those without skills or access to the internet. The government is planning to develop assisted digital support for 23 exemplar digital services by 2014-15, and to put in place common models of assisted digital support and shared procurement routes for assisted digital services. Of those people we surveyed, 17 per cent do not use the internet and of these 72 per cent do not intend to go online in the coming year. Most of those offline have low confidence in using a computer and know little about the internet. Based on these numbers, departments need to plan for around four million people in England who may need help in using online channels. However, of those people who are offline, 48 per cent already receive help from someone else, such as friends, family and work colleagues, to use the internet. The government's approach to assisted digital services does not recognise this situation (paragraphs 5.6, 5.8, 5.9 and 5.17).

11 The new website GOV.UK provides a single path to departmental services and has been well received by users. Initial impressions from our focus groups were positive. They described the new website as simple to use, and were impressed with the amount of information available. Many who attended the focus groups said they would definitely use it again (paragraphs 4.8 and 4.21).

Conclusion

12 Our independent analysis shows scope for using online public services more. Also, the government's aim of making public services digital by default seems broadly acceptable to most people and small- and medium-sized businesses. However, there is far to go before digital becomes everyone's chosen means of accessing public services. There are still significant numbers of people who cannot, or do not wish to, go online. The government has set out plans to help such people use digital channels but now needs to put these plans into action if it is not to create a 'them and us' problem for those not online.

Recommendations

- a When the government launches new digital services it should publicise how it will help those who are offline.** The government has long been aware of the need to support those who are offline to use online services. It is developing plans to assist those who are offline and recognises the importance of users knowing how and where to access services. Our assessment of users' capability shows that a significant number of people will need help, particularly those who are over 65, in lower socio-economic groups or disabled.
- b The Government Digital Service (GDS) should consider the help the offline population gets from friends, family and work colleagues.** Almost half of those we surveyed who were offline found someone to go online for them. The demand for help may therefore be lower than expected. However, public services must be designed so that people can apply for licences or make payments for others, in a way that minimises fraud. Currently, the government's approach to assisted digital services does not recognise this.
- c GDS should communicate its assisted digital schemes and the timetable for transition to digital services to the elderly, those in lower socio-economic groups and the disabled.** The service should consider whether having each government department develop arrangements for people who need help is the best approach. Those who are offline are more likely to be those who are particularly hard to reach. It is therefore important that they can find information about how to access public services easily. As these people are also likely to be using several public services, there will be opportunities for departments to work together, as required by GDS, to help the offline user.

- d** **The GDS should increase its behavioural research to see what prevents capable internet users from using online public services more.** Our research suggests there are reasons other than lack of awareness, frustration with services or lack of trust. Some users feel that, while a digital channel is appropriate for shopping, it is not formal enough for some government business. GDS needs to understand these behaviours.
- e** **GDS should promote GOV.UK more to raise awareness of available online public services.** GOV.UK was well received by people at our focus groups and six million people visited the site in January and February 2013. This is more than ever visited Directgov and Businesslink combined. As we found existing online services were judged by many as easy to use, there is an opportunity for GDS to promote these services more, even while it is redesigning public services for efficiency reasons. Increasing the take up of online services would give departments additional information on user behaviours and preferences. This could help to improve the next generation of digital service design. It may also reduce costs in the short term.