



**Consumer
Focus**
Campaigning for a fair deal

Consumer Focus response to Directgov review

September 2010

About us

Consumer Focus is the statutory body that champions the needs of consumers across England, Wales and Scotland, and the needs of postal consumers in Northern Ireland.

Our work on Public Services centres on giving primacy to the needs of the public rather than providers in public services; and ensuring public services are shaped by and responsive to the people and communities they serve.

Consumer Focus advocates that - as experts on the services they use - people and the communities of which they form part should be present and have a meaningful voice in shaping the provision of public and community services.

A key part of our work on the provision of public services is ensuring that online public services provision is responsive to the needs of consumers. As such we welcome the opportunity to respond to this consultation and hope that its outputs help ensure that the needs of users are placed at the heart of all decisions made regarding Directgov. Consumer Focus has published reports and hosted workshops with the aim of identifying areas of concern within Directgov from the perspective of its users and identifying improvements.

Our response to this consultation is built in large part upon this work.

The next stage of our digital public services work will involve a research project to establish what consumers want from online public service provision; and how they want to experience them.

Our consultation response first summarises our previous work and its outputs and outlines our future research, which address many of the themes raised in the consultation questions. We then specifically address the most relevant consultation questions. Links to our research reports and relevant sources are provided in the footnotes.

Does Directgov Deliver?

In November 2009 Consumer Focus released the report 'Does Directgov Deliver?'¹. The report set out to establish and examine whether Directgov was meeting the needs of consumers. The document identified the following areas of concern:

- Upon its creation Directgov prioritised putting information from government departments in one place to the detriment of establishing what consumers actually want and need and providing that first and foremost
- The site is not always easily navigable, with a flawed search engine and a focus on 'signposting' articles that leads to a perceived overload of information and leaving over a third of users being unable to find what they want²
- The site is not consistent in presentation or provision, particularly across devolved regions and in how it handles external links
- The website often seems to contain what is easiest to provide rather than what is most needed (you can order a customised number plate but not track a school application)
- User expectations of online services are set by the likes of Amazon and Expedia where using services online is simpler and more convenient than other means. Directgov does not compare favourably to these sites, or indeed to some public and third sector sites
- Many processes are drawn out and, contrary to advertising, it is sometimes not possible to fully complete transactions online, with users being asked to post a letter or wait for passwords to be posted to them. Again, this is at odds with the expectations of online services being set by the private sector
- Directgov is treated too much as a broadcast medium rather than a reciprocal communication tool (although following the release of our report some changes have been made in this area there is still work to be done)

The report identified the following as the key lessons to be learnt:

- The priority should be to cater to the user's needs first and not simply to collect as much information as possible in one place online due to government mandate to do so
- There is nothing wrong with hosting a wide range of services or information per se but if the website is not user-friendly and easily navigable then too much information will only worsen usability issues
- Government websites are expected to be authorities, as such consistency and coherency is vital to ensure that Directgov is viewed as a trustworthy and reliable source of information and services
- There is scope for Directgov to learn from best practice, there are many websites providing effective services in the public, private and voluntary sectors such as Bracknell Forest Council and Shop4Support.com

¹ The Report can be accessed online in PDF format at: <http://bit.ly/9BwvQ9>

² Department for Work and Pensions, Directgov's regular online research 2009 only 65 per cent find all, or most of what they wanted. FOI request Consumer Focus, 3 April 2009

- Directgov must listen to and learn from its users. Websites are not there for the sake of it, to replicate offline services or to act as a one-way broadcaster, people expect to be able to interact via the internet; this interaction and feedback can be hugely beneficial for both parties

We Directgov

Following the publication of 'Does Directgov Deliver?' Consumer Focus hosted a day-long 'We Directgov'³ workshop in March 2010 attended by a range of experts in the field including digital service innovators, public service designers, consumer representatives and representatives from Directgov to explore how consumer interest should best be placed at the heart of the design and delivery of digital public services to ensure quality, efficiency and accessibility. Participants also developed proposals for change to give greater customer involvement in service development – producing 5 key principles:

'Walk a mile in the consumer's shoes'

- Make user-centred design your fundamental approach
- Understand your consumers' motivation
- Speak the same language: listen, engage, understand, then design
- Take feedback seriously: if it means 'change', change

Be consistent

- Put the consumer in the forefront of the design process. Then keep them there, though the design process may be complex and involve many people and organisations
- Define standards. And apply them

Question your design approach

- Making the most of the service online requires more than just replicating what has been done offline
- Be prepared to show humility
- Good design may involve taking some risks, and being prepared to experiment

Quality of content, as well as functionality of the design

- Remove redundancy and inaccuracy
- Assure your content: it must be perceived as definitive

Consider the whole design chain

- Belief in these principles must extend right through those responsible for policy, conception, design and implementation
- Be able to feed back to, and if necessary influence, policy so that designs can actually be implemented in practice

³ The Wiki and a PDF summary of the event can be viewed here: <http://bit.ly/aZ9jYG>

Future Consumer Focus work

We will shortly be conducting a piece of consumer research into online public services in which we will 'step back' from Directgov and examine online public services in the round with the goal of establishing what the public want, need and expect from them. This work is currently in the scoping stages but we envisage it having both qualitative and quantitative elements to ensure that a robust picture of consumer views is established. Scoping up to this point has revealed a gap in knowledge addressing this particular issue – although data does exist for individual websites and attitudes toward public service provision more generally which will inform this work. We have also had a range of discussions with Directgov throughout our scoping to gain their input and to learn from any internal research they have carried out.

With government departments facing cuts in spending most intend to move increasing amounts of service provision online (for example Jobseekers allowance and pensions will have the internet designated as their "preferred application channel" by March 2011), this will not only mean a greater migration of services to the internet, but also an even more urgent need for providers to ensure that online public services are designed around and responsive to the needs and expectations of consumers. The core concern identified by the 'Does Directgov Deliver' report was that in the rush to put everything online the needs of users were not prioritised. With a renewed impetus for services to be migrated online there is a risk of services being designed and implemented in a hurried fashion or based solely on the input of professional experts and developers without a proper grasp of what consumers actually want and need from these services.

This research will seek to establish what consumers actually want from their online public services. In many respects the outputs of our research are likely to complement the outputs of this consultation, albeit gathering information through very different means and with the focus squarely on the needs of users.

Consultation questions:

Question 2: Who should do what?

What should Central Government do itself – eg in terms of content, applications and standards – and what would be better done by the wider public sector, businesses, charities and users?

The key to answering this question properly is to first establish what people want online public services to do. Only once this is properly understood can services be designed that respond to those needs and decisions about the most effective ‘divisions of labour’ be made.

Clearly, where integrity is a critical element of the service (secure transactions, official information etc.) government (or the agency of government relevant to that transaction or information) has at least an assurance and ‘hallmarking’ role to play. This is an area of particular concern for Consumer Focus as we have recently had several instances brought to our attention whereby private websites are charging to act as a facilitator to public services which are provided for free online elsewhere. If people are using such websites because they are unable to find information on how to access these transactions through the ‘official’ channels or if they are resorting to using these sites because current public provision is so unclear has yet to be established but either way this represents a significant area of concern not only for consumers but also for those providing public services online.

There already exists research demonstrating that consumers prefer to access different services by different means and that these preferences are subject to change along with shifts in technology⁴. Many third party websites such as PatientOpinion, TheyWorkForYou and MyPolice have been created in response to a need not being met by publicly funded sites to allow the public to interact with, scrutinise and hold to account public services and government in ways not previously possible. Some of these services have since been integrated or imitated by public sector websites since with varying degrees of success and cooperation (Directgov piloted the integration of FixMyStreet.com into the website but unfortunately this functionality was dropped at the end of the pilot period).

Whether users prefer third party sites as independent arbiters or if they use them because ‘official’ versions are either not available, inferior or not trusted is unknown and demonstrates the urgent need for a better understanding of what consumers require from digital public services to be established.

As elucidated in the ‘We Directgov’ workshop outputs the core value should be one of openness to new approaches and new ideas, particularly if there is evidence that it is something that users want.

⁴ IIPS: ‘What the Citizen Wants’ PDF available here: <http://bit.ly/9rlzlc>

Question 3: Sharing the platform

To what extent should Central Government provide a platform for the delivery of digital services by other parts of the public or voluntary sector – for example, local authorities, councils, voluntary and community sector organisations?

Our response to this question is in many ways related to our response to question two, particularly regarding the potential to integrate services. With regard to local authorities, many users are unaware of whether a subject area they wish to engage with is within the remit of local or national providers – this is reflected by the fact that ‘Local Directgov’ is used only as an internal brand with all public-facing sites retaining the standard Directgov branding. The majority of consumers are considerably less concerned with which government department certain services sit within or whether local or national government is responsible for them than they are with the quality of the service available.

Consumers should find it easy to get the information they need or complete the transaction they need at the point at which they need it, it matters far less where that information comes from (so long as the source is accurate and trusted) but it is vital it be in a form that the consumer can utilise. Ultimately the most important thing is that users are able to access online public services in the most convenient and useful way to them and that these services are built around their needs. While the background processes where a mix of bodies and organisations provide the necessary information may exist, the front end should be as seamless as possible for consumers.

We certainly have concerns regarding the variance in the availability, quality and range of services available to consumers provided online by local authorities. Many local authorities offer impressive websites with innovative and highly useful features often superior to those offered by Directgov itself (and which Directgov should seek to learn from). However many others do not. This is certainly not an equitable state of affairs but we would advise that any attempt to standardise online public services across local authorities be it through Directgov Local or other means be undertaken with great caution as it will be vital not to limit or undermine the pioneering and innovative work undertaken by many local authorities in this area.

Question 4: Trends in digital delivery

What key trends should Government bear in mind when designing digital services?

As discussed at our ‘We Directgov’ workshop Directgov should not be expected to serve as a cutting edge innovator in every field of online service provision, particularly given how fast-moving this area is. Directgov should however aim to be a ‘fast follower’ paying close attention to what is and isn’t working elsewhere, learning lessons from local authorities, private and independent websites and where they are finding success in engaging with users. There may also be a role for government in acting as a facilitator to make innovation easier (data.gov.uk represents a good example of government taking on such a role).

Providing public services online offers a wide range of opportunities, particularly at the local level. Consumers are the best experts on the services they use. The internet offers numerous possibilities for innovative public service providers to tap into that expertise in an efficient way and to maintain an ongoing dialogue with citizens in order to drive service improvement. Ultimately it should be the needs of users which dictate how Directgov operates and what services it offers.



Consumer Focus response to Directgov review

www.consumerfocus.org.uk

Copyright: Consumer Focus

Published: September 2010

If you require this publication in Braille, large print or on audio CD please contact us.

For the deaf, hard of hearing or speech impaired, contact Consumer Focus via Text Relay:

From a textphone, call 18001 020 7799 7900

From a telephone, call 18002 020 7799 7900

Consumer Focus

4th Floor
Artillery House
Artillery Row
London SW1P 1RT

Tel: 020 7799 7900

Fax: 020 7799 7901

Media Team: 020 7799 8004 / 8005 / 8006