

Literature review to inform the future digitisation of Jobcentre Plus service delivery

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Background

One of the stated priorities for Jobcentre Plus in 2011/12 is to work towards delivering more of its services online and in formats that enable customers to access them by a range of means.

This review aimed to provide an evidence-based foundation to help Jobcentre Plus:

- understand and respond to the current and projected levels and means of access to the internet;
- improve the 'customer appetite' and willingness to use the internet, particularly among people who are potentially digitally excluded; and
- learn lessons from the way in which online services have been provided by 'leading edge' organisations and the way in which e-Government has developed internationally and in the UK.

Key findings

Access and technology

Although almost every household in the UK has internet access, many people cannot access services that are of sufficient speed to undertake basic, mainstream activities. Other people do not subscribe to internet services due to its cost or a lack of IT competence. As a consequence, there remains considerable geographical and socio-demographic variation in internet access and usage.

This is possibly the most significant issue for public services (including Jobcentre Plus) in planning for the provision of online services.

However, if delivered, the UK Government's Universal Service Commitment (USC) of universal broadband access of two Megabits per second (Mbps) by 2012¹ should allow public services to confidently extend both the range and sophistication of their digital services.

Even with increased access, some groups will remain less likely to use the internet. Although it is anticipated that the numbers unable or unwilling to use online services will diminish over time as more IT literate cohorts move through the system, there is a risk that the 'digitally excluded' may become increasingly disadvantaged as online provision of services becomes the norm. Provision of training and support through UK online centres and other agencies will continue to have a key role to play in increasing computer literacy and confidence.

Technological developments are also rapidly transforming the landscape of internet usage. In recent years, there has been a substantial increase in internet-enabled mobile devices and internet-enabled games consoles and televisions. Such devices provide public services with further scope for 'mainstreaming' provision of online services. This offers unprecedented opportunity for public services to become part of users' everyday lives, but at the same time presents challenges. Public services will need to recognise that they cannot do everything themselves; rather, they need to enable external organisations to produce a wide range of innovative applications, services and resources on their behalf.

¹ Since writing this report, the new Government has changed the time frame for meeting the Universal Service Commitment from 2012 to 'within the lifetime of the current parliament' (i.e. by 2015).

Expectations of e-Government

There is an increasing public demand for the opportunity to access government services online. However, users' experiences do not always meet their expectations and this can lead to confusion, frustration and ultimately disengagement. This could present a significant barrier to the success of strategies for delivering online public services.

It will become increasingly important that public services which delivering online services have a clear understanding of their customers' expectations and needs, as well as a strategy for managing and meeting them. A key element of this is for them to know how their online services link with other means of contact (telephone follow-up, letter, face-to-face meeting) and how these links are managed. Not doing so may risk people who attempt to use online public services becoming disheartened and disengaged, thus undermining the positive effect of training and support in this area.

An unwelcome outcome of this scenario would be that the use of 'traditional' services does not decrease in line with expectations as digital provision is rolled out, meaning that the potential cost-savings are not realised. It could also prevent resources being targeted on those who continue to require more 'conventional' modes of interaction, particularly for complex or 'personal' transactions.

Data security is another critical issue in relation to people using online services. Many people have significant concerns about the security of data provided to government, the transmission of personal data and security issues surrounding storage of personal information on their own devices. It does not seem likely that these concerns can be overcome without government action.

The international experience

The success of 'leading edge' organisations' online provision has been characterised by a cultural shift from 'top-down' control and provision towards an approach where customers are actively engaged in the planning and review of services. Furthermore, information is increasingly made openly available so that external organisations and individuals have the opportunity to manipulate and develop innovative applications. Although progress has been made, traditional organisations (including public services) have been slower to place these at values the heart of the way in which they plan and deliver services.

The 'one-stop' or single portal model is widely regarded as the optimum means of delivering effective e-Government. This is characterised by seamless delivery of online, phone and face-to-face services in a way that meets customers' needs and expectations (most notably in respect of the ability to conduct transactions rather than only access information). The provision of online public services in the UK has undergone a dramatic transformation in recent years. This is evidenced by the conversion of Directgov from a government 'supersite' to a unified whole of government portal with increasing transactional capabilities.

The UK government is viewed as having the potential to become a world leader in the digital provision of data and the enabling of external stakeholders and organisations to access and use these data freely. If this potential were realised, it could aid the transformation of public services in a more rapid and innovative way than could be achieved by public service organisations (such as Jobcentre Plus) acting alone. Indeed, there are clear gains to be had by letting users outside of the organisation access and manipulate the data. This could be a mutually beneficial arrangement which offers commercial opportunities to the organisations using these data.

Conclusions

The overarching message from this review is that successful delivery of online services is about the adoption of values not just technologies. Some examples of avenues that Jobcentre Plus might consider when developing its online provision include:

- undertaking ongoing research and consultation with a wide range of its customers;
- working with network providers to overcome digital exclusion and explore how access to core government sites can be made affordable;
- maintaining provision of tailored support and training focussed on accessing services and of flexible affordable local Internet access;
- thinking about their possible role in ensuring public confidence in the security aspect of engaging in online transactions with government services; and
- working with external organisations to make data more widely available and to facilitate the manipulation of data in new and innovative ways.

The full report of these research findings is published by the Department for Work and Pensions (ISBN 978 1 84712 805 8. Research Report 679. August 2010).

You can download the full report free from: <http://research.dwp.gov.uk/asd/asd5/rrs-index.asp>

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