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exemption complexities

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site for sore eyes

“Could do better” was a phrase which often appeared on my school reports, and it seems to also be the message in two recently published reports, from Experian and the Society of Information Technology Management (SOCITM), relating to websites.

The reports indicate a decline in the quality of websites and a lack of understanding of citizens’ requirements. We still don’t appear to be utilising the most accessed channel and even seem to be allowing the situation to get worse.

The first report was from Experian, which undertook research into authentication issues and trust between local authorities and citizens when identifying the customer. The report highlights substantial differences in viewpoints between what officers believe the citizen wants and what the citizen actually wants. These are highlighted below:

Local Government’s view

- ◆ 20% believe there is no security risk in storing identity documents on-site;
- ◆ 67% of officers surveyed believe identity

According to recent reports, the internet is rising in popularity but decreasing in usability, which is not good news for local authorities. **Simon Bailey** reports

2. Overall how do you rate the service? and
3. If you believe the service was poor, please tell us why?

These same questions were asked over the three main access channels of face-to-face, telephone and the internet.

So which channel do customers prefer? Surprisingly, the telephone channel gave the highest satisfaction rate, with face-to-face being second and websites being a poor third. Yet it is the web that attracts the most number of visitors.

The main reason for telephone dissatisfaction is the delay in answering, but when citizens did get through they at least had their questions answered. Their dissatisfaction with the internet was because their queries had not been resolved, which is worrying, as they would then be unlikely to re-visit the website.

So why are people visiting council websites? The SOCITM report highlights that the main reason was for viewing job vacancies, followed by information on schools and leisure. Making a payment and finding out about housing were way down the list.

The credit crunch is having an effect, and I am aware of more visitors to local authority websites, searching for help on debt, benefits and what happens if they don't pay. These are the top stories that should now be taking the headline spots on home pages. Many

sites now have specific areas where questions can be asked, and based on these questions, visitors can be directed to specific areas of the site, which would be a much more intuitive way of finding information.

Is the situation for websites getting better? Well, it would appear to be yes and no! In the survey, the percentage of people

who found the information they were looking for had increased from last year. But the percentage of people not finding the information had also increased. So while it is good news that more people are finding information, it would be better if this was at the expense of those not finding information, showing a real trend in improvement.

The SOCITM survey is just one of many reports. And each one gives invaluable information as to web activity and use. If you pester your web master to let you read them, they will be really pleased that somebody is taking an interest in developing their own area of the website. Not only from a content level, but also to take into account the findings of SOCITM and Experian, as outlined in this article.

I believe that citizens really do favour the web as their access channel, but are finding that it is not providing them with the information they require. We still do not understand the needs of people, and it is only with the data from surveys such as those provided by SOCITM and Experian that we will understand their needs and act accordingly.

Could do better? Marks 5/10 – room for improvement! ❖

passport really confirmation as to the identity of an individual? The report highlights some fascinating statistics that should make us think the next time we accept these documents as proof of identity:

- ◆ there are 80 million active National Insurance numbers in the UK, despite the fact that the country's population is only 60 million;
- ◆ in 2006, the Identity and Passport Service had 16,500 fraudulent applications, 10,000 of which went undetected;

“We still don't appear to be utilising the most accessed channel and even seem to be allowing the situation to get worse”

- ◆ in 2008, 3,000 blank passports were stolen in a raid on a delivery van; and
- ◆ there were around 2,500 fraudulent applications for driving licences detected by the DVLA in the 12-month period up to March 2007.

I personally find the first statistic the most disturbing!

Experian believes that by the end of 2009, two thirds of financial organisations will use a series of national databases to perform electronic authentication for identity purposes. Electronic authentication is clearly a more efficient and effective process than paper-based methods, and based upon the statistics above, will provide a “true” picture of who the citizen actually is!

SOCITM's report reviews the channels and range of services being delivered, together with their cost and performance. It is a useful read for any revenues and benefits manager, as it covers areas such as housing and council tax benefits, together with the delivery of council tax and NNDR enquiries.

For satisfaction of service delivery, customer feedback was measured by asking: 1. What was the reason for your visit today?

fraud is a problem in relation to the services they provide;

- ◆ 54% stated that customers can apply online but only 8% stated the ID verification process was automated;
- ◆ 30% worryingly admitted that they were not considering online authentication at present; and
- ◆ only 8% think that customers are unhappy or very unhappy with the current paper-based systems.

Citizen's view

- ◆ 40% think the most significant improvement in customer service that local authorities could provide was to offer services over the internet; and
- ◆ a third of citizens find paper-based authentication either inconvenient or very inconvenient.

One of the more worrying points to be raised was that authorities are still using traditional paper methods of authentication – often asking for a driving licence as proof of ID – only 8% of the respondents used an electronic ID checking system. Yet when customers were asked “what could your local government do to improve the level of customer service they offer?”, 40% of respondents replied “provide services over the internet”.

The need to establish identity by paper-based methods will seriously hinder online applications. The report also highlighted that as well as creating a fragmented process, sending important documents in the post poses a security risk. But why is paper ID so important? Are documents such as a