

BENEFIT

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*Benefit talks to the 2009
Benefits Team of the Year
and discovers the secrets
of their success*

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Digitalising Britain

Simon Bailey analyses the report, *Digital Britain*, aimed at spearheading the government's ambitions to ensure that the UK is leading the global digital march

In summer 2009, the government issued plans to ensure that the UK is at the leading edge of the global digital economy. The report, *Digital Britain*, will give rise to more legislation if required but, for now, sets out proposals as to how public services should be delivered digitally.

Previous initiatives for delivering public service were based upon the provision of an electronic access channel, with the vain hope that people would start to use it. While there may have been some take up of the new ways of accessing services, it appears to be reasonably slow.

Times are changing, and the report issued in June 2009 is setting the scene for a more enforced move to undertaking transactions digitally. Although many government services are still provided face-to-face or by telephone, the electronic renewal of vehicle tax available on the DVLA web site has seen the costs of providing the service reduce by over 45%. The report found that the Electronic Vehicle Licensing (EVL) scheme, which enables customers to tax their car online, saves the DVLA around £8m per annum, and attracted 18m users last year. For every additional re-licensing transaction that is processed through the EVL channel, a further 93p will be saved.

Digital Britain identifies the services most suitable for earliest switchover by applying six criteria:

1. transaction volumes: is this a low value but the service is well used?;
2. complexity: can users be expected easily to work their way through the process without assistance?;
3. customer groups: is this service likely to be used by the general population, or is there a specific user group? (eg, older people);
4. legislative impacts: what are the legal

requirements on government to use certain channels or signatures?;

5. physical verification: is there a need for witnessing or token exchange; and
6. efficiency: what is the scope for cost savings that will provide better value for money in public service delivery?

If I was to apply the questions above to a claim for benefit or an interaction with a benefits service, my answers might be:

1. yes – it is an extremely well used service with transaction values being reasonably low. Each change of circumstance may only cost pence to administer over the whole service;
2. it is complex? Yes, but with intelligent forms this complexity can be removed;
3. specific groups – it is used by all groups to access entitlement to benefits;
4. there should be no legislative impact; as e-claiming has been possible for a number of years; and
5. there is no physical verification required, as claims can now be paid and administered without ever seeing the claimant. Circular A18/2006 provided for claiming by telephone or electronic means; and
6. efficiency – self service will bring about substantial savings with estimated costs per claim of over £100 (old Performance Indicator).

The report has already identified areas for a more enforced approach to service delivery:

- ◆ student loans;
- ◆ Companies House registration;
- ◆ personal tax returns for higher rate taxpayers;
- ◆ electoral roll registration;
- ◆ school registration;
- ◆ redundancy advice processing; and

◆ debt advice.

So, if cost and savings are important, is it possible to actively close down other access channels as is being proposed. Why not? The private sector has been doing it for years, offering self help via the internet or forcing customers to call a high cost long wait premium call centre.

Would you choose a service that only offered on line transactions? Probably not. However, if this was incentivised, there might be an attraction. By reducing the cost of customer service, private organisations,

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such as Ryanair, will effectively reduce the price of their air fares, and in a competitive market this approach sounds reasonable.

But can local authorities do something similar? Again, probably yes. Many authorities are already looking to migrate their customers to a more cost-effective method of service delivery and the incentive is a speedier assessment of their claim and better customer service.

Attracting claimants to the most cost-effective, efficient method of claiming must be at the top of any priority list for a benefits service. If government has its way, citizens may be forced down the electronic method of claiming.

But what about those that are digitally excluded, I hear you ask? That's another story, and the subject of a future article. ✦

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