

RIP Verify



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Once again we return to the subject of identity verification

I've forgotten how many articles I have written on the subject of identity verification. It has always been a thorny issue for Revenues and Benefits services as they struggle to prove the identity of people, especially as they claim benefits.

It would be so simple if we had ID cards to prove who we are. In fact, there was a plan to introduce ID cards with the Identity Cards Act in 2006. Cards were linked to a database called the National Identity Register (NIR), which has since been destroyed.

There was much concern about the 2006 scheme from human rights lawyers, activists, security professionals, IT experts and politicians who were all worried by a big brother database of UK residents. The public were not impressed either, with a You Gov poll reporting that 52% of people were unhappy with the prospect of having their data recorded with only 11% trusting the government to keep the information confidential.

The general election of 2010 saw the demise of the ID card scheme when the Conservative Party explicitly pledged to scrap the National Identity Register. The wording of several other manifestos implied that this may have been the position of certain other political parties as well.

Sure enough the coalition of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2010 announced that it was scrapping the ID card scheme, including the National Identity Register. The Identity Documents Act 2010 repealed the Identity Cards Act 2006 and all ID cards that had been issued were invalidated.

The problem with scrapping the ID card scheme was that this left the government with no means of establishing identification. Consequently in 2011 the Cabinet Office started work on what was called the Identity Assurance Programme and was later renamed *Verify*. The idea was simple. Instead of the government holding information to prove identity, personal data that was already held by commercial organisations could be used instead.

Unfortunately, the *Verify* program was not a

success, with many of the third-party identity providers withdrawing from the scheme. Now only two providers, the Post Office and Digidentity remain. *Verify* drew criticism for not hitting various targets including late delivery, with a start date of 2012 being delayed to 2016. There was also concern that only 47% of people could establish their identity using *Verify*.

Despite concerns over *Verify*, in 2018 Kevin Cunnington, a former Government Digital Service Director, blogged that they were taking *Verify* to the next stage, including signing up five new identity providers. Despite this optimism only three years ago, it looks like *Verify* has had a short life and is now due to be replaced.

In February 2021, The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) published a framework on the future use of digital

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identities. The DCMS set out principles, policies, procedures and standards for the use of digital identities and the sharing of information to check people's identities or personal details. A key element of the framework is that individuals should be in control of how much information they share.

It appears the DCMS wants to be open about data management by having a policy that explains how data is created, obtained, disclosed, protected and deleted.

The DCMS highlights that any scheme developed will follow industry standards and

best practice for information security and encryption. The scheme will tell individuals if any changes such as an update to their address has been made to their digital identity and, where appropriate, will have a detailed account recovery process and notify citizens if an organisation suspects someone has fraudulently accessed their account or used their identity.

Confirmation that *Verify* was being replaced was made in a speech by Cabinet Office minister Julia Lopez MP in March 2021. She confirmed that the cabinet office is currently running a 'discreet pilot' of a new digital identity system as a successor to *GOV.UK Verify*.

She highlighted that the discrete digital identity pilot project will be deliberately small in scale at the start and will create the proof of concept. The project will be led and coordinated by the Government Digital Service, co-designed with Whitehall departments and public services and be largely government built and government owned.

However, it looks like the project will not be starting from scratch. The minister commented that *“while the best elements of Verify will be reused where appropriate, all parties are keen to move on from Verify's over-elaborate expectations trajectory and cost. Good progress on our pilot is expected in coming months, with joint discovery work due to accelerate further.”*

After so many attempts by successive governments to produce an identification system fit for purpose, it will be interesting to see how this project develops and more importantly how long any new system will last. RIP *Verify*.

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