

## Section E: Focus Groups Report

### The purpose of this report

E1. During January 2007, a team from the LSE Public Policy Group and the Oxford Internet Institute carried out four focus groups as part of the research for the report, *Government on the Internet*. Our aims in conducting the groups were:

- (i) to obtain insights into how citizens use and view government websites, their usefulness now and how online services could be improved;
- (ii) to understand from deliberative discussions how citizens approach and interpret tasks involving finding government information (also covered in our user experiments, see Section D of this report above); and
- (ii) to identify the key questions to be included in our national survey to ensure that these questions could be framed in a way that accurately connects with how citizens view government websites.

### How the focus group discussions were conducted

E2. Focus groups offer a way of systematically acquiring qualitative data on specific topics. Each group included between 9 and 11 people. Participants for the groups were recruited by ICM Research. The groups were also balanced in terms of gender, social status and ethnicity. Two groups took place in Birmingham and two groups in Watford. In each location, one group was for people aged under 45 years of age and one group for those over 45 years. We divided groups in this way because our experience of undertaking focus groups on a range of public policy issues suggests that older people are much more knowledgeable about these issues, partly because they have lived in the same place for a much longer period of time and partly because they have more experience of life's problems and contingencies. This greater expertise of older people can lead to younger participants being over-quiet in mixed age focus groups. In order to ensure that participants were relatively web-enabled, we asked two primer questions:

- whether they used the internet once a month or more frequently; and
- whether when planning a journey or a holiday, they used the internet as their first port of call.

Only those who answered Yes to both these filter questions were asked to attend.

E3. Both sets of groups took place in purpose-built focus group accommodation with built-in audio and video facilities. We recorded each group using digital audio and video recorders. Additional members of staff from LSE sat in on the discussions in the background and made detailed notes of what was said and of how discussions developed. All quotes from participants given below are verbatim.

E4. We used the same approach across all four groups. We began with a short practical session of 30 minutes, designed to ensure that respondents had some recent experience of looking for government information. The information was related to questions that citizens may need to find in every day life, as set out in Section D above. We had PCs or laptops available and we asked participants to find pieces of government-related information that might be available on government sites or other sites. We emphasised that this was not a test, but rather intended only as a starting point for the following discussion. (The instructions and questions for the practical session are shown at the end of this Section.) After 30 minutes we then had a short feedback session on the practical part of the group, and collated participants' views of their experiences. The discussion moved on to try to identify how participants themselves currently use government websites and what their views on government online services are. We asked what private sector sites participants used most often and how these compared to the government sites they had used. We also asked participants to point to some government websites that worked well and any that did not. Each group lasted at least one and a half hours in total.

### **Feedback on the Practical Session**

E5. We began each discussion by asking participants to feed back their thoughts on finding the government-related information we had asked for. We asked how they went about finding the information. The majority of the participants used a search engine to do this, and most used Google as their search engine of choice.

- *I go to Google because I automatically do because that's the name that's implanted on my brain.*
- [Q. Did anyone not use a search engine?] *No.*

Even where participants knew the name of the government organisation they thought was relevant, they used a search engine to get to that organisation's homepage.

- *I Google it with the name, for example I know the Environment Agency so I put that into [the search engine].*

E6. We then asked whether the participants found the information we asked them to look for useful when they came across it. Here participants had mixed views, with some feeling that the information was clear and easy to understand on government sites. Others felt that the information was not presented in a way that was understandable or helpful for them.

- *The government one [Directgov] was laid out clearly.*
- *Yes, I thought it was easy.*
- *I found the Inland Revenue site easy to understand, there was a page on what I wanted [which was how to understand a tax code] and I thought it was quite simple.*
- *They could make it more interesting. I hit a page with reports and documents and I thought, 'close that'.*
- *I did feel that I was digging through a lot of waffle [on the government sites], to find what I was going for. I sort of hit a couple of those and then got off them quick.*

E7. We asked participants whether they had heard of the main government website for citizens, Directgov. Many participants had not heard of it, and those that had were not able to explain what its functions are. Some had come across it during the practical session and so were interested to know more about it. Others had seen television adverts for tax credits where mention was made of the web address in relation to that and they were not sure if it had wider relevance.

- *Yes, I have heard of it. But I don't really know what it is.*
- *I've never heard of it.*
- *I didn't know about that - I only found it by chance.*

Some participants who had used Directgov previously to look for information had not found it very useful.

- *Sometimes you have got the front sheet. And then you have to go in, and go in, and go in, to find what you want. A lot if it is wordy stuff. It would be good to have pictures or icons, to show what particular areas are - something that you can relate to.*

Whereas search engines were seen as an easy way to find information on the web, the style of a site showing categories was not seen as helpful by some. However, this view was not supported by everyone across the groups and in fact, later in the session, people in all the groups agreed that both methods of finding information needed to be included.

E8. We next explained about the Directgov website to each group. The idea of having one place where government information and services can be accessed was universally seen as a good idea. Most participants felt that currently Directgov was not well known enough to serve this function. They felt more marketing was needed in order for it to function more effectively.

- *If there was a site where they listed all the government sites, that would be helpful.*
- *It's not championed as a site where you can find lots of information though, is it? As you say, it's been on television in relation to tax credits, but it's not like 'Hey check out this site because it's got all the information you need'.*
- *Why doesn't the Directgov have better branding, like Google or Ask Jeeves? [Now called Ask.com.]*

Participants who had used the site previously for tax credits or paying their car tax remembered it as useful but had no way of re-accessing it, nor were they aware that it could be used more widely than they had done. The site name also added to these problems:

- *The thing is, you are never sure of the name, or if there is a full stop.*

Directgov have not yet run a full public marketing campaign.

### **Current use of government online services**

E9. We next asked participants how they currently used government websites and what online services they had already used. All participants initially said that they never or rarely use government websites. However, during more detailed discussion it sometimes became clear that they had used these services, but they did not

realise they were accessing government-related information. A few participants could highlight government sites that they particularly liked.

- *I've used DVLA - that was easy to use ... It was really quick and useful.*
- *One I found very interesting ... it was about building restrictions, planning permission. And I found that absolutely excellent.*
- *I've done road tax. That was pretty simple. If I had tried to find it myself I would probably have got lost. But I had the renewal form with the address right there, so I could go straight there, type in a code and it was done in minutes.*
- *I have used the pensions forecast online and that was good.*

E10. Other participants felt that in general they would prefer not to use government websites, because they assumed they would be less convenient for them.

- *You get the impression with a lot of these websites, they put them up to stop you speaking to someone... who really knows the answer.*
- *I do get the feeling that some of these sites are set up to see how long, to see how tolerant you can be! And in the end I just sort of give up.*
- *I would prefer to speak to someone.*

E11. We asked participants what would make them use government websites more, and whether there were any disadvantages that were barriers to their using these sites. The main issue for our participants seemed to be that they did not think they would need to interact with government very often. They therefore felt the costs of working out how to use individual government websites were too high, because this knowledge would not help them with other government websites. The sites would need to be easier to use, more like search engines, before they would think of them as the first method of interacting with government.

- *I found it [direct.gov.uk] useful for what I needed it for. But it's maybe not something that I'd go back to and use again.*
- *I just very, very rarely use a government site, unless I have a problem with taxation or whatever.*
- *I think I would use them every week if it was simple to use and that I could navigate myself through it quite easy. Also added information that you would just like to have a look at, what's going on in your environment ... so you can be members of things, as well as complaints.*
- *If the government website was as easy and fluid as [a search engine], then that would make our life easier.*
- *Can we have confidence, though, that we can just go online and sort our problems out?*

E12. Some participants did see some advantages to accessing government information online, principally around the issue of trust:

- *If I did use them [government sites], I would assume that the information there was up to the minute and accurate.*
- *Well, you'd hope you could trust it wouldn't you?*
- *I would trust it on a factual thing, like a tax code.*
- *It's more respected, isn't it?*
- *It's got to be legal, hasn't it?*
- *It's more official.*

E13. We also asked participants if they ever had help using the internet, or if they ever helped others. Most people at some point had either been given help or had helped out members of the family.

- *I do help my mum, she's useless.*
- *My dad is rubbish on computers, so he says 'How do I do this?' and I help him - that sort of thing.*
- *Teenagers, whenever I get stuck I call my son and he says 'Oh God, she's on that computer again'.*
- *My parents, they're old, they don't understand it.*
- *My dad actually helps me.*
- *If I was claiming benefits or that, I would go to the Citizens Advice, because they've got someone there who is genned up on that.*

E14. Many participants did raise concerns that websites should not be the sole method of communication between citizens and government. Many still preferred to use the phone or to speak face to face with government organisations directly. Others wanted to use a combination of the internet to find information and then the phone if there was additional information they needed.

- *I like to go into an office and do it face to face.*
- *I look for the contact numbers online and then use those to phone up . . . I prefer to speak to somebody and for someone to actually explain it to you - that person hopefully has the knowledge to give you all the information you need ... rather than reading it all on a screen and thinking 'Hang on. That doesn't answer my other question about this' and then having to ring up anyway.*
- *I find it much easier to use the web. I had to do my [name of service] a while back and I thought I'd do it over the phone first and it was a nightmare. It was all automatic, you're not speaking to anyone and you put all your credit card details in and then it comes up that it can't recognise the transaction and that the system has crashed. So then I went to the website and tried to do it again on that, and it came up that it was already confirmed. So I wished I'd just gone to the website in the first place, and I probably will do the next time.*

### **Desired features of government websites and online services**

E15. When we asked participants what basic features would they like to see all government websites have, they gave a range of responses. But these were mainly clustered around two themes, the first of which was that they should be better designed:

- *... usually when you go to the main page you have a search engine on there. But as you scroll down and whatever, you lose the search engine. You need to have that search engine box on every page, top and bottom.*
- *The ones [government sites] I've seen, there's loads of information popping out at you, some on the left side, some on the right, links you can click on. They just need to slow it down a little.*
- *If you are on a government site, you aren't doing something you enjoy. You are either trying to get information or you are giving the government money which, at the end of the day, you want to get done as quickly as possible and get out.*
- *I think it should be more just a search ... where you can just say what you want.*

The second key theme was information that is clear and easy to understand:

- *I think a lot of people stay away from government websites because they expect them to be really stuffy and complicated, really technical - whereas they want them to be simple.*
- *There's always that section called 'Frequently Asked Questions'. I don't know where they get their information from, because they don't seem like frequently asked questions to me. The one that I would want to ask probably wouldn't be in there.*
- *[Government sites] should be simple, 'cos they should be aimed at all age groups, shouldn't they? Anyone should be able to get the information. ... I think if sites were really, really foolproof, like for idiots, then people who are scared of using a computer wouldn't be scared of it, and [they would] think 'Yes I will go on there and look for that information'.*

### **Government sites in comparison**

E16. We asked participants about the private sector websites they used most often, and what they liked about them. Simple and easy to use were comments that came up most often, along with being more assured of finding value for money.

- *I find the skiing ones are brilliant, really basic, really simple. I can do it in 10 minutes. Flights – very easy.*
- *I always book my holiday online, I don't know why anyone uses a travel agent.*
- *I mean, eBay, it's a lot of fun, getting a bargain ... it's quite addictive.*
- *I use the AA Route Finder, that is very good... .*
- *I use Rightmove as I am looking to buy a house, [and] Autotrader to look at the cars.*

E17. We asked more specifically about internet banking, because this is often cited as a good comparator to government. Around half of the participants did use internet banking regularly and they thought it was easy to use:

- *I think they are better [than government sites].*
- *Easy, it's all set up and it just works.*
- *It's something that I do every day. I go on to my bank account and look at what the transactions are. It's something that you need to do regularly, whereas with a government site, it's not something you need to do regularly.*
- *It's just very straightforward. It's got options down the side that you would regularly use. It couldn't be easier.*

E18. We asked whether government could learn from some private sector sites, in order to encourage more people interact with government online. The general feeling of the groups was that they did not want government sites to use gimmicks or cutting edge technology, but they did want simple to use designs to be incorporated.

- *Just to simplify it I think.*
- *I'm not sure that I'd want to make it fun. I just want to get in there, get the information I want and get off.*
- *Make the websites easy to use.*

E19. We wanted to see whether participants felt that government sites could use some user generated content features that are common among private sector sites. We specifically asked about other customers' testimonials, and feedback from other users of the sites to help subsequent users make decisions. Would our participants use comments like these, for example, when choosing a school for their children or a hospital if they had to have an operation? Some people thought that this would be a good idea.

- *It would be useful to have other parents' comments on schools, good and bad.*
- *Yes, especially up to date ones. Because you hear lots of things going on, especially about hygiene and that type of thing, in schools as well as in hospitals, and up to date comments would be really good. Also to have up to date good comments as well as bad comments.*
- *If I was going in for an operation in hospital I would want to know how successful the guy that was operating on me was, so there's that type of information.*
- *I'd want more specific information, rather than just personal remarks.*

E20. However, other participants felt that comments from other citizens might not be trustworthy, or that government organisations would never allow negative comments to be posted on their sites.

- *I would like to see that on the government sites. But they won't do it ... They'd have to disclose their performance, their failures.*
- *But they won't put anything negative, will they?*

- *It depends. It depends who's written them [customer testimonials]. I take them with a pinch of salt. If it says, 'Mrs Smith from Yorkshire', you wonder who has written it, because it's [maybe] not 'Mrs Smith from Yorkshire'.*
- *You get some websites where they get bad comments as well. I trust those more.*

### **Future improvements to government websites**

E21. We asked participants what government could do to improve their online presence. For the groups, their first suggestion was to make the information and services already available online more widely known. Some people were pleasantly surprised during the practical session to see how accessible some of the government-provided information had been. They felt that if more people knew about this, usage would increase:

- *I think there are probably more services on the websites than you realise ... It's just that I haven't needed them.*
- *Adverts would appeal to someone at a particular time. Just because it doesn't appeal to us [referring to the group]... to a lot of people in the country it could be useful.*
- *It could be advertised on your payslip, or on your P60, the [web] address.*
- *Advertise them.*
- *What is there is quite good, really.*
- *When I found them, they were easy to understand.*

E22. Other participants had more general ideas for improving government sites.

- *[Include] things about your local environment.*
- *I think they should change their search programme - so when you type it in, rather than getting lots of documents coming in, you've actually got the specific information you are looking for.*
- *It would be nice to see a lot more positive things as well. Generally, in the media, it doesn't matter who is in charge, everything's a mess ... it would be good to get a balance.*

E23. This issue of better marketing was mentioned particularly in relation to the Directgov website. Some thought that all government written communication should include the web address for Directgov, for example.

- *They need to put more adverts on television. I've never seen one on it in my life.*
- *Maybe links from other websites.*
- *Maybe it should just be better advertised - adverts on telly; 'If you are looking for government information go to Directgov', get it into people's heads.*
- *I don't think they do advertise it, do they? How are you supposed to know about it?*



E24. As mentioned previously, the idea of having one central place for government online information was seen as a good idea.

- *If there's one page that you can go straight to what you want, that's good. It is much easier than going from C to B to E. It should be simple, that's the main thing.*

There were some negative observations from participants around the name of Directgov:

- *Directgov. I just think that's a terrible name for people to remember. It should be directgovernment.co.uk, all one word. I bet 98 per cent of people wouldn't think to put a dot between direct and gov.*
- *I went to Directgov and didn't realise I was in a government site. And to search the next question I went out of it and went back into Google, which just shows you that brand means nothing to me.*

## **Conclusions**

E25. Over the four groups, we found a varying picture of how citizens use government information and services online. Often, many people did not realise they were using government sites or they obtained government related information from other sites such as the BBC. Some who did not regularly use government sites were pleasantly surprised by the practical session, because they found the information requested easily and the layout and content of the sites was often easy to understand and helpful.

E26. However, there were a number of concerns for government organisations. First, government sites are clearly seen as text-heavy, characterized by overwhelming lists of documents rather than clear, easy to understand text. The rise of well-known search engines has meant that citizens are now used to typing in an exact question or a precise subject into a site and then being taken to the exact page. Many therefore see sites that use categorisations for users to click through, as unwieldy and unhelpful. The web content on government sites can be seen as written in jargon. However, government websites are seen as accurate, up to date and perhaps most importantly, as a trusted source of information.

E27. Perhaps the concern that can be addressed most easily is to publicise the already available government information and services more widely. Focus group participants liked the idea of having one place to find all government information. They did not feel that at present Directgov was fulfilling this function because it is not well known enough. They also felt that there may be a better brand name for it. Directgov have not yet run a full public marketing campaign.

## Annex E1: Focus Group Practical Session Introduction and Questions

### PRACTICAL SESSIONS 1 AND 2

This session will last for 30 minutes. It will be followed by a discussion session of one hour.

We are going to ask you to look up some information on the web that you might need to find in every day life. We are not looking to test you on this information. You do not need to work through all the examples below, you are welcome to choose those that interest you most.

The boxes below each question are for you to write in any comments you have as you go along. We would like you to record *how* you went about finding the information, and *where* you found it, what was the name of the website? Other than that, you are welcome to write down any comments on what you thought of the websites you found, for example, was the information well presented? Understandable? Easy to access?

In the discussion group that will follow this session, we will be asking you about the practical session; then about what you use government websites and services for; what you think of government websites; what experiences you have had using them; and whether you found them useful.

#### PRACTICAL SESSION 1 (Under 45 years group)

	Question
1	You are planning to move to LOCATION and are looking to find a job there (as a shop assistant) before you go.  <i>Can you find a list of available positions in LOCATION?</i>
	<b>Space for around 6 lines of writing – shown as grey shaded below</b>
2	You have a tax code 488L on your payslip, but you are not sure what that means.  <i>Can you find an explanation of your tax code?</i>
4	You are trying to find a secondary school for your daughter. You have heard that NAME OF SCHOOL in LOCATION is good but you would like to get more information on this.  <i>Does NAME OF SCHOOL in LOCATION achieve at least above average GCSE results for England?</i>
5	You want to earn an additional qualification to care for children. After getting some information you decide on a National Vocational Qualification (NVQ), level 3, in Children's Care that you would like to do part time while you work part time.  <i>Can you find any information on what colleges in your local area provide this course?</i>
6	You have somehow lost your birth certificate and want to get a duplicate.  <i>Can you apply to get a duplicate birth certificate online?</i>
8	Your child is starting a new school and you would like to avoid using the car to take him there. You would like to see if there is any guidance for people looking for greener, or sustainable, travel options.  <i>Can you find any information on this and how up to date is it?</i>

## PRACTICAL SESSION 2 (Over 45 years group)

	<b>Question</b>
1	<p>You have a tax code 488L on your payslip, but you are not sure what that means.</p> <p><i>Can you find an explanation of your tax code?</i></p>
2	<p>Your friend is going into hospital in LOCATION to have a minor operation. You would like to find out more about the hospital's record on quality of service.</p> <p><i>Can you find any information on the performance on the hospital in LOCATION?</i></p>
3	<p>You would like to earn an additional qualification in improving your IT skills. You would need to do any course part-time as you will still be in full-time work.</p> <p><i>Can you find any information on what courses your local colleges provide on IT skills?</i></p>
6	<p>You are thinking of buying a house in Mill Lane in the village of Islip in Oxfordshire. You are worried about the risk of possible flooding.</p> <p><i>Can you find any information on the likelihood of flooding in this area?</i></p>
7	<p>You would like to look what kind of state pension you will get when you retire at 65.</p> <p><i>Can you find any information on the amount of pension you can expect?</i></p>
8	<p>You have decided to go on a cruise which will stop in Turkey and Egypt. You are worried about local safety.</p> <p><i>Can you find any information about whether there are risks in travelling to these countries?</i></p>