

How engaged are UK citizens?

~ Parity investigates public perception of online government services ~

The background: the Transformational Government Agenda

'Transformational Government: enabled by technology' (TGA) was initially published by the Cabinet Office in November 2005. A strategic review of how technology can be used to improve public services, it outlined an agenda for change that would make government departments more responsible to the individuals they serve, and how savings could be achieved through automation with IT. Public services need to be available, joined up, secure and sustainable, said the TGA.

Originally, the Cabinet Office's intention was to provide an annual report on progress against the objectives it had set. One year on, the report was published in December. Two years on, it only appeared the following March (2008). Three years on, the report was published on May 14, 2009. There have been some excellent headline savings - £26.5 billion, according to this year's report – and there is no doubt that the public feels increasingly comfortable with dealing with government services online. However, key issues apparently holding back the TGA's success have been high-profile security scares and issues around making services available via the web if those websites are not up-to-scratch or communicated well enough to end users.

One of the key challenges laid down by the Minister responsible for Transformational Government, Tom Watson MP, in the last annual review was that government websites had to be more engaging, both in terms of availability of public services through them and their attractiveness to citizens. The 2009 annual review makes bold claims for success here: DirectGov has over 15 million visits per month; NHS Direct is more popular for health advice than commercial equivalents from Boots and Bupa, and 13 million motorists renewed their car tax online.

Parity set out to investigate how successful the Transformational Government Agenda has been in the last year, by researching the impact on the people that really matter: UK citizens. Have people seen a difference in the way government services are delivered online, and have they benefitted from any improvements? How do they rate the services in comparison with the private sector website they use on a regular basis? And where do they still feel that government websites let them down?

About the research

This report details the findings from the research, conducted by Coleman Parkes in April 2009. It questioned 1,000 UK adults who use the Internet at home and were familiar with internet-based government services, with a representative sample across genders, age groups and regions. 88 per cent had used online government services in the last year, and the rest had previous experience of using government websites.

Key issues that were researched included:

- Ease of use
- Transactional ability
- Capability and experience as compared to commercial websites
- Preferred engagement methods
- Improvements seen in the last year
- Areas for improvement

The report: How successful is the online delivery of government services?

Who is using government websites, and which services are they using?

Marginally more men than women have used the online local or central government services in the last 12 months, and there is no real difference by age. Respondents in Wales and the South East report the least frequent use of online local and central government online services with only 82 and 84 per cent respectively stating that they have used an online service, compared with 92 per cent in Northern Ireland and the North East, for example.

The majority of respondents (73 per cent) had used both DirectGov and their local council's website, while only 40 per cent had used NHS Direct.

Service Used (%)	All	Male	Female
DirectGov	73	78	68
Local council website	73	75	70
NHS Direct	40	36	45

Those aged 18 – 25 (78 per cent) and 36 – 45 (77 per cent) are most likely to have used DirectGov, while people aged over 55 are least likely to have visited the website. Interestingly, younger people were the least likely to use local council websites (only 64 per cent). People in Wales (83 per cent) and the South East (86 per cent) are most likely to have visited a local council website.

Only 40 per cent of all people report having visited NHS Direct with more women using the site than men; people aged over 46 are least likely to have used NHS Direct. It does seem that the younger person is more likely to use NHS Direct than older members of the UK population. Interestingly, only 24 per cent of people in Wales report having used NHS Direct, compared to 47 per cent in the North East.

Actual use of the wide range of online services available to people in the UK varies greatly, as can be seen in the table below. 41 per cent of people now report that they pay their road tax online with no difference by gender, and half of those aged 46 – 55 pay their road online. People in the South East (only 28 per cent) seem most reluctant to pay their road tax online compared with 49 per cent in the North West and 47 per cent in the South West. Only 9 per cent had registered for child credit online, with an obvious bias towards those more likely to have young children.

22 per cent overall but 25 per cent of men now pay their council tax online, and those aged 26 – 45 are most likely to use this payment method. People in Northern Ireland are the least keen to pay their council tax online, while 32 per cent of respondents in the West Midlands report using the method of payment.

Only 15 per cent of the population book an appointment online with little variation by gender but younger members of the population are most likely to take this approach. Less than one in ten people have reported an incident online with men slightly more likely to have provided a report than women. Those over 55 and also those in Wales, the North East and South East are most likely to have made an online incident report.

Activity (%)	All	Male	Female
Pay road tax	41	41	41
Register for child credits	9	8	10
Pay council tax	22	25	19
Renew parking permit	3	3	3
Book an appointment	15	14	16
Report an incident – ie fly tipping	9	11	8
Get health advice	36	31	41
Get advice on social care / schooling etc	19	15	22
Fill in tax returns	14	16	13
Register births/deaths/marriages	3	3	3

36 per cent of the population but far more females have used an online service to get health advice (interestingly more youngsters have used this than older members of the population) and almost one in five people (but again far more females and younger members of the population) have sought social care information online. 14 per cent of people undertake tax return completion online with a bias towards males and also those aged 36 – 45. People over 55 do not seem to like using online tax return services and neither do people in Scotland or the North West.

Is it easy to find the information you need from local and central government departments online?

The main reason for not using an online service in the last 12 months among the small minority of people (12 per cent of the survey population) who have not engaged with a local or central government service online in that period is the fact that the services have not been needed (68 per cent). Only 24 per cent of people say they prefer to speak to someone so do not use online services. Security concerns are not an inhibitor to using online local and central government services – only three per cent of people mentioned them as an inhibitor to using online services.

Doing well...

There seems little doubt that people find it quite easy to find information online that is needed about local and central governmental services. When asked to provide a rating on the ease of finding information on the websites the average score generated was 7.3 out of 10, 10 being very easy. There is little difference by gender or age, but people in the South East gave the lowest average score: 6.8 compared to 7.6 in the North and South West.

In addition people also agree that finding information about local and central governmental services online is much easier than offline – providing an average score of 7.8 out of 10, 10 this time indicating that online is much easier than offline. People aged 18 – 25 seem to find online information much easier to find than the older population as do those in the East Midlands and South West.

...but room for improvement

There is also no doubt that improved awareness of central and local government online services would encourage people to use them more. When asked if people agreed with the statement: “improved awareness of local and government online services would encourage me to use them more often”, **92 per cent** of people agreed. The overall average score was 8.2 out of 10, 10 being strong agreement, indicating very strong agreement. This is reflected across the country and is particularly strong amongst the population in the North West and those aged 18 – 25. There is very little difference between the genders and the population of the South East provided the lowest average score across the regions.

How do you rate your experience of conducting transactions on government websites?

There is marginal agreement that Government websites are easier to use than commercial ones, but with an average score of 5.7 out of 10 (10 indicates that the government website is much easier to use, and 5 that they are similarly easy to use) there is clearly room for improvement.

There is little doubt that online is rapidly becoming the preferred method of communication for many local and central government focused activities. Currently only 30 per cent of the population prefer to pay their road tax in-person compared with two thirds of people who are happy to use an online system. This feeling is pretty universal across all age groups and regions.

Two thirds of people also prefer to pay their council tax online compared to only 29 per cent who like to pay in-person but only 56 per cent of those over 55 elected for the online method here perhaps showing an element of nostalgia for the ways council tax has been paid in the past. People in the South West (74 per cent) have a greater preference for online council tax payment than others.

Activity (%)	Telephone	In-Person	Online
Pay road tax	4	30	67
Pay council tax	5	29	66
Find information about local schools	4	16	80
Book a hospital appointment	45	18	37
Pay TV licence	6	16	77

Only in the case of booking a hospital appointment is there a greater preference for a non-online approach, in this case the telephone. 45 per cent of people prefer to make a call to book a hospital appointment, compared to 37 per cent who prefer online and 18 per cent are happy to turn up and make the appointment. Interestingly, slightly more people aged 46 and over would prefer online than the younger generation but the Scottish (20 per cent) and Northern Irish (27 per cent) show the least inclination to use an online booking system.

TV licence payment is rapidly moving to the domain of the Internet, as 77 per cent of the population (and 81 per cent among 35 – 46 year olds) prefer to pay online. Interestingly, only 68 per cent of people in the North East prefer the online method, 20 per cent are happy to pay in-person.

How could people's experience of government services online be improved?

The most commonly cited changes that people would like to help improve their experience of local and central government websites include more information about what can be done online (so it would appear there is an awareness issue); better search functionality (mentioned by 55 per cent of all respondents, and 60 per cent of 18 – 25 years olds and 64 per cent in Wales) and a quicker response to questions (a change required by 54 per cent of all people and 62 per cent of people in the West Midlands).

Change (% agreeing)	All	Male	Female
Better security	31	29	33
More interactivity	36	42	30
Quicker responses to questions	54	53	54
Better search functionality	55	58	52
Making the sites more similar to commercial sites	23	25	22
More information about what I can do online	62	60	65
Improving the content	44	45	44
Making the sites easier to use	45	45	44

Some work would appear to be necessary to make the local and central government websites easier to use. This was especially an issue for people in the South West and those aged over 55. Interestingly people aged 36 – 45 are more likely than any others to see a change required with respect to content. Half of all 36 – 45 year olds said a change was required here compared to 44 per cent overall and 38 per cent amongst those aged 46 – 55.

Have government websites improved, and if so, how?

There is no doubt that people agree that Internet-based government services have improved over the last three years. 36 per cent of people say that they have improved a lot and a further 45 per cent report a marginal improvement. With such high figures it is not surprising that there is little variation by gender, age or region. This said, people in Northern Ireland are least positive in this respect as only 27 per cent report a great improvement in internet-based government services compared to 46 per cent of people in the West Midlands, for example.


Not only do people think that internet-based government services have improved a lot over the last three years but they are also using them a lot more. 81 per cent of UK home-Internet users said they use Internet-based government services at least a little more now compared to three years ago, with little difference by age or gender.

Around 70 per cent of Scottish and Welsh inhabitants use Internet-based government services at least a little more now compared to three years ago compared for example with 89 per cent of people in the West Midlands and 85 per cent in the North West. What is clear is that use of online services has increased rapidly over the last 3 years and looks set to continue. People do not have difficulty in finding the information they need, nor do they find the sites to be inferior to commercial sites, which they are also using to a great extent – though people are less likely to undertake transactions on public sector websites than on their commercial counterparts’.

Statement (%)	All	Male	Female
I use Internet-based government services a lot more now compared to 3 years ago	48	49	47
I use Internet-based government services a little more now compared to 3 years ago	33	32	35
I use Internet-based government services about the same amount as 3 years ago	17	18	15
I use Internet-based government services a little less now compared to 3 years ago	1	0	2
I use Internet-based government services a lot less now compared to 3 years ago	1	0	1

In conclusion: Are UK citizens engaged?

In order to make the projected savings outlined in the Transformational Government Agenda 2008/9 report, take up of online government services must be consistently high, relieving pressure on other ‘front line’ services such as call centres and reception staff, where staffing, training and CRM costs make providing support to the general public expensive. In addition, projects must be streamlined so that a return on investment is delivered quickly and the best technology is in place to keep providing a good service to citizens.



But the biggest area for improvement is improving awareness of what people can do online, encouraging the public to turn to online services instead of picking up the phone or turning up at an office. People need reassurance that services like booking hospital appointments online will be effective, and communications around what else people can do online need to be improved.

With only just over half (60 per cent) of the UK currently having access to the Internet at home, online government services cannot afford to remain the public sector's 'best kept secret'. It's probably true that those who don't have the Internet at home are also those who need government support the most – the disabled, those with learning difficulties, the elderly and those out of work. Those who are socially disadvantaged are much more likely to be digitally disadvantaged, and even the Treasury expects 20 per cent of households to be in this situation in 15 years time.

Because of this, use of online services needs to be high among those that have Internet access for any savings to have an impact on the public purse, and even more needs to be done to enable those currently without the Internet at home to access online services.

As the Transformational Government Agenda enters its fourth year, the focus must be on raising awareness of the services, improving inclusivity and incentivising people to conduct transactions online. Most online purchases, from insurance to DVDs, are less expensive than those bought on the high street, giving the consumer the incentive to shop online. This reduces the shop's overheads and increases their margins. The public sector should consider a comparable scheme, making car tax, TV licences and other payments less expensive when conducted online.

Making people aware of what they can do online and keeping them engaged will be an ongoing challenge. But with receptiveness to using the Internet for interactions high and a great incentive on the government's side to make this work and save costs, the chance for success is high. Making this a reality depends on the Transformational Government Agenda remaining a high priority for both local and central government, into 2010 and beyond.