

ALT response to the independent review of Directgov by Martha Lane Fox

31/8/2010

The Association for Learning Technology (ALT) is a charity and learned body with over 700 individual and over 200 organisational members including most UK universities, many FE colleges, and a wide range of businesses and agencies with an interest in technology in learning.

We are pleased to respond to this consultation¹, and particularly welcome it because its focus is on the *raison d'être* of Directgov. That Directgov provides more for citizens than a set of government-oriented “e-commerce” services is axiomatic. Directgov also has the potential to be a bi-directional communication channel that can drive service-improvement and simplify the mechanics of Government. But for this to happen the founding principles of Directgov need to be revisited, as we seek to show below.

QUESTION 1. Central Government’s objectives in digital delivery

We believe that the following five aims are important.

1. To save the Government and UK taxpayer money. (We don’t believe that this is in conflict with the four further aims that follow.)
2. To make it easier for citizens and others to interact with government when the wish to or are required to do so.
3. To drive simplification across government, central and local (this was an original aim for the Directgov site and something we believe may have got lost).
4. To support efficient and cost effective ways for user and government interaction.
5. To act as an exemplar of good practice for other providers of information and services in the public and private sectors.

The current system is currently indifferent but getting slowly better at 2 and 3, but remains poor at 1, 4 and 5. The current “objectives” all fall under 3 although there are elements of 4 in all of them. But “publishing content” etc. should not be objectives: instead the objectives should always be written with some element of “user pull” included in them. Thus “Making transactions between government and citizens, organisations and others easier, safer and more cost effective for all involved.” Or “Ensuring citizens have access to the content they need along with data about government that is transparent.”

¹ This response was written by Dick Moore and Professor John Slater, and edited by Seb Schmoller.

Suitably rewritten with a strong “user pull” component, the objectives should then be unpacked at a lower level to include such things as

under the second:

- acting as a trusted formal site for interaction (including financial interactions) with central government (HMRC, DVLA etc.)
- providing a mechanism for collecting structured views on proposed government actions (including but not restricted to policy)

under the fourth:

- publishing official public content and data
- providing government data that is joined up within itself and ..
- providing an access channel to wider content, not held by Directgov, but relevant to the user.

There is an increasing body of research on how e-government might be developed, and “*A Citizen Oriented E-government Maturity Model*” by Brunel University’s Hala Al-Khatib is but one recent paper that provides an interesting and relevant synthesis².

The emphasis in deciding priorities throughout should be driven by users, and we believe that “joined up” does not imply a monolithic system - see below.

QUESTION 2. Who should do what?

Directgov must above all else be authoritative and trusted. It provides a government imprimatur for the transactions that it supports and the information it provides. If it lose that as a result of third party involvement then it becomes essentially useless and moves in that direction are irresponsible. Transactions such as filling in a tax return should be completely free of any third party involvement and advertising. Organisations working on the site and providing direct support to users referred to as part of the site such as embedded online help systems and referenced call centres must essentially be “government”.

However, assuming they are required (this is the “access channel to wider content” that we mention above), lists of places (mainly websites) where users can go for further advice and services should be included. This is where charities, those that offer charged services and other possible links (other Governments etc.) come in. There should be mechanisms for proposal and establishment of links. But these links should always make clear on the site, to all including those using assistive technology and/or with sensory impairment, that they are links to content or services that are outside the jurisdiction of government.

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<http://www.brunel.ac.uk/329/BBS%20documents/PHD%20Doctoral%20Symposium%2009/HalaAlKhatib0632085.pdf> last accessed 30/8/2010

The above is a “logic” formulation. In practice government will appoint agents to do some or all of the production, maintenance and support tasks. But they should work entirely within the imprimatur.

QUESTION 3. Sharing the platform

There is no role for central government in being a hosting organisation. It will not be done efficiently and the only reason that third parties will sign up is if the costing is incorrect (e.g. free - in which case taxpayers’ moneys are being wasted), or to appear to share the government brand (and thereby to undermine it). Sharing the platform will tend also to increase clutter and to decrease usability.

The most successful local authority sites should be examined for models. They rarely have third party content on them and when they do (for example to central government sites) it is clearly labelled through some such badge as “other links”.

The temptation to publish superfluous and possibly unedited content on the site should be avoided. Easy, uncluttered and safe access to transactions and content that are needed and wanted by citizens and their agents (such as those working in benefit offices and elsewhere advising citizens) is what is required. Thus the emphasis should be on supporting and enabling the interactions that form the underlying business/transaction models of government (e.g. to tax my car or renew my passport), rather than on “clever” web delivery for its own sake.

This is where our fifth aim - *“To act as an exemplar of good practice for other providers of information and services in the public and private sectors”* - comes into its own. Many of the current problems spring not from the website but from the web unfriendliness of other activities of government. Complex, hard to negotiate business processes that have a web front end, rarely translate well to the web and as a result will deter engagement. Our third aim - *“To drive simplification across government, central and local”* - refers as much to business process as it does to the user interface. Directgov should strive to become an exemplar of good practice. It needs therefore to be able to encompass modern trends, not by responding to every fad, but by moving steadily to support an inclusive, personalised, open system with modern security and related features that will imbue confidence amongst citizens.

QUESTION 4. Trends in digital delivery

We offer the following six pointers.

1. Openness

It is important that a government committed to openness should support initiatives in Open Data (making government data available for others to build services on) and Open Content (maximum use of Creative Commons licensing of Government Documents).

2. Distribution

Data should not be forcibly centralised for web publication. Subsidiarity and the use of distributed systems with look-up tables is increasingly modern practice, even if not always practised in UK government (e.g. MIAP, now known as the Learning Records Service). Network technology continues to advance rapidly. While there is little appetite for the sharing of specific data across government, we believe that there is a strong case for sharing data across government, for example for changes of address or name, or the death of a citizen.

3. The web document as the real document

Publication of government documents on the web should increasingly take priority in such areas as formatting where print versions still have priority often to the detriment of the web presentation. We need technical formats that permit ease of use for the citizen who rarely accesses anything other than the web document (for example the two column designs that cannot easily be read on screen should be avoided as should unnecessarily large file sizes that can and will increasingly cost the user to download as mobile charging models become more common).

This area of making departments aware of the fact that their information will be most accessed through web interfaces. and that web-based citizens are thus the main class of user needs a lot of attention, with staff development to ensure that the fundamental shift that is taking place is fully understood in government.

4. Authentication and authorisation etc.

Appropriate levels and systems of validation and verification are needed aligned with the transaction taking place. For example if a citizen wishes to pay a parking fine then this should be possible without having to apply for a password via post. These levels of security should map onto the nature of transaction with different models applied. With high stakes transactions we would expect to see two-factor authentication in use where non-repudiation is required (usernames and passwords struggle to stand up to legal challenge). Citizens and agencies must have confidence in e-government. The current system of extensive delays if you forget your login and password involving two lots of physical posting are unacceptable: there are better and more secure alternatives. This is another area where a better systems result from giving users more choice.

5. Customisation and inclusiveness

Directgov needs to keep up to date with advances in this area. For example more facilities in support of accessibility (where the site is currently not bad but where more can be done in speech recognition and synthesis and in the use of machine translation) and the provision of smart style sheets that can adaptively render a site in response to a users preference and method of connection (e.g. when using a mobile device or a low bandwidth connection). Keeping good profiles of users to improve responsiveness to the individual is becoming easier and should increasingly be a hallmark of services provided through Directgov.

6. Software engineering and project management

To keep pace with current developments in web delivered services we recommend that Directgov is developed in a more agile, iterative fashion, with each three year project (say) split into (say) 12 four month phases. This would enable a Directgov site/service to keep pace with current practice. The focus should be on modular rather than monolithic development, with self-contained smallish components that can be absorbed into other systems, multiple entry points, and with unit testing and instrumentation built in. Alongside this staff- and citizen-users (i.e. those on each side of the front line) should be at the heart of all development.

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