

House of Commons  
Committee of Public Accounts

**PROGRESS IN  
ACHIEVING  
GOVERNMENT ON THE  
WEB**

Sixty-sixth Report of Session 2001–02



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*Report, together with  
Proceedings of the Committee and  
Minutes of Evidence*

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## **Committee of Public Accounts**

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### **Footnotes**

In the footnotes of this Report, references to oral evidence are indicated by ‘Q’ or ‘Qq’ followed by the question number; references to the written evidence are indicated by the page number as in ‘Ev .....’.

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## EVIDENCE (*Wednesday 12 June 2002*) (HC 936-i, Session 2001–02)

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Mr Richard Broadbent, Chairman, HM Customs and Excise, and Mr Alex Fraser, Director, Logistics, HM Customs and Excise .....	Ev 3

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# SIXTY-SIXTH REPORT

**The Committee of Public Accounts has agreed to the following Report:**

## **PROGRESS IN ACHIEVING GOVERNMENT ON THE WEB**

### INTRODUCTION AND LIST OF CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Government has set the target that all public services which can be transacted electronically should be available on-line for citizens and businesses by 2005. To help achieve this target, £1 billion has been allocated over the three years from April 2001 to boost government organisations' presence on-line. Of this, £350 million is being provided to help the 388 local authorities in England develop on-line services. Web sites are the means by which the public can find out what services are available on-line and access them electronically.

2. The Office of the e-Envoy as part of the Cabinet Office is responsible for formulating common policies and guidelines to underpin and monitor departments' implementation of e-government. Departments are directly responsible for developing their Internet-based services and using these to deliver improved public services.

3. In 2000 this Committee reviewed how departments were developing their Web sites and made a number of recommendations.<sup>1</sup> On the basis of a Report<sup>2</sup> by the Comptroller and Auditor General we examined progress which the Office of the e-Envoy had made since our last Report. In addition, we took evidence from Customs and Excise on how it was developing its Internet-based services and from the Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions<sup>3</sup> on how it was promoting Government on the Web among local authorities. We underline four main points:

- Many of the recommendations in our previous Report on Government on the Web published in June 2000, which were accepted by the Government, have yet to be fully implemented. In particular the Office of the e-Envoy has made limited progress in collecting and publishing systematic information on the development of government Web traffic,<sup>4</sup> the take-up of electronic services by the public, and the condition of government Web sites, and in developing a methodology for justifying expenditure on Web provision. **The Office of the e-Envoy should be more active in monitoring and reporting departments' progress in putting services on-line, their take-up by the public, and the quality and use made of departments' web sites.**
- There are over 800 central and local public sector bodies with over 3,000 Web sites usually providing information about their roles and responsibilities. By accessing the UK on-line government site the public can now link to the most relevant central bodies Web site for their enquiry. People are, however, most interested in services, such as how to obtain support or care for an elderly relative, which is often the shared responsibility of a number of organisations. **More Web sites need to be designed around specific services that cut across organisational boundaries so that people can access all the information they need on services such as transport, housing and education from a single source.**
- Departments have made services available on-line only to find that the public are reluctant to use them. For example, Customs and Excise made it possible to submit value added tax returns electronically but only 2,500 out of 1.65 million VAT-

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<sup>1</sup> 21<sup>st</sup> Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *Government on the Web* (HC 331, Session 1999–2000)

<sup>2</sup> C&AG's Report, *Government on the Web II* (HC 764, Session 2001–02)

<sup>3</sup> Central responsibility for local government has now transferred to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister.

<sup>4</sup> The extent to which a Web site is accessed and used.

registered traders signed up to do so. Customs and Excise are now considering how to redesign this service so that businesses see benefit in using it. **People are only likely to use on-line services if they are easier and more cost-effective to use, more accessible and more convenient.**

- Departments need to consider how information technology can be used to streamline current ways of working, reduce time-consuming procedures and improve productivity. **Simply converting conventional processes to Internet-based applications will not realise the significant improvements in efficiency which IT can make possible.**

4. Our further conclusions and recommendations are:

- (i) Departments have direct responsibility for making their services available on-line and realising the efficiency improvements made possible by IT. The Office of the e-Envoy has, however, strategic responsibility for promoting electronic service delivery and the achievement of the Government's e-targets. The Office should identify examples of where departments and local authorities have improved services or efficiency through IT and use these as beacons to promote more widespread adoption of good practice.
- (ii) Departments will only be able to refine and enhance their Internet-based services if they have reliable and regular information on the extent to which they are used and the benefits which the public consider they receive from them. The collection of such information, and its use to identify ways of improving electronic services, is variable. As a minimum, Departments need to monitor the take-up of their on-line services, how often they are used by the public, and their impact on the quality of service which users receive.
- (iii) The public are only likely to provide personal information on-line if they can be sure that its confidentiality is adequately safeguarded. As we have emphasised in our Report on e-Revenue<sup>5</sup> it is imperative that departments meet appropriate security standards so that personal information cannot be accessed by those not authorised to do so.
- (iv) Digital certificates are used by some departments to authenticate the identity of people and businesses interacting with them on-line and so provide some safeguard against fraudulent activities. Obtaining digital certificates can, however, be both costly and time-consuming for businesses and once obtained they can be used for only a limited number of services. The Office of the e-Envoy should work with the IT industry to identify ways of reducing both the time and cost of obtaining a certificate and increasing the services which they cover.
- (v) Local authorities provide a wide range of public services. Some authorities are more advanced than others in providing services on-line, with the risk that some parts of the country may be excluded from the benefits of electronic government or may not have access to them for some time. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister should target support on authorities which are less advanced in delivering services on-line.
- (vi) The main indicator used to monitor local authorities' progress in delivering services on-line reports the number of services available electronically but not the extent to which they are used or the take-up of electronic services by citizens and local business. To obtain a more reliable assessment of progress the Office of the

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<sup>5</sup> 52<sup>nd</sup> Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *e-Revenue* (HC 707, Session 2001–02)



Deputy Prime Minister, in consultation with local authorities, should develop indicators which measure these aspects too.

- (vii) Significant sums are being invested by departments and local authorities in developing Internet-based services. As yet there is very little reliable data, however, on the extent to which value for money is being achieved in terms of both better public services and improvements in efficiency. Public sector organisations need to set out the intended value for money benefits in the business cases justifying their expenditure on IT projects and monitor and report on their achievement.

#### PROGRESS IN IMPLEMENTING GOVERNMENT ON THE WEB

5. The Internet allows easy communication between computers by facilitating the exchange of information electronically. Providing services via the Internet (or Web) should make it possible for public sector organisations to improve the quality of services delivered to citizens. Information and services can for example be available 24 hours a day from whatever location people access them. Internet-based services also have potential for improving the operational efficiency of departments by converting labour intensive processes to electronic applications. To help realise these benefits the Government has set the target that all services which can be transacted electronically should be available on-line for citizens and firms by 2005.<sup>6</sup>

6. In our 2000 Report we made a number of recommendations to improve departments' implementation of Government on the Web. These included the need for the Office of the e-Envoy to collect and publish systematic information on the development of Government Web traffic, the take-up of electronic services by the public and the condition of government Web sites, and also the need for the Office to develop a methodology for justifying departments' expenditure on Web provision. Progress in implementing these recommendations which were accepted by the Government has however been slow. The Office of the e-Envoy told us that while it did not collect detailed information on the content of individual departments' Web sites, it had developed standards setting out what a high quality Web site should include, and was promulgating good practice such as the example of NHS Direct and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office Web site for all departments to follow. The UK online Web site had also been developed, making it easier for the public to link to departments' Web sites from a single access point. The Office considered that there had been considerable improvement since our last Report, particularly in making significantly more services available on-line, but accepted that more progress was needed.<sup>7</sup>

#### THE IMPORTANCE OF WEB SITES BEING KEPT UP-TO-DATE

7. The public are less likely to want to access departments' Web sites if the information provided by them is not up-to-date. Our enquiries found examples where information was out of date or inaccurate. The Downing Street Web site did not have a complete up-to-date list of Ministers and on 12 June the UK online site [www.ukonline.gov.uk](http://www.ukonline.gov.uk) had as the latest "hot topic" information on the Budget nearly two months after the event. The Office of the e-Envoy said that while it was important to keep web sites up-to-date, older technology meant that it was often expensive to make individual changes, which was why the technology on UK online had recently been up-graded.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> C&AG's Report, para 1

<sup>7</sup> C&AG's Report, para 11; Qq 7-9, 25-26, 106

<sup>8</sup> Qq 29, 34, 37-38, 40

8. There are various ways to monitor the extent to which Web sites are used. Typical indicators include “hits”—the transfer of a single piece of information to and from the Web site to the user; and time on site—the average time that users spend on a department’s web site. Asked how much information was available on who was accessing government Web sites, the Office of the e-Envoy said that departments were responsible for monitoring the usage of their own Web sites. Information was not held centrally because there were over 2,000 government Web sites. For the UK online and the e-Envoy site the Office had detailed information about the number of users and the time of day when they accessed the sites. There were problems in measuring usage, however, particularly in terms of people who access and then move on to another site and also in finding out what sort of information they use. The Office said it was about to embark on two sets of audits of 100 sites which would also examine the extent to which these sites were used and the frequency with which they were accessed.<sup>9</sup>

#### TAKE-UP OF ON-LINE SERVICES BY THE PUBLIC

9. The Government’s e-target focuses on making services available electronically and not on achieving take-up of these services by the public. As we emphasised in our Report on Improving Public Services through e-Government,<sup>10</sup> the success of Internet-based service delivery will ultimately depend on whether the public are prepared to use such services. The Comptroller and Auditor General’s examination found that the UK lags behind some other countries in the take-up of e-government services by the public. The Office of e-Envoy said that some smaller European countries were far in advance of the UK in the use of government services on-line, but not the larger European countries. In comparison to the UK commercial sector, particularly banking, the Office of e-Envoy said that departments were less advanced in encouraging the use of services on-line. But departments had consequently had more time and opportunity to learn lessons from private sector experience.<sup>11</sup>

10. An international benchmarking study in April 2001 indicated that 81% of UK businesses were now on-line. In order to encourage such businesses to submit VAT returns electronically, Customs and Excise launched a pilot exercise in which 1000 traders initially agreed to participate. Subsequently, however, over two-thirds of these traders dropped out of the pilot. By February 2002 around 2500 users were registered for submitting their VAT returns on-line out of a total of 1.65 million VAT-registered traders. We asked Customs and Excise how it could be confident therefore that it would meet its target that 35% of its customers should be interacting with it electronically by Spring 2004 and 50% by 2005. The Department said that its market research did not suggest that traders were reluctant to interact with it on-line but rather that they saw no benefit from doing so. It had recognised the need to change its operations and processes so that all its customers saw real value in its electronic services. This change was happening with import-export duties but not yet for VAT where take-up was negligible.<sup>12</sup>

#### INCENTIVES TO ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO INTERACT ON-LINE

11. People are more likely to deal with departments on-line if the service is designed to reflect their particular needs. To design such services departments require reliable information on the characteristics and preferences of their users. Customs and Excise was doing work to identify the type of service which its users wanted from e-government as part of redesigning existing services in a way that incentivized the public to use them. For

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<sup>9</sup> C&AG’s Report, para 4.30; Qq 4–9

<sup>10</sup> 54<sup>th</sup> Report from the Committee of Public Accounts, *Improving Public Services through e-Government* (HC 845, Session 2001–02)

<sup>11</sup> C&AG’s Report, para 4.19; Q 50

<sup>12</sup> C&AG’s Report, paras 2.3–2.4, 2.7; Qq 10–11, 18–19, 96

example, they wanted to make completing VAT returns much easier. The Department would prepare a VAT return for traders based on accumulated data on their past business performance, e-mail the return to the trader who could either amend it to take account of any change in revenue or simply confirm that the return accurately reflected revenue earned in the period. The latter would be a simple automated transaction saving a business a considerable amount of time. Another incentive might be to allow businesses some flexibility in changing VAT payment dates. The Office of the e-Envoy added that another way of encouraging take-up of departments' electronic services was to make them available through intermediary organisations such as banks and Citizens Advice Bureaux with which citizens and businesses often had more routine day-to-day contact.<sup>13</sup>

#### SECURITY OF INFORMATION PROVIDED ON-LINE

12. When departments and the public interact electronically there are risks to security and of unauthorised disclosure of personal information. For certain transactions such as Inland Revenue and VAT returns departments need to be able to verify that the person submitting the return is who they say they are. People and businesses providing confidential or commercial information on-line want assurance that only those authorised will have access to the information. Customs and Excise said that they were using digital certificates<sup>14</sup> to authenticate those to whom it made payments or repayments. Obtaining digital certificates was, however, both costly and time-consuming, and once they had been obtained they could be used for only a limited number of services. The Office of the e-Envoy said that the IT industry was working to make it possible to obtain a digital certificate more easily and to apply for them on-line.<sup>15</sup>

13. A breach of security had occurred on Inland Revenue's web site with the consequence that information from some people's tax returns provided on-line had become available to others. The Office of the e-Envoy said that the Inland Revenue site had been closed down and the Department was doing extensive testing to ensure that such a breach of confidentiality could not happen again. All departments' Web sites had to comply with certain technical standards, but in this instance a technical failure that had not been anticipated had caused the problem. Inland Revenue would be making sure that all other departments were aware of the circumstances which caused the breach to prevent a similar occurrence.<sup>16</sup>

#### REVENUE FROM THE SALE OF THE GOVERNMENT GATEWAY'S WEB SITE TECHNOLOGY

14. Microsoft were one of the IT suppliers which had been involved in developing the Government Gateway Web site and were now seeking to sell the technology to other governments. Asked whether the UK government would earn commission on any sale, the Office of the e-Envoy said that it had a contractual arrangement with Microsoft whereby 22% of any gross sales of the Government Gateway technology intellectual property would come to the UK Government.<sup>17</sup>

#### PROGRESS IN DEVELOPING LOCAL GOVERNMENT WEB SITES

15. The Department for Transport, Local Government and the Regions has allocated £350 million over the three years 2001 to 2004 to promote electronic government by the

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<sup>13</sup> Qq 77-78, 80-81, 87-88

<sup>14</sup> An electronic device which is issued by a third party to attest the authenticity of the issuer of a document. The combination of encryption techniques and the use of an independent third party should prevent fraudulent documents from being accepted as genuine and facilitate secure transactions between, for example, a government agency and citizens.

<sup>15</sup> Qq 12-13, 21, 24

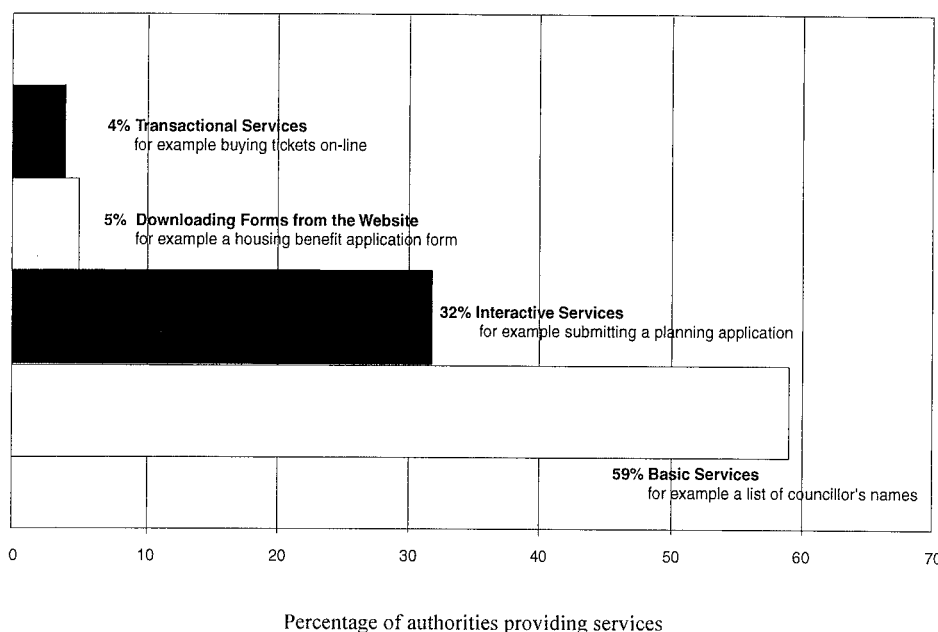
<sup>16</sup> Qq 64-66

<sup>17</sup> Qq 90-93

388 English local authorities, which included developing their Internet-based services. Responsibility for local government has since transferred to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister. As for central departments the Government has set local authorities the target that by 2005 all of their services which can be transacted electronically should be available on-line. In promoting achievement of this target the Department has adopted the approach which the Office of the e-Envoy has applied to central government. Local authorities were asked to appoint champions to promote electronic service delivery in their organisations and prepare by April 2001 statements setting out how they intended to achieve the e-target. These statements were then reviewed by the Department. By November 2001, 97% of English local authorities had a Web site.<sup>18</sup>

16. Local authorities' progress in providing services on-line is being monitored using a Best Value performance indicator which requires them to count their services and those which are available electronically. Most of the services currently made available electronically by local authorities provide information and advice and few permit transactions such as paying parking fines on-line (Figure 1). Asked why only just over a quarter of local authorities let citizens pay their council tax electronically, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister said that some 95% of council taxes were already collected through direct debit. In terms of promoting the development of more interactive services the Office said it was funding pathfinder projects which included partnerships of local authorities working on different aspects of service delivery.<sup>19</sup>

**Figure 1: Types of electronic services provided by local authorities**



The most common service local authority websites provide is basic information but few allow people to transact or download forms.

<sup>18</sup> C&AG's Report, para 3.10, 3.12, 3.19

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, para 6; Q 16

17. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister considered that the main challenge was how to transfer the good practice and experience of leading edge local authorities in electronic service delivery to the rest of local government. People living in less prosperous areas or where local authorities were less advanced in developing Internet-based services might otherwise be excluded from the benefits of electronic government. There were national strategies to prevent this from happening. For example, the Department for Education and Skills and the Office of the e-Envoy had a programme to provide access to the Internet in a range of public places including through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport's library service.<sup>20</sup>

#### ENSURING THAT INVESTMENT IN GOVERNMENT ON THE WEB DELIVERS VALUE FOR MONEY

18. Converting and redesigning manual processes and procedures so that they can be done electronically should provide opportunities for departments to improve their operational efficiency with potential to release resources from support activities for front line service delivery. Few departments have as yet full information on the cost of completing basic administrative tasks to assist in determining the scope for efficiency savings which converting to electronic means of working should allow.<sup>21</sup>

19. The Comptroller and Auditor General's examination of Customs and Excise's development of electronic services provided some indication of the potential savings that should be achievable. For example, the average cost of processing a combined VAT return and cheque under current manual systems is £1.16. Private sector experience suggests that the processing of similar transactions electronically should typically cost less than 10 pence. Applying these figures to the 7 million VAT transactions which Customs and Excise process each year suggested that there would be significant savings if the Department could encourage substantial numbers of businesses to submit their VAT returns on-line. Customs and Excise also identified an average 240,000 errors each year in the submission of VAT Export Sales Lists from businesses. Each error cost £1.50 to correct (around £360,000 a year). There was therefore potential to realise savings if lower levels of error could be achieved by businesses directly inputting information via the Web.<sup>22</sup>

20. Customs and Excise had achieved only modest efficiency savings from moving to Internet-based services largely because take up of services by businesses had been low. It was only by persuading sufficiently large enough numbers of people and businesses to switch from sending returns in by post to doing so on-line that more labour intensive manual processing could be reduced.<sup>23</sup>

21. The Office of the Deputy Prime Minister was supporting a number of projects to promote improvements in value for money in local authorities. This support was mainly for authorities which were taking the lead in developing, for example, electronic procurement or electronic customer management systems. The intention was to have all purpose systems which were capable of being transferred to other authorities at a cost significantly less than if they had had to employ consultants to develop similar systems from scratch. It would be possible to point quite rapidly to areas of local government where substantial savings would be being achieved.<sup>24</sup>

22. The Office of the e-Envoy had not yet implemented the recommendation in our previous Report on the need to develop a methodology for justifying expenditure on Web provision. Asked how it could be confident that expenditure on implementing electronic

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<sup>20</sup> Qq 27-28

<sup>21</sup> C&AG's Report, para 2.18

<sup>22</sup> C&AG's Report, para 2.18

<sup>23</sup> Qq 14-15, 94, 116

<sup>24</sup> Qq 27, 118

government was delivering value for money, the Office said that the Treasury would be issuing guidelines on applying such a methodology. Before any significant sums could be spent on IT projects departments had to present a business case to the Treasury setting out the intended benefits to be achieved from the investment in IT including savings to be realised.

MINUTES OF PROCEEDINGS OF  
THE COMMITTEE OF PUBLIC ACCOUNTS

SESSION 2001-02

WEDNESDAY 12 JUNE 2002

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon  
Geraint Davies  
Mr George Howarth  
Mr Brian Jenkins

Mr George Osborne  
Mr David Rendel  
Mr Alan Williams

Sir John Bourn KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, was further examined.

The Committee deliberated.

Mr Rob Molan, Second Treasury Officer of Accounts, was further examined.

The Comptroller and Auditor General's Report on Government on the Web II (HC 764), was considered.

Mavis McDonald CB, Permanent Secretary, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, was further examined; Mr Andrew Whetnall, Director for Local Government, Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, was examined; Mr Andrew Pinder, e-Envoy, Office of the e-Envoy, was further examined; Mr Richard Broadbent, Chairman, HM Customs and Excise, was further examined; and Mr Alex Fraser, Director, Logistics, HM Customs and Excise, was examined (HC 936-i).

The witnesses withdrew.

The Committee further deliberated.

\* \* \* \* \*

[Adjourned until Monday 17 June at Four o'clock.

\* \* \* \* \*

MONDAY 4 NOVEMBER 2002

Members present:

Mr Edward Leigh, in the Chair

Mr Richard Bacon  
Mr Ian Davidson  
Angela Eagle  
Mr Frank Field  
Mr George Howarth  
Mr Brian Jenkins

Mr George Osborne  
Mr David Rendel  
Mr Gerry Steinberg  
Jon Trickett  
Mr Alan Williams

Sir John Bourn KCB, Comptroller and Auditor General, was further examined.

The Committee deliberated.

Mr Brian Glicksman, Treasury Officer of Accounts, was further examined.

\* \* \* \* \*

Draft Report (Progress in achieving Government on the Web), proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

*Ordered*, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 3 read and agreed to.

Paragraph 4 postponed.

Paragraphs 5 to 22 read and agreed to.

Postponed paragraph 4 read and agreed to.

*Resolved*, That the Report be the Sixty-sixth Report of the Committee to the House.

*Ordered*, That the Chairman do make the Report to the House.

*Ordered*, That the provisions of Standing Order No. 134 (Select Committees (Reports)) be applied to the Report.

\* \* \* \* \*

[Adjourned until Wednesday 6 November at Four o'clock.]