

14th October 2010

Dear Francis Maude,

DIRECTGOV 2010 AND BEYOND: REVOLUTION NOT EVOLUTION

You asked me to oversee a strategic review of Directgov and to report to you by the end of September. I have undertaken this review in the context of my wider remit as UK Digital Champion which includes offering advice on “how efficiencies can best be realised through the online delivery of public services.” This means that I have not reviewed Directgov in isolation but as part of how the government can use the Internet both to communicate and interact better with citizens and to deliver significant efficiency savings from channel shift. This letter sets out my findings and key recommendations.

Directgov as an organisation does two different things. It **provides access to online transactional services** such as student loans, car tax and Jobseekers’ Allowance, and it **publishes government information** for citizens in one place on the Web. Currently, it is focussed on providing information that people need and on providing access to online transactions with less focus on government news, campaigns, and engagement. For me, the acid test for Directgov is whether it can **empower, and make life simpler for, citizens** and at the same time allow government to **turn other things off**. A focus on vastly increasing the range, usage and quality of online transactions will deliver the greatest impact; less hassle for citizens & businesses, and greater efficiency.

There has been a reinvention of the Internet and the behaviour of users in the last few years. Digital services are now more agile, open and cheaper. To take advantage of these changes, government needs to move to a **‘service culture’**, putting the needs of citizens ahead of those of departments. This increase in focus on end users should include **opening up government transactions** so they can be easily delivered by commercial organisations and charities, and **putting information wherever people are on the web by syndicating content**.

My recommendations have radical implications for Government's entire web presence as well as for Directgov. I hope these recommendations provide you and Cabinet colleagues with a **high level architecture for how Government internet services could be transformed** over the next few years. I want to stress that this report is not a detailed review of Directgov's current operations or an implementation plan. Instead, I have concentrated on the inter-relationship between Government use of the Internet, the need for channel shift and the future role of Directgov.

Summary of Key Recommendations

- 1. Make Directgov the government front end for all departments' transactional online services to citizens and businesses, with the teeth to mandate cross government solutions, set standards and force departments to improve citizens' experience of key transactions.**
- 2. Make Directgov a wholesaler as well as the retail shop front for government services & content by mandating the development and opening up of Application Programme Interfaces (APIs) to third parties.**
- 3. Change the model of government online publishing, by putting a new central team in Cabinet Office in absolute control of the overall user experience across all digital channels, commissioning all government online information from other departments.**
- 4. Appoint a new CEO for Digital in the Cabinet Office with absolute authority over the user experience across all government online services (websites and APIs) and the power to direct all government online spending.**

Background

To inform my review, the ERG Digital Delivery team commissioned Transform – a consultancy company offering pro-bono work – to interview more than 50 leaders from business and the public sector about the future of Directgov. Transform’s full report and an executive summary of their findings and recommendations are attached for your information

As well as Transform’s work, I have been helped by some good discussions with an advisory group I pulled together that included brains from the BBC, Google, M&S, YouGov, academia and venture capital. So whilst these recommendations are mine, I hope you will find there is a broad consensus about the recommendations – the only differences of opinion are around timeframes and operational detail.

1. Transactional Services (and Channel Shift)

Employment, motoring, education and benefits are the primary drivers of visits to Directgov and together have constituted 80% of Directgov’s traffic in the past year. Improving the quality and take up of transactions on Directgov in support of channel shift is hard and might take longer than rationalising web content to deliver cash savings but as you know the prize is potentially much bigger. Shifting 30% of government service delivery contacts to digital channels would deliver gross annual savings of more than £1.3 billion, rising to £2.2 billion if 50% of contacts shifted to digital. I strongly suggest that the core Directgov team concentrates on service quality and that it should be the **“citizens’ champion with sharp teeth” for transactional service delivery.**

Directgov should focus on improving service quality for citizens and delivering significant cost savings from service simplification and a shift to digital only services. Directgov should own the citizen experience of digital public services and be tasked with driving a **‘service culture’** across government which could, for example, **challenge any policy and practice that undermines good service design.** There is much that can be learnt from the commercial sector - I have repeatedly been told that government services online need to be more complex but I am not sure why. For example, the student loans process still ends with the printing out of a 30 page document that has to be signed.

Directgov could be the link to easing up the bureaucracy of many services and focusing on what creates the absolutely best citizen experience. If you can book a flight online with a few clicks and cut through all the associated regulations from ABTA, ATOL and the CAA then anything is possible. **It seems to me that the time is now to use the Internet to shift the lead in the design of services from the policy and legal teams to the end users.**

Directgov SWAT teams - bolstered from other parts of the ERG and business people with experience of switching to digital service delivery – should be given a remit to support and challenge departments and agencies delivering the first wave of digital only services: Student Loans, Car Tax, and JSA applications as part of the work of the Efficiency and Reform Group. We must give these SWAT teams the necessary support to challenge any policy and legal barriers which stop services being designed around user needs.

Recommendation 1

Make Directgov the government front end for all departments' transactional online services to citizens and businesses, with the teeth to mandate cross Government solutions, set standards and force departments to improve citizens' experience of key transactions.

2. Opening up transactional services and content for others to use

We should put government transactional services and content where people spend their time on the web, rather than always expecting them to go to Directgov. In parallel to improving transactional services, Directgov should be a proactive wholesaler of services by encouraging commercial and charitable organisations to use government applications to create services for their own consumers and clients. The Transform report provides some existing examples:

- HMRC have adopted this 'API' approach for online transactions with great success. There are over 100 commercial third party software solutions & websites which allow companies & individuals to transact

with government via the HMRC's Application Programme Interfaces (APIs)

- Best Buy, have set up a social commerce store on Facebook. Visitors to the Best Buy Facebook page see the 'shop & share' tab through which users can access the entire product catalogue, as well as get their friends' opinions and ratings on the products within it.
- The majority of items sold on eBay are listed using third party software solutions integrated with eBay via the latter's APIs.

Directgov's role should be to **create cross-government standards on APIs and use of open technologies** to support channel shift, plus the stimulation of an eco-system of third party distributors of tools, applications and content which integrate government services and content. To **build citizen trust and understanding** in this new approach, Transform recommend that Directgov should develop a branded **quality assurance 'kite mark' for Government applications**. (The Transform report provides an example of how this approach might work by using 'Powered by Directgov' to reassure a young person making a student loan application through a social networking website)

The **Directgov team** will require **new capabilities to build a reputation as a centre of excellence in this area with departments and external organisations**. To develop this expertise quickly and to avoid duplication, we should consider integrating the existing data.gov.uk team into Directgov as the centre of expertise for opening up not just data but also applications and services.

Recommendation 2

Make Directgov a wholesaler as well as the retail shop front for government services and content by mandating the development and opening up of Application Programme Interfaces (APIs) to third parties

3. Reinventing government online publishing

Government publishes millions of pages on the Web, via hundreds of different websites. Most of these sites are still run as silos within departments. This **fragmentation leads to significant duplication of functions and technology**, and means the **overall user experience is highly inconsistent**.

I am convinced that a new approach to government online publishing is needed. A **new central commissioning team should take responsibility for the overall user experience on the government web estate**, and should **commission content from departmental experts**. This content should then be published to a single Government website with a consistently excellent user experience.

Ultimately, departments should stop publishing to their own websites, and instead produce only content commissioned by this central commissioning team. There is no need for a major migration of content from existing departmental websites, they should simply be archived or mothballed when essential content has been commissioned and included in the new site.

Duplication and Savings

The savings from a reduction in duplication are significant, but will take time to realise. The Government recently announced a 75% rationalisation of Government websites. It is estimated this should reduce overall Government web expenditure from around £560 million to about £200 million a year. I think there is agreement that Government can go much further than this, perhaps over time reducing overall expenditure to less than £100 million a year (and some think much less than this though I think we should be careful to manage expectations at this stage).

I recommend that any savings from the reduction in duplication should remain in departments, once transition costs and ongoing funding for the new central team have been taken into account.

One domain: direct.gov.uk or hmg.gov.uk

Ultimately it makes sense to the user for all Government digital services to reside under a single brand. The user should not have to navigate the departmental structure of Government before finding the service or content what they need. On the web, this implies the adoption of a single Internet domain for central government. No10 feel it is preferable to go from 750 top level website domains (eg www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk) to a single top level website domain for all of central government . I agree with the thrust of this although I do not underestimate the size of the challenge to achieve it. **Driving government content into a single domain could be achieved by stretching the direct.gov.uk brand to cover all other government content**, for example direct.gov.uk/business and direct.gov.uk/news etc.

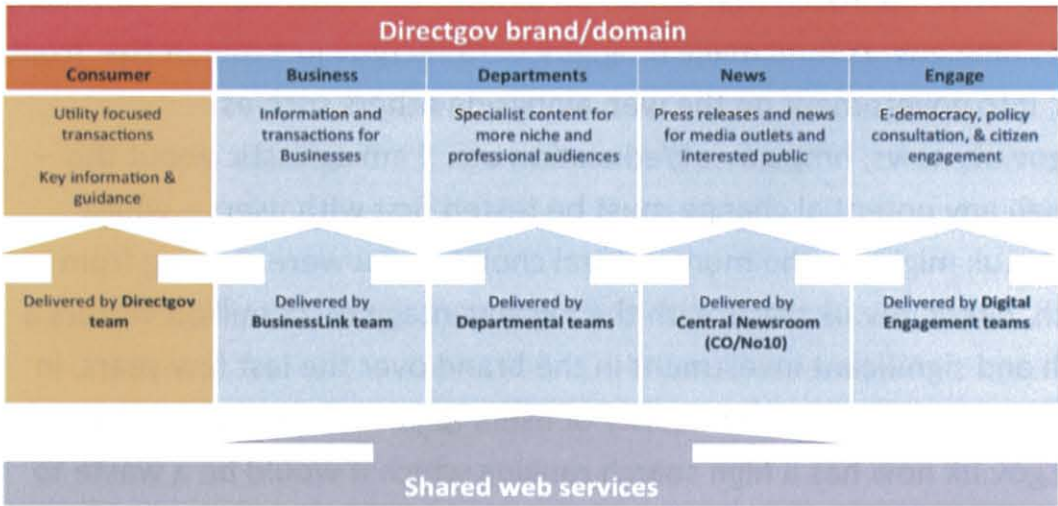
However, if the brand is to be stretched it will be important that the **Directgov team focuses relentlessly on transactional service delivery** and that **other teams are responsible for content on sub domains such as directgov.uk/campaigns**. There is an important tension between information citizens need and are actively seeking, and information government is promoting. An elegant solution might be to publish content government wishes to promote on direct.gov.uk/No10.

An alternative approach that would be to develop a new top level domain, such as hmg.gov.uk (and make hmg.gov.uk/directgov just one of the 'front doors' into government on the web alongside others such as hmg.gov.uk/news, hmg.gov.uk/education etc. I am agnostic about this – although any potential change must be tested first with users – whilst hmg.gov.uk might be the more natural choice if you were starting from scratch, direct.gov.uk starts with the big advantage of 28 million visitors a month and significant investment in the brand over the last few years. In addition, search drives the majority of users to government websites and direct.gov.uk now has a high search ranking which it would be a waste to throw away.

A shared, agile, cost-effective suite of web technologies

There is general consensus that the government online publishing infrastructure is not agile enough and is no longer fit for purpose. The contract for the Directgov technology platform has only a few years to run as does the contract for BusinessLink. There is some work underway in both organisations (and with NHS Choices) to develop a single shared, more agile, suite of web services. This approach could offer significant savings, but as with any technology project is not without risk. Transform recommend that development of a shared web services infrastructure should be developed by the government CIO as part of the ‘G Digital’ project with Directgov not in the lead but as the key customer. Whoever leads this work, another option which merits consideration is whether government might share some of the BBC’s web service infrastructure.

The illustration below from the Transform report provides an example of how this might work in organisational terms. All government information and services would be in one direct.gov.uk (or hmg.gov.uk) website and delivered on one shared web services infrastructure. I think that –although there are no current plans to do this – government should consider moving beyond this and merge the teams and operations of Directgov and Business Link to provide one centre of expertise on online service delivery.



No wrong door for citizens

As importantly, we should be ensuring that citizens find the information they want as quickly as possible wherever they are on the web. I do not believe it would be sensible or cost effective for government to try to attract or push people through one 'front door' (home page) to all government information and services. Like most commercial websites and the BBC website a only a small minority of Directgov users come in through the home page (12%) as the majority of visitors arrive from search (52%) or via an external link (43%) straight to one of the big transactions such as car tax, student loans or jobsearch. My strong advice – backed up by Transform's findings – is that it is vital to **put more effort into syndicating government content** so that **citizens can find what they want wherever they are on the web** rather than investing in paid advertising or search to bring people to the Directgov (or a new HMG) homepage.

Recommendation 3

The model of government online publishing should change radically, with a new central team in Cabinet Office in absolute control of the overall user experience across all digital channels, commissioning all government online information from other departments.

- Departmental experts will still produce much content, on a commissioned basis.
- Over time, departments will stop publishing content to their existing sites.
- Any savings from the reduction in duplication should remain in departments, once transition costs and ongoing funding for the new central team have been taken into account.
- Ultimately, government should use just one Internet domain, which could be direct.gov.uk or hmg.gov.uk
- A shared, agile, cost-effective suite of web services should replace existing departmental web publishing infrastructure
- Put more effort into syndicating government content across the third party websites.

4. Funding, capability and leadership

It is good that Directgov is now part of the Cabinet Office but leadership on the digital communications and services agenda in the centre is too fragmented. I recommend that all digital teams in the Cabinet Office - including Digital Delivery, Digital Engagement and Directgov - are brought together under a **new CEO for Digital**.

This person should have the controls and powers to gain **absolute authority over the user experience across all government online services (websites and APIs) and the power to direct all government online spend**.

The CEO for Digital should also have the controls and powers to direct **set and enforce standards** across government departments in areas such as:

- **Technical standards:** including APIs, data models and security;
- **Content standards:** including format, taxonomy, meta-tagging and rules for syndication partners;
- **Design standards:** including usability, accessibility and look and feel
- **Process standards:** including content creation, content review processes, SLA and partner processes;
- **Customer standards:** including feedback, consultation, insight, analytics, segmentation and registration.

They should work within the infrastructure parameters set by CIO – but independent.

I recommend that this position is advertised externally as soon as is possible.

Recommendation 4

A new CEO for Digital in the Cabinet Office should have absolute authority over the user experience across all government online services (websites and APIs) and the power to direct all government online spending.

Thank you for asking me to undertake this review. It has been a fascinating piece of work and I hope my recommendations are helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, reading "Martha Lane Fox". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial 'M' and a stylized 'L' and 'F'.

Martha Lane Fox
UK Digital Champion