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Report by the Comptroller and Auditor General

## Government on the internet: Progress in delivering information and services online

Government has made progress in making a wide range of information available to the public through the internet. But the National Audit Office has found that although internet users rate government websites reasonably well, the quality of those websites has improved only slightly since 2002.

Today's report to Parliament looked at the progress made by government in delivering services and information online since the NAO last reported in 2002. Government organisations spend some £208 million on websites each year. Usage of the main government websites has risen over time and some sites are widely and repeatedly used. For example 78 per cent of Jobcentre Plus online service users visited its sites at least once a week.

The report found that many government websites tend to be text heavy and off-putting to the user. Internet users told the NAO that some government websites are complex to understand and navigate and information useful to them is often hard to find amongst large amounts of policy material not relevant to them.

Government is seeking to improve this situation through radically reducing the number of central government websites. This will be carried out by moving customer-facing online information into two main 'supersites' - Directgov and [businesslink.gov.uk](http://businesslink.gov.uk). This is designed to provide the public and businesses a simple and clear route to accessing information and performing transactions. The report shows that Directgov content and presentation were appreciated by citizens. This is a promising new initiative but it is an ambitious programme and needs to be carefully managed and kept under regular review.

Information on the cost of providing information online and user data also need to be improved. A third of departments and agencies have very little knowledge about how much their online provision of services is costing them. And most departments do not have sufficient information on who is using their sites and how they are being used.

The report highlights the potential for better web-based information: for example to inform choice such as finding schools for children or choosing NHS hospitals for operations.

The report concludes that there is scope for departments and agencies to improve value for money in the provision of online services. Among its recommendations, the NAO says that departments should carry out regular research to ensure they are providing services appropriate to the needs of the public and gain better knowledge about how people prefer to

access government services. They should also collect and analyse usage data and feed it directly into the design of government websites, maximize the visibility of government websites on search engines and ensure that websites meet accessibility and usability criteria for the people that use them. Directgov and businesslink.gov.uk currently follow these principles and as the website content is converged onto these sites citizens and businesses should be better served. The Cabinet Office needs to ensure the risk management of the 'supersite' strategy by keeping it under regular review.

**Head of the National Audit Office Sir John Bourn said today:**

"Progress has been made by departments and agencies in getting more information on the web. When I last reported on this subject in 2002 I reported weaknesses in information across government on the cost and usage of its websites. Today's report highlights that little improvement has been made in these areas. Departments need to focus on understanding the cost effectiveness of their websites and who uses them and why, so that they can better meet the needs of citizens. I therefore welcome the initiatives of Directgov and businesslink.gov.uk which aim to streamline and rationalize the Government's web estate and should help to concentrate minds and focus efforts."

#### **Notes for Editors**

1. This report was produced on behalf of the National Audit Office by a joint team from the London School of Economics Public Policy Group and the Oxford Internet Institute of the University of Oxford.
2. Press notices and reports are available from the date of publication on the NAO website, which is at [www.nao.org.uk](http://www.nao.org.uk). Hard copies can be obtained from The Stationery Office on 0845 702 3474.
3. The Comptroller and Auditor General, Sir John Bourn, is the head of the National Audit Office which employs some 850 staff. He and the NAO are totally independent of Government. He certifies the accounts of all Government departments and a wide range of other public sector bodies; and he has statutory authority to report to Parliament on the economy, efficiency and effectiveness with which departments and other bodies have used their resources.

**Press Notice \*\*/07**

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