

Briefing note – Government Services on line

The Government wants more people to access public services online. The aim is to make services more efficient and cost-effective but also to provide information and access to services in a way that is quick and convenient for individuals at times that suit them.

Services will become ‘digital by default’. The Government Digital Strategy (GDS)¹ states

‘By digital by default, we mean digital services that are so straightforward and convenient that all those who can use them will choose to do so whilst those who can’t are not excluded’

It also states that ‘it is important that we do not leave anyone behind in this move to a digital by default approach’.

This note provides information about central government digital services and access for those not online – it does not cover services provided by local government or other organisations.

Age UK supports initiatives to improve digital inclusion which can benefit many older people. However it is important that those who are unable or unwilling to be on line are not disadvantaged.

Digital by default

Many central government services can already be accessed on line – for example people can claim their state pension, complete a self-assessment tax return, and apply for a driving licence on line. However currently there are also other ways to access these services which use different systems. Digital by default services are those specifically designed to be accessed digitally and the Government expects that most people will choose to do so. If people are not on line there will be other ways of accessing the service through what is described as ‘assisted digital’ support. The same digital system will be used but data could be entered by someone else as described below.

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-digital-strategy>

Government departments use a four stage process to design and build digital services. These are: researching and checking what users need, designing and testing a prototype system, starting to deliver the service publically, and then live running. The first 25 digital services for individuals and businesses are in the process of being developed and are due to be up and running by March 2015.² Services of relevance to older people include: claiming carer's allowance, making a lasting power of attorney and passport renewal.

Identity checks

In order to use some of the new government digital services the user will first need to establish an identify profile. Once they have done this they will be able to use the same profile to access any of the digital services. The identity system will not involve a single central government data base – instead people will choose from one of a number of private companies which will provide 'identity assurance'. The first time someone tries to access a digital service that requires identity assurance, information will be displayed about how to register and about the different companies providing identity assurance services. Once registered, people will use the same log in for different government services.

Assisted digital support for government services

As part of the process for developing a digital service the government department running the service has to ensure there is appropriate assisted digital support available. If someone makes an enquiry about a service they will be encouraged to access this digitally or otherwise will be assessed for, and referred to, assisted digital support. If it is appropriate, people will also be encouraged to gain on line skills. For example they could be referred to an organisation that helps people learn to use the internet, or the organisation that provides the assisted digital support may also provide digital skills training as part of the process.

Assisted digital could be provided in a number of ways - for example:

Visiting a centre Someone could visit a centre where there is access to computers and there are trained staff on hand to provide help and support. People might use this service if: they can use a computer but do not have one at home, they have used a computer but do not feel confident to do so without support, or they have little or no experience getting on line and they either would like to learn, or want someone else to make the application on their behalf.

Home visit In some situations a home visit will be provided, perhaps because someone has mobility problems. The service user will then receive help to enter the data or, if more appropriate, will give the information to the service provide who will enter it on their behalf.

Telephone service It may be possible to access the service by telephone. An individual may not see this as accessing a digital service but the person taking the call will be entering the data on the same system as anyone accessing it digitally themselves. The call may also

² <https://www.gov.uk/transformation>

include encouragement to develop digital skills and signposting to organisations that can provide support.

On line or telephone support Web chat or a telephone helpline could be available to provide support to those with some digital skills but who may have questions during the process.

The Government Service Design Manual states that 'assisted digital can't be provided via paper channels as this conflicts with the move to end-to-end digital services'.³

Who will provide assisted digital support?

Government departments are generally expected to commission other organisations such as private companies or voluntary organisations to provide the service rather than provide it directly. Where appropriate, provision for different services may be co-ordinated – for example people may be able to go to an online centre where they can access a range of government services. At time of writing (June 2014) GDS are helping Departments to define exactly what services are required in preparation for a commissioning process.

Age UK's views on digital by default and the assisted digital strategy

Accessing government services digitally will help many people because it can be quicker, cheaper and more convenient. It also benefits all of us if the costs of accessing public services are reduced.

However nearly three out of ten (29 per cent) of people aged 55-64 and more than three out of five (63 per cent) of those aged 75 and over have never been on line – this represents 4.8 million people aged 65 in the UK⁴.

Age UK supports the aim of increasing digital skills among older people so that they can access services digitally. Many local Age UK organisations run programmes to help people in later life gain digital skills and the internet can offer older people a range of benefits and ways to make life easier and more enjoyable.

But as well as a lack of digital skills there are other barriers to being on line. These include: the cost of equipment and internet access, concerns about security, poor broadband access in some geographical areas, and physical and cognitive impairments which may make learning new skills or using new technology difficult or impossible. For example in terms of security and access to government services older people will need to understand the identity assurance system and why this service is not being directly provided by government, and have confidence that the information they give is secure.

While younger generations who have grown up using technology may see this as an essential part of their lives many older people who are not on line say they do not want to be.

³ <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/assisted-digital>

⁴ *Internet Access Quarterly Update, Q1 2014 ONS.*

In some cases this is because they are not aware of the benefits this could bring. But others have made an informed decision that they do not wish to be on line. Some older people feel strongly that they should have choice about how they live their lives and should not be pressurised to go digital.

Age UK believes that where people can and want to learn digital skills, support should be provided and the other barriers set out above also need to be addressed. However no-one should be locked out of any services simply because they don't use the internet. People who cannot, or choose not to, access services digitally should not be disadvantaged or made to feel like second class citizens. The right balance must be taken between encouraging and supporting digital inclusion where relevant and accepting that some people cannot, or simply do not want to access services on line.

Assisted digital support

As GDS recognises, some people will never use digital services themselves or will take some time to gain skills. It will also be the case that some people may lose capacity over time.

Age UK therefore welcomes the statement in the Government Digital Strategy that people who cannot use digital services will not be excluded and the comment from Minister Francis Maude that 'services will be digital by default – but not compulsion'⁵.

The service design manual on assisted digital support for government departments covers areas including what 'good assisted digital looks like' and how it can be provided. It also emphasises that support must be adequately funded and that government 'can't rely on others to give assisted digital support to their service uses'.

Age UK supports the aim of providing good quality, adequately funded access to services for those not on line. We are also pleased to be part of an Assisted Digital Stakeholder Reference group which is contributing to the design of the service.

Access to services needs to be centered around individual need and choice and people should not be excluded because they cannot, or choose not to go on line. Furthermore people who are perfectly capable of accessing services independently should not be disempowered or made to feel they will have to depend on others to do so in the future. To this end the term 'assisted digital' should be replaced by language that does not imply anyone not on line is in need of help. And while on line, telephone or face by face support will suit the needs of most users, paper channels should not be ruled out where this is most appropriate and is the best way to allow people to independently access a service.

July 2014

⁵ Letter from Francis Maude Daily Telegraph, 13 June 2014