

Gauging the time lags in Whitehall's responses to modern digital processes suggests an enduring problem with organizational culture in the civil service

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How fast should British government incorporate the latest developments in digital communication into its dealings with citizens and customers? [Patrick Dunleavy](#) provides some detailed evidence to back up the claim that the online facilities of UK government are now lagging a decade behind those of the private sector.



In a [blog](#) last week, [Jane Tinkler](#) highlighted some interesting points raised by the latest Public Administration Select Committee (PASC) [report](#) about the slowness of government IT services to respond to the growth of social media and the extent to which government does not give helpful feedback to their customers. Some [commentators](#) on this blog (perhaps from within the government IT services) argued in response that social media was actually brand new, and that in the circumstances, a number of social media tools were being used across government. In their view, [LSE Public Policy Group](#) was out of touch with a range of new developments in Whitehall's communications efforts. In response I wanted to try and amplify Jane's blog a little, and to point to some important specific cases where progress in government communications with customers still seems to be very slow.

Of course, I should say upfront that there are many odd little nooks and corners of government where dedicated IT professionals and communications folk are trying to push the limits a little. But in our experience they are often doing it all on their own, against the dead weights of an IT establishment preoccupied with legacy mainframe systems, and against senior officials' (and it must be said, ministerial) inertia. What PASC was commenting on though, and Jane discussed in her blog, is what the experience of government online is like for millions of customers, right now. Let me just review three key aspects:

1. Giving users feedback on what other users find useful. Now you can't say this is new stuff – Amazon has been doing it very well for 15 years or more. You can't say it's rocket-science either – even our blog has three different ways of finding out what people are finding interesting and reading, right now. But look on any government department website. Can you find ANY indications being given to users about what is genuinely popular that week or that day? What are the hot topics? How many users are looking at what pages? Can you find any user comments on any of the web pages – e.g. customer testimonials saying that a given page is useful? Can you find any indications of “If you liked that, try this?” advice.

We think the answers to all these questions is No. Instead you find something much worse than nothing at all, namely home pages for Whitehall departments that say “Popular pages” – but are in fact just bogus, alphabetical lists of sub-pages that civil servants think that citizens *should* read.

2. Using Twitter. With over 100 million people using Twitter now, and the UK as a whole a real Twitter hotspot, central government departments could be building great networks to help disseminate really useful information to people who need it. But look at any homepage for a Whitehall department and try and find the link to Twitter. It's nice and prominent on the [DEFRA](#) (Environment, Food and Agriculture) homepage, but there's no Twitter logo and they have an underwhelming 15K users. Business, Innovation and Skills ([BIS](#)) has a bigger Twitter following (28K) – but buries the Twitter link unexplained at the bottom of pages and has an offputtingly corporate tweetstream with little or no sense of any community.

Meanwhile there are some giant departments like the [DWP](#) (Department of Work and Pensions) that apparently do not have a Twitter stream at all – only its Press Office has one, which has built up a diminutive 1.5K followers. Down at the grassroots there are lots of DWP officials who know that this makes no sense – and so it is good to see that around 100 local Job Centre Plus offices (out of nearly 800) have a Twitter facility now, with small numbers of local followers. A local office stream (such as that for [Cannock JCP](#)) could be a great way of getting essential job details out to local jobseekers who need them.

But (looking in from outside) it seems that these initiatives are maybe just one person doing their best in each office – re-keying salient job details manually because there is no organized feed-in from JCP's massive data banks. And although DWP and JCP both have very large press and communications operations, there's clearly no one centrally whose job it is to supply potentially useful materials for inclusion in the local Twitter feeds. (There is one [central JCP Twitter address](#) with just 502 followers, apparently designed only to direct users to a webpage; there was a post on it today and a previous one ten days ago. There is also a Twitter symbol on the bottom of [JCP pages on Direct.gov](#), that again just directs you to a webpage.)

3. Optimizing the design of systems used by millions of customers. Suppose you are a company dealing with more than 7 million customers filling in a single webform that generates £billions a year in income. How much care and attention would you give to it? How many online experiments would you run to get the online form exactly right for as many sub-groups of customers as possible? And how much money would you spend on getting the most accurate and useable form that you possibly could?

Would you keep the design of your webform unchanged for years at a time in imitation of a paper form that most of your customers will never now see? Would you print it in green micro-font, with the print spaced across acres of empty white space and tiny 'radio' buttons for clicking on? Would you intersperse the top 10 questions that your customers really needed to answer with lots and lots of others that are irrelevant for them? And would you use obscure language and terminology that requires almost every question to be explained with a help box? When customers were finished, would you offer them a printout of their responses to the form that included all the questions they had not answered, as well as those they had, in a format designed to replicate a paper form that they have not filled in, and which manages to exclude the key detail of how much they needed pay you? Above all, since billions of pounds critical for your revenue stream depend on this one form, would you ensure that, by now, there was *not* an App for that?

You will be thinking by now that, of course, no rational company would behave in such bizarre ways. But this is exactly what HMRC (Revenue and Customs) does with its income tax self-assessment form. The online form still bears many hallmarks of the original hated paper form, severely criticized by the 2004 National Audit Office [Difficult Forms](#) report. In seven years of use, the improvements made here have been invisible to most customers.

The importance of these examples is that digital change in British government is not something that stands still. When you are so far behind the pace of what is happening in private business or in civil society, this ground is not something that can be easily made up. The ways in which departments and agencies do and do not respond to their customers provide an amazingly accurate and revealing picture of the organizational culture of Whitehall. If you are years behind the times in your online estate, it is almost invariably because you are years behind the times in your fundamental attitudes and values, and worryingly adrift from the continuing pace of rapid digital change, as [previous research studies](#) have convincingly demonstrated.

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