

# Getting Whitehall to incorporate new IT developments in public services remains an uphill struggle. The government now lags ten years behind the private sector in its use of social media and lack of feedback to users

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*In a scathing indictment of 'Rip off' IT contracts in government the Public Administration Select Committee called for sweeping changes in government-contractor relations. **Jane Tinkler** finds that the Committee's follow-up report comments insightfully on the coalition government's response document, but also stresses new themes. In particular, PASC is now highlighting the across-the-board absence of social media in central government websites and transactional services. Is it a case of 'plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose?'*



Any large organization can get set in its ways, focusing on what it knows how to do and trying to ignore new developments that seem to threaten to disrupt its way of doing business. Even a company that prides itself on being at the forefront of innovation can fall victim to this syndrome – witness the problems that Google has recently had in trying to get its engineers and marketing experts to take the development of social media seriously compared with the company's traditional (i.e. last decade) focus on search and search-related advertising. Using the freedom that only major corporates have Google took drastic action – making **25 per cent** of *all* its staff's bonuses (whatever they worked on) dependent upon the company meeting its social media objectives.

The Public Administration Select Committee yesterday powerfully **addressed** an almost exact counterpart of Google's problem – namely the striking absence from all of Whitehall's websites of any signs of social media being deployed, or the least effort being made to feed back to users information on what other users were finding helpful. Instead the legacy of a decade of now ossified e-government efforts are hundreds of old-style government websites still dominated by wall-to-wall text, devoid of any rich media, written in obscure language apparently for people with a near-PhD knowledge of the byways of public administration. Drawing in part on comments commissioned from myself, **Helen Margetts** of the Oxford Internet Institute and **Patrick Dunleavy** (included at Appendix 2 of their **report**), the Committee note perceptively:

*"There are obvious areas in which the Government could go further and move faster to implement 'digital by default'. For example, officials should be rewarded for using social media and digital channels to disseminate information and provide services (especially where this reduces reliance on other, more expensive channels). User feedback submitted via the Directgov site provides the Government with a great deal of free data on the strengths and weaknesses of its service provision. The Government must make good use of it, alongside other information from social media produced outside Directgov itself, to understand better how its services are used and perceived and, in turn, to design better services" (paragraph 19).*

And later the report is forthright on improving Whitehall's ability to experiment and learn from users:

*"We recommend that Departments exploit the internet and other channels to enable users to provide direct online feedback both in the design of services and in their ongoing operation and improvement".*

The consequences of lagging government IT are of course intensely offputting for users who have grown used to better private sector and civil society standards, and have to rack their brains to remember how things operated years ago in order to use government sites. The implications of government's slow adaptation are not just dysfunctional or hard-to-use online services, but also the maintenance of great swathes of unnecessary costs. For instance, virtually all UK government websites are still provided in expensive-to-alter conventional web pages maintained on content management systems that only Web specialists can fully configure.

Some big departments are still locked into cumbersome integrated IT contracts that cost them an arm and a leg, and impose long delays, to change any webpage. Yet ultra-cheap blogging software is very fully developed and is highly relevant and suitable for most of the government's information content output – software that can be maintained by non-specialist staffs and updated or changed easily at the click of a button. Perhaps only a small fraction of the most-viewed information pages would then need to be embodied in conventional websites for more permanent use.

The problems that the Public Administration Select Committee so incisively draw attention to are fundamentally those of huge time-lags and gaps in the [organizational learning](#) of civil service departments. In a Whitehall where most departments are 'immortal' (and some departments like HMRC can trace an unbroken lineage back to mediaeval times), are we condemned to always confronting government IT provision that lags a decade behind the times? Even if we could sort out IT contracting as PASC wants onto a more contractually diversified and competitive basis, and build IT systems in more modular ways to avoid IT disasters, would Whitehall's pervasive amateurism on modern IT business processes still produce more of the same chronically lagging digital systems?

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