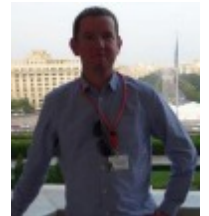


## ‘Digital by Default’ will be a complex and costly transition but the initial infrastructure is now in place

*The recent launch of GOV.UK, the new single domain for government which replaced Directgov and Business Link, represents an important step in furthering the progress of the ‘Digital by Default’ agenda. [Colin Smith](#) suggests that while the transition may still be difficult, the necessary infrastructure is now in place.*



The launch of GOV.UK was accompanied by extensive hoopla, some of it markedly self-congratulatory in tone, that hailed the site’s revolutionary approach to service delivery in putting the needs of users rather than the needs of government at the core of its functionality. Martha Lane Fox, the UK Digital Champion, [described the arrival](#) of the new site as being “as profound a moment for us as citizens as the laying the first railway track or the designing the first school curriculum – it’s the beginning of the blueprint, values and style for the next wave of services that we will use into the next century”.

Putting hyperbole to one side, there is no doubt that GOV.UK represents a step forward in the organisation of the government’s digital resources. The design team (the Government Digital Service) built and utilised an application to map and prioritise typical and unusual user needs from the webpages, which they titled – wonderfully – the ‘Needotron’. The outcome of this work is a website that is informed by user-centred design principles in a way that its predecessors weren’t, and, if its been done well, that will exceed previous levels of usage and satisfaction.

Alongside the benefits from increased usage are the potential for cost savings and further economies as more government departments adopt the GOV.UK standards for online service delivery. Frances Maude [claims](#) that the new pages will cost taxpayers £70 million a year less than the services that it replaces. It is hoped that the open source technologies used will make web publishing simpler for government, and therefore allow them to deliver more – and better – services online.

That GOV.UK firstly attracts and then retains users is important, not least because the site has been seen as the first manifestation of the government’s new ‘digital by default’ agenda. The ‘Government ICT Strategy’ (and the accompanying ‘Strategic Implementation Plan’) published by the Cabinet Office in 2011 contains much that is new in the realms of government ICT. The strategy itself is made up of four components; ‘reducing waste and project failure, and stimulating economic growth’, ‘creating a common ICT infrastructure’, ‘using ICT to enable and deliver change’, and ‘strengthening governance’. Within these can be found some fresh and important ideas, but it is the concept of ‘digital by default’ that has attracted most attention. The message is clear – in the future, the standard delivery channels for government services will be digital. Meanwhile, those who cannot easily access digital channels will be provided with assistance through a network of “assisted digital” provision.

‘Digital by Default’ will be a complex and costly transition for government, and its ultimate success might well be determined by whether GOV.UK becomes a ‘quick win’ that is well received, and is used by increasing numbers of citizens. Early reports suggest that GOV.UK initially maintained the usage levels achieved by its predecessors, but that the numbers of visits and ‘unique visitors’ dipped soon after launch. This has been explained with reference to longitudinal data for Directgov and Business Link, which were both affected by seasonal trends that saw [traffic fall off in the autumn](#).

What are we to conclude of the experience so far? While the developers of GOV.UK are celebrating a new approach to delivering government services online, it is clear that citizens remain largely immune to hype. They will use the service when there are clear benefits to them from so doing. On that point, it seems reasonable to emphasise one factor that will affect outcomes above all others. ‘Good news’ stories are important, and serve to whet the appetite, but it is online content, and the range, quality and

utility of that content, that will drive the success of GOV.UK above all. The infrastructure is now in place. So, Government departments – over to you!

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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