

IMPROVING SMALL BUSINESSES' EXPERIENCE OF GOVERNMENT SERVICES

Introduction

1 The Small Business Service (SBS) defines small businesses' experience of government services as any interaction they may experience with government, including tax and regulatory transactions and guidance, business support, selling to government, and consultations. The government's main objective in improving small businesses' experience of government services is to make services more coherent, accessible and of better quality. It proposes to do this through:

- SBS working with other government departments to simplify and develop a more coherent approach to service design and delivery.
- Assessing and increasing small business satisfaction with government services, particularly business support services.
- Putting the customer first in the delivery of government services by ensuring that services are tailored more closely to small businesses' needs.

2 This evidence section complements Chapter 7 of the *Government Action Plan for Small Business* by setting out in more depth the rationale for the new and existing government actions and by providing a fuller account of the plans to track and monitor their progress. The section:

- Explains why government is putting in place a range of activities designed to (a) establish what current customer experiences are, and (b) consistently improve the quality of government interactions with customers.
- Outlines how the government will monitor and evaluate success in achieving its objectives and highlight the gaps in the evidence base that will need to be addressed if policy and delivery are to be further improved.

Rationale: why is action required?

3 Public services to small businesses are accessed and delivered through all tiers of government, nationally, regionally and locally, through direct departmental delivery, through sub-contracted delivery partners, face-to-face, by paper, telephone and online. While there are exceptions, many small business customers see services as fragmented, confusing and difficult to access and not particularly customer focused.

4 The government spends around £2.5 billion (excluding tax and Common Agricultural Policy payments) a year on services to small businesses (*DTI, 2002b*). The rationale for action is based on the simple proposition that a more customer-focused, joined-up approach to delivering government services to small businesses will significantly improve service delivery in the following ways:

- Improved targeting and take up of these services.
- Reduced overheads associated with multiple contracting and reporting arrangements.
- Reduction and, where possible, elimination of overlaps in service provision.
- Improved business perceptions of government and the burdens it places on them.

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5 Improvements in service delivery will increase the cost effectiveness of government actions designed to offset those market failures that act as barriers to business success and, through this, will increase the impact of these actions on the performance of the small business sector.

Extent of the Problem: what does the evidence say?

Government delivers many services to small business...

6 The *Cross Cutting Review of Government Services for Small Business* divided government services into those that are available to all small businesses, regardless of their ambitions, sector, size, and location and those that are targeted at particular groups. Universal services can reach up to 100 per cent of small businesses and are estimated to be responsible for expenditure of £740m. Targeted services have an estimated reach of 10 per cent of small businesses, but account for £1800m of government spending across departments.

...in a variety of ways

7 Publicly funded services continue to be delivered through a variety of channels including face-to-face, over the telephone, by post, by e-mail and over the internet. Efforts to improve customer experience of government services will need to focus on the specific characteristics associated with each type of delivery channel. At present there is a lack of clear evidence about how customers view different channels. There are also gaps in the evidence about satisfaction with particular types of services.

Customers are still confused...

8 The Cross Cutting Review, subsequent work on the business.gov programme and regular SBS surveys have identified a number of concerns and expectations arising from small businesses' experience of government services. There is still a perception that government does not understand business and that some services remain too complex and bureaucratic to access. A range of informal SBS consultations with small businesses and government departments undertaken during preparation of the Action Plan produced the following messages about small businesses experience of government services:

- 'I don't know what the regulations require of me, or who to ask'.
- 'When I ask them, they don't know'.
- 'It's all too complicated and it takes too long'.
- 'It turns out I'm not eligible for help (but my competitor down the road is)'.
- 'When I get it...its not what I want anyway'.

9 These messages suggest that some government services are fragmented, confusing, and difficult to access. This can act as a barrier to effective take up and compliance and lead to inefficiencies in delivery which can increase costs.

...and government needs to understand why

10 In order to raise the quality of government services, government needs to understand better what is meant by the term 'customer experience'. Identifying which actions can be taken to improve that experience will flow from this better understanding. Research on business support services (*CURDS, 2002*) suggested that variations in

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customer experiences are shaped by both customers' expectations and by their experience in accessing and using services in the past.

Government is making greater efforts to improve standards...

11 Efforts are underway across government to improve customer experience of service delivery (*HM Customs and Excise 2003; Inland Revenue 2003*). For example, the Inland Revenue uses the Charter Mark scheme – part of the Modernising Government programme - as one way to improve customer satisfaction, with various offices around the country being awarded the Charter Mark, some for successive years. Charter Mark is the government's award scheme for excellent service to the customer - for public services that go that extra mile. They are given for continuous improvement, and more stringent standards are set each time an organisation applies to renew its award. By achieving successive awards, continuous improvement is demonstrated.

12 HM Customs and Excise uses national standards as a means of measuring and improving experience of their services. The *Business Needs Survey (HM Customs and Excise, 1999)* found that 88 per cent of businesses were satisfied with the services provided by HM Customs and Excise. In addition, 20 per cent felt that the service had improved compared to the previous three years. Underlying these figures are specific measures, with targets, for aspects of service delivery that aim to reflect the needs of customers and are reviewed every year. They include speed and efficiency of response to customers in areas such as telephone calls, messages left on answer phones and all types of correspondence.

...and departments are talking to each other more than before

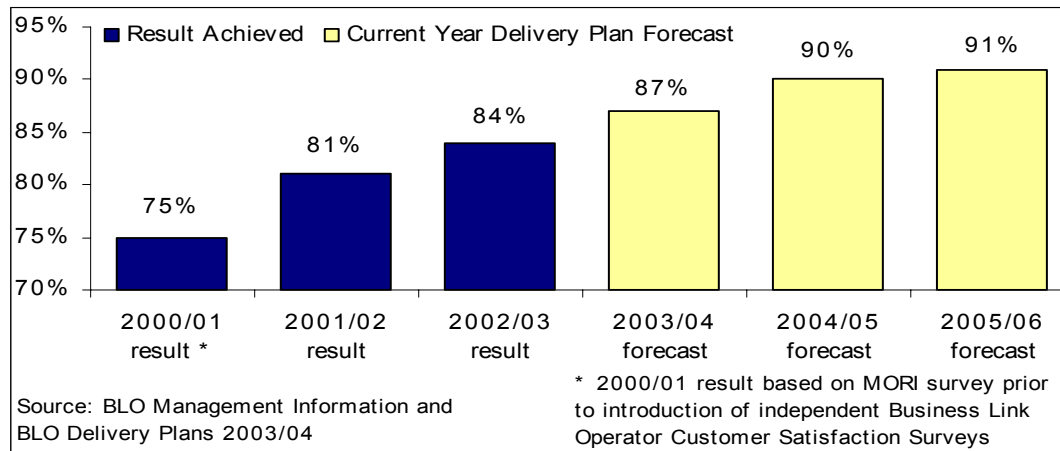
13 Each department and agency has teams responsible for monitoring, evaluating and measuring both performance and satisfaction. At present the approaches used are inconsistent in several respects and are not based on a common view of customer experience from the viewpoint of the small business. There is now more joint working across departments designed to increase understanding of these different approaches and to improve coherence, but more needs to be done.

Improvements in delivery are being reflected in increased customer satisfaction...

14 *Bennett and Robson (2003)* found that satisfaction with Business Link Operator services amongst manufacturing and business service sector businesses has increased to 81.5 per cent in 2002 from 69.3 per cent in 1999. This is consistent with SBS performance monitoring data, which currently show a satisfaction level of 85.3 per cent overall (Q2, 2003/04) (see Chart 1 below). Both these pieces of evidence suggest that SBS clients are largely positive about their overall experience.

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Chart 1: Business Link Operator Customer Satisfaction



15 Bennett and Robson found that satisfaction with central government services for small business is generally comparable to other public sector services (74 per cent).

...with penetration of some government services increasing too...

16 As well as increases in customer satisfaction with Business Link Operators, the proportion of businesses using their services has also increased. SBS statistics show that penetration of Business Link Operator services¹ is currently 18.5 per cent (see Chart 3.2).

17 Other research has reported higher figures. For example, *Bennett and Robson* (2003) found that for the businesses they surveyed Business Link Operators were the most widely used public sector service with 32.6 per cent of businesses using them. The main reasons for the difference between these figures relate to the way in which penetration or use is measured and the different sampling methods (for example *Bennett and Robson* related only to businesses in the manufacturing and business service sectors).

But government needs to do more to understand what customers need...

18 *Bennett and Robson* suggested that there are few differences between type of business in terms of impact or satisfaction level, indicating that the nature of the particular problem and the attitudes and skills of advisers are the main determinants of client outcomes. Evidence from work on customer experience in Canada (*Institute for Citizen Centred Service, 2003*) also suggests that staff attitude and experience are important aspects of satisfaction. It suggests five key drivers of customer satisfaction:

- Fair treatment.
- Knowledgeable, competent staff.
- Positive and helpful staff attitude.
- Timeliness of service delivery.
- A successful outcome.

Government needs to aim high...

¹ Expressed as a percentage of the total Inter-Departmental Business Register for all businesses and pre-starts that have used Business Link Operators.

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19 Small businesses expect government services to be provided in an impartial, accountable and honest manner. These attributes need to be considered in each of the three key areas that comprise overall customer experience:

- How was the experience of the channel used to access the service? For example, was the telephone answered quickly, professionally and courteously?
- How was the interaction with the service provider? For example, was the person contacted helpful, knowledgeable and reliable?
- Was the expected outcome achieved? For example, was the customer left delighted, satisfied or disappointed with the end result, and was their enquiry followed through to a conclusion?

...and be passionate about understanding customers' needs

20 Small businesses generally use the delivery channel that is most appropriate to their particular need and circumstances. Providing a clear view about the level of customer satisfaction can be difficult when information about the experience, interaction and outcome are encompassed in one piece of evidence. For example, SBS research (*SBS, 2001*) found that 84 per cent of those that used government website services thought them helpful. This tells us that customers were very satisfied but does not tell us why or allow us to focus on where the overall experience could be further improved.

21 The international benchmarking survey (*DTI, 2002c*) provides another example of this. It found that across all countries the proportion of businesses interacting online with government appears to have fallen by some considerable margin compared with the last survey. 50 per cent of UK respondents said they went online to find out about local or central government services (Sweden 73 per cent, Japan 21 per cent), down from 62 per cent in 2001. This evidence also does not tell us why this happened. These examples point to a need to undertake research that asks enough in-depth questions about customer experience to be of value in improving the service delivery process.

Government needs to build on success...

22 Given high levels of satisfaction with some government services, it is important to be clear about exactly which areas of service provision it is hoped can be improved upon. To achieve this, SBS is commissioning a major research project to develop further the work undertaken in the *Cross Cutting Review of Government Services for Small Business*. This project will map government spend on services to small business and will inform government about where improvements to service delivery might be achieved.

Measuring success: what are the plans to monitor and evaluate progress in improving small businesses' experience of government services?

23 Table 1 includes the main indicators which the Small Business Service is committed to monitoring and reporting on over time in assessing the extent to which government has been successful in improving small businesses' experience of government services. It shows the current baseline position for each measure of success, and indicates when further information will be available to assess progress.

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Table 1: Action plan indicators for measuring small business experience of government improvements

Key measures	Source	Current position	Next update
➤ Increase the number of small businesses saying they are satisfied with government services	Under consideration, including SBS Small Business Survey	Measure(s) under consideration/development.	Unknown at this time. SBS data for 2003 available Spring 2004.
➤ Increase Business Link Operator market penetration and customer satisfaction	Business Link Operator management information submissions	Penetration: 18.5% (Apr-Sept 03) Satisfaction: 85% (Apr-Sept 03)	January 2004 (2003/04, Q3 data) June 2004 (2003/04, annual data)
➤ Increase small businesses' perceptions that their concerns are being taken into account by government	SBS Small Business Survey	A new measure	Spring 2004 (2003 data)

24 In addition to these key measures, the SBS will work with partners to collect data on a number of supporting measures. These are likely to include:

- Increase Business Link brand awareness.
- Increase usage and satisfaction with business.gov.

Gaps in the Evidence – there is still much to do...

25 In addition to monitoring success against these indicators, specific research and evaluation studies will be carried out to fill gaps in knowledge about what policy actions work and why and to gather views from small businesses themselves on what more needs to be done.

26 Work is already underway on strengthening the evidence base. SBS is supporting the development of the UK Business Advisor Barometer. This survey tool, along with the UK Business Barometer, will be used to research customer experience during 2004. In addition, SBS is also undertaking research to map and analyse how government expenditure on services for small businesses translates into customer experiences, in order to understand better, and to improve, service delivery.

27 These pieces of work will be the starting point for strengthening the evidence base on this issue, but further work is required. This evidence review points to a need to:

- Devote time and resource to establishing where evidence exists (such as in research already undertaken by government departments, agencies, academics and consultants).
- Undertake new research, probably jointly commissioned by several government departments, to obtain a fuller understanding of how to define experience of government and what the main areas of improvement should be.
- Focus efforts to improve customer experience of government services on the specific characteristics associated with each type of delivery channel. At present there is a lack of clear evidence about how customers view different channels.

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- Undertake research that asks sufficiently in-depth questions about customer experience to be of value in improving the service delivery process.

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