

ANNEX A TO DAO(GEN) 16/04

The Public Accounts Committee's 26th Report, 2003-04

Difficult Forms: how government departments interact with citizens

The PAC made the following recommendations that are of relevance to all departments that produce forms for the use of the public. In its response, the Government accepted the PAC's recommendations subject, in relation to the PAC's second conclusion, to consistency with data protection requirements and appropriate legal gateways for the sharing of information.

PAC recommendation (i) “Departments should minimize the burden, which their forms impose on citizens. When designing forms departments should test the requirement for each piece of information and be able to justify why it is needed. Citizens should not normally have to supply information about themselves to a department that they have previously supplied. Modern IT systems, the provision of forms online and risk-based methods of administration should make this easier to achieve including, wherever possible, the pre-population of documents.”

PAC recommendation (ii) “Departments should seek to improve electronic communication between themselves so that information submitted to one organisation can, wherever appropriate, be shared with others.”

PAC recommendation (iii) “Departments should keep forms as short as possible, in terms of both the numbers of questions asked and the number of pages. The successful introduction of the shortened Attendance Allowance form shows that simpler forms can be introduced without unduly risking public money or jeopardising the security of systems.”

PAC recommendation (iv) “Departments should instigate regular reviews of forms and re-design them quickly where problems become evident.”

PAC recommendation (v) “Guidance notes should be designed to help people complete forms quickly and with minimum effort.”

PAC recommendation (vi) “Rather than relying on guidance notes alone, departments should consider other means to help citizens complete forms. The introduction of telephone assistance for pensioners when claiming Pension Credit shows how completion can be made easier for the citizen and can also result in cost savings for departments through reduced numbers of errors and appeals.”

PAC recommendation (vii) “When designing forms, departments should meet the needs of customers with specific needs. Many users of forms have difficulties, for example, in terms of basic literacy and numeracy,

language barriers or other practical problems or incapacities. Departments need to consult these customers directly on the design of forms.”

PAC recommendation (viii) “Departments should demonstrate greater commitment to meeting the Government’s 2005 deadline for the online provision of all forms, by setting out clear strategies, with milestones and targets, to make sure they achieve this. Not all the case study departments were confident of meeting the Government-wide target for all their forms to be available online by the end of 2005, or the related aim to achieve, for key services, high levels of electronic use by the same date.”

PAC recommendation (ix) “... departments should introduce strategies to promote the benefits of online forms to their customers.”

PAC recommendation (x) “Departments should determine the administrative costs of processing forms.”

PAC recommendation (xii) “Departments should assess their forms against the practical guide produced jointly by the National Audit Office and the London School of Economics: ‘Reviewing and Improving Government Forms’. This comprehensive checklist, which draws upon a wide-ranging review of existing forms, should enable designers to avoid many of the errors of the past.”