



**Improving government forms:
on paper,
online
and on the phone**

Consultation on behalf of the National Audit Office

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This guide was developed for the National Audit Office under contract by a team from the LSE Public Policy Group led by Professor Patrick Dunleavy, and the Oxford Internet Institute, led by Professor Helen Margetts. The combined team included Tobias Escher, Sofia Goldchluk, Stephane Reissfelder, Jane Tinkler and Ed Towers.

About LSE Public Policy Group (PPG)

PPG undertakes pure and applied research, policy evaluation and consultancy for government bodies, international organizations and major corporations active in the fields of policy evaluation, public management, budgeting and audit, and e-government, survey or focus group research, public opinion, and the design of election systems.

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Introduction: Designing better government forms

1. This guide has been written for people working in central government sector organizations – that is departments, executive agencies and non-departmental public bodies. We hope that it may also be useful to other parts of the public sector, especially local authorities and NHS bodies. Our key aim is to provide detailed checklists for officials who have direct responsibility for reviewing how their organization seeks information from customers or citizens by means of paper forms, online applications or via call centres. By 'customers' we mean a whole range of ordinary people, (such as 'taxpayers', 'service users', 'people seeking licenses', 'benefit claimants' and so on) who deal with government.
2. By working through the detailed checklists for each of these three types of forms, you will get practical advice on assessing how easy your current forms are for customers to complete. The checklist items include many different features that are rated as 'difficult', 'intermediate' or 'easy' for customers. On some forms (including phone scripts and online forms) these features cannot be avoided, and we are not saying that 'difficult' features should be cut if they are necessary. However, it is very important to keep the number of difficult features as low as is absolutely necessary, and to consider if any can be converted into easier to use features.
3. It is also very important to have a clear idea of how easy or difficult to use each form is. So even where all difficult features have been checked out and found to be absolutely essential and not capable of being made any easier, it is still worth counting them and getting a good overall idea of the degree of difficulty that your form or contact process will involve for customers.
4. This guide was developed from an earlier checklist covering only paper forms, issued by the NAO in 2004 following the *Difficult Forms* report,¹ and which has been widely used in central government. We are very grateful to the many civil servants and public officials who have given us feedback on that original checklist. This version works in essentially the same way as the older version, but draws on very recent research and good practice, including the May 2009 NAO report on *Department for Work and Pensions: Communicating with*

¹ National Audit Office, *Difficult Forms: How government agencies interact with citizens*. (HC 1145, Session 2002-2003. London: The Stationary Office, 31 October 2003.) This study was the first full-scale analysis of government forms since the early 1990s. It examined how departments and agencies review their forms and which aspects of government forms customers find problematic or straightforward. The study also focused in detail on six major government forms, filled in by more than 20 million people a year.

*Citizens*² and on consultation with government departments and customer groups in summer 2009. The new versions draw on extensive work with focus groups, experiments with users completing online forms, and close observations in call centres during 2008-9, as well as earlier focus groups conducted in 2004.

5. Three separate checklists are included here:

- For paper-based forms. (In addition, we include some supplementary questions for downloadable PDF forms, which have their own complications.)
- For online forms. And
- For phone-based forms.

Some features are included across all the three checklists, but they are usually somewhat rephrased to be more easily applied in each context. Many features are specific to one checklist. All the features included have been identified in research work as those most commonly causing problems for customers.

Checklists of difficult features

1.1 Forms and customer contacts are the ‘face of government’ as far as citizens are concerned. Improving how they are designed can yield big dividends for government organizations. Very often features in your forms can be simplified or implemented in different ways. A form or a customer contact that is well-designed and is easier for customers to follow will create an improved image and greater trust in your organization, produce better and more complete information first time saving time for staff, and help cut down on customer errors and misunderstandings. When forms are completed over the phone with call centres or online, a whole new range of features need to be considered.

1.2 The checklists should:

- allow you to make a systematic and comprehensive evaluation of the overall level of difficulty of each of your forms;
- prompt discussion and creative thinking in the team responsible about which pieces of information really are essential for the form or customer contact; and
- encourage you to seek information from customers in ways that are easiest for them and likely to be most effective also for your organization.

² National Audit Office *Department for Work and Pensions: Communicating with Customers*. (HC 421, Session 2008-2009. London: The Stationary Office, 7 May 2009.) This recent study found that within the Department, benefit forms had improved. They were generally shorter, with less open-ended questions and much clearer layouts and directions through the forms. However, the Department’s forms were still too long, with a lack of ‘quick start’ guidance. And new issues have arisen with phone-based and online forms, now tackled here.

1.3 Some of the features included in the questions can be more easily changed than others. It is fairly straightforward to alter the language used in questions, to ask questions in accessible ways and improve the kind of phone-based or web help that is available to customers. Other features that may cause difficulty for customers may actually be unavoidable within the context of a department or agency's work, such as the inclusion of a photograph in a passport application. But even here it is as well to recognise from the outset how many features of a form may create problems, even if some of these features cannot be changed. Not all of the features in the list are relevant to all departments and agencies.

How to use the checklists

1.4 When complete, the checklists will be available online. However for this consultation, we have developed the checklists in an Excel format to ease calculation of the difficulty and importance scores. First pick the checklist (paper, online or phone) that applies to your form. Next:

- Work through all the questions in the checklist and determine for each question whether to award it a 1 for difficult, 0.5 for intermediate (where this is applicable), or 0 for easy. We have provided some guidance to help you award this 'Score for difficulty'. If a feature clearly does not apply at all to your form, delete the row from the spreadsheet. (But be very sparing in deciding things are non-applicable.)
- Assign a value in the 'Weighting for importance' column to features according to whether they are more or less important to your form's customers. You may be able to draw on your own research and feedback processes on your customers' requirements. We have taken a very simple and restricted number system for weighting here, with features that will be very important to your customers as 3, and less important features as 1. (For example, some forms require documentation to be posted to a government organisation, these might be important personal documents which your own research has told you is a source of stress to your customers. You would award this question a 3. Some forms do not require customers to prove their identity by asking security questions, this stage can be skipped. You would therefore award this question a 1.)
- The 'Total (difficulty x importance)' column should automatically be calculated in this spreadsheet to give you a Total score for this question.
- At the end of each section, an average score for the section should automatically be calculated. This enables you to compare more easily the scores across the sections.
- At the end of each checklist, the total average score and the total score should be automatically calculated. The number of checklist questions are as follows:

- Paper forms = 76
- Paper forms with PDFs = 87
- Online forms = 104
- Phone-based forms = 80

Obviously your maximum possible total will depend on how many features we have included that are relevant for your form, plus the extra weights you assign to some features.

- The form will automatically calculate the total score and percentage score for your form, which will be a percentage of the actual ticked scores against the maximum possible score (including weights). The maximum possible score for each form is:
 - Paper forms = 228
 - Paper forms with PDFs = 261
 - Online forms = 312
 - Phone-based forms = 240
- If you have a difficulty score number that is over 75 per cent then your form is likely to be difficult for your customers to fill in. If the difficulty score is lower, say 25, then it is reasonable to expect your customers to find the form relatively straightforward.

1.5 As you go through if a feature has high difficulty it will be useful for the team to consider why and if this could be avoided by a redesign, or perhaps by changing several connected features altogether. If you end up with a high difficulty score, then the team should reappraise where the difficulty is arising and what could be done to improve matters. If some essential features cannot be changed, then look at improving all the things that can be made better to try and low the difficulty score in that way. You could also compare across the sections to see if one section is especially difficult and skewing the result for the whole form.