Electronic Government Services

Key priorities for the Citizens Advice service
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1. Executive summary

1.1 The purpose of this document is twofold:

- to set out general matters that government as a whole needs to address in the provision of electronic services if they are to be useful to Citizens Advice Bureaux clients and advisers; and
- to list a number of specific electronic services the Citizens Advice service would like government departments to introduce.

1.2 The government has set a key target that all public services should be available electronically by 2005, and achieving high levels of use. It is therefore vitally important that electronic services are tailored to people’s needs.

1.3 Government has awarded the Citizens Advice service £20 million to provide the basis for access to electronically delivered advice services in bureaux in England and Wales. The Citizens Connect programme aims to ensure that CAB clients are not excluded from the potential benefits of electronic government services, and to improve the quality of advice services available to clients.

1.4 Our programme will enable bureaux to provide improved services, installing a virtual private network infrastructure, a new secure case recording system, and will equip bureaux with fast and secure access to electronic government services.

1.5 The Citizens Advice service is already acting as a valuable intermediary between government and citizens. Citizens Connect will enable bureaux to act as intermediaries between clients and government by using electronic services, provided that our independence is recognised and safeguarded, and the services made available are of high quality.

1.6 If CAB clients, advisers and government are to realise the benefits envisaged from the Citizens Connect programme, then more transactional services need to be provided. Bureaux deal with clients with around 6 million problems each year – a large proportion of which involve contacting departments with queries about whether a claim has been submitted, what information is held in relation to the client, and to submit new information. There are clear mutual benefits to be derived from the development of good electronic services. Services that are of clear benefit to advisers and clients are more likely to achieve high levels of usage and will save substantial amounts of advisers time trying to resolve client problems through phone, fax or written contact with government departments and agencies. Equally, government officials could be freed up from dealing with a high proportion of contacts from advisers. The need for advisers to contact government could be significantly reduced if well-designed, beneficial electronic services are made available by government.
1.7 Many government forms are already available for downloading on government websites. This is already benefiting CAB advisers and clients, but they must be kept up to date and improved. Bureaux have welcomed the ability to obtain forms readily for use with clients, though the quality and presentation of forms needs to improve - there are real concerns about the quality and accessibility of existing online forms.

1.8 Our key criteria for assessing the value of electronic services are that they should be better, easier, and faster than other existing channels. It is important, though, that other channels for communicating with government are not withdrawn as e-services are developed. We see e-services as simply another way for people to contact and interact with government, but many people will still have to, or choose to, use other routes.

1.9 Citizens Advice is now in a position to help government to ensure that electronic services improve public service delivery and to address the risk that people will see no advantage to using electronic services. We can help do this by working to identify services that Citizens Advice Bureaux clients and advisers would find useful, and by testing and piloting the use of beneficial electronic services.

1.10 The greatest benefits for clients, advisers and government are to be found by developing services in the advice areas that form the greatest part of bureaux advice work, in particular social security benefits and tax credits.

Key priorities for electronic services - cross-governmental priorities

1.11 **A common method of authentication of Citizens Advice Bureaux/Advisers, and confirmation of client authority.** CAB advisers can currently spend a lot of time confirming to government that they are phoning or faxing from a bureau and that they have the client’s authority to act on their behalf. Bureau use paper forms to confirm client authorisation, and there is a variety of routines and ad hoc systems designed to confirm the bureau adviser’s identity. What is needed is a mechanism to authenticate bureau advisers and confirm client authority to all government departments and agencies.

1.12 **A facility for making and tracking claims.** Claims and applications require acknowledgement and follow up. Advisers frequently need to check whether a claim has been made, and to make detailed enquiries. This will require a facility for making and tracking claims, which allows CAB advisers to submit claims and renewals, track the progress of claims, and allows subsequent actions such as seeking a review of a decision, notifying changes of circumstance or lodging an appeal. Information associated with benefit claims will need to be full and accurate, giving sufficient detail to avoid the need for an adviser to seek further information by phone or in writing.

1.13 **Improved usability and ‘look and feel’ for electronic forms.** Existing services need improvement, as links to electronic forms are currently not
clearly shown on a number of government department sites, and are in many cases difficult or daunting to use. Government departments should do more to improve access to and usability of electronic forms, and give their electronic services a common ‘look and feel’.

**Key priorities for electronic services - departmental priorities**

1.14 Once solutions are found to address questions of authentication, claims tracking and look and feel, it will be much easier to address key priorities for individual departments. Many of the departmental priorities are, in fact, dependent on the achievement of cross-governmental solutions.

1.15 Based on our current assessment, our key priorities for Departments are as follows:

**Department for Work and Pensions**

1.16 **Forms on the DWP website should be easier to find.** Access to up-to-date benefit claim forms is already useful to bureaux using the Internet. However, forms on the DWP website, and on DWP executive agency sites, need to be made much more obvious to users as soon as possible.

1.17 It is also very important that all benefit forms available for downloading from the DWP website are kept up-to-date.

1.18 **The existing forms also need to be less daunting for people to use.** The current pdf forms on the DWP main site carry three successive warning messages - “you will not be able to save this form”, “it is important that you read the notes”, and “you must contact your social security office to establish the date of claim – your claim could be affected if you do not do so.” This approach risks dissuading people from using the forms.

1.19 **Advisers will need the ability to make and track benefit claims.** Giving advisers the ability to make and track claims whilst acting on behalf of clients could save significant amounts of time and effort for both advisers and DWP staff. To be a high quality service, information on claims (such as what has been claimed, whether or not a decision has been made, what rules a refusal was based upon) will need to be full and accurate. The DWP should publish clear timetables for the development of transactional social security benefit services. The benefits that should be given priority for development as transactional services are income support and jobseekers allowance, incapacity benefit, attendance allowance and social fund crisis loans.

1.20 We are also keen to work with the Appeals Service in the implementation of its modernisation programme.
Inland Revenue

1.21 Developing a clear role for CAB advisers as intermediaries for clients claiming tax credits will, we believe, be important for the Government to achieve targets on take-up and child poverty.

1.22 The Inland Revenue has already developed transactional e-services by allowing online tax credit claims. Individuals can register for online access to their own tax credit account via the Government Gateway, using a password and two Personal Identity Numbers. However, this mechanism for individuals is not likely to be suitable for use by intermediaries such as CABx.

1.23 The key priorities are for a facility to authenticate bureau or advisers to the Inland Revenue, and for CAB advisers to have access to their clients’ tax credit application details and award notices.

1.24 There should also be very clear information on the Inland Revenue website about all the changes of circumstance it is necessary and advisable for tax credit clients to report. There should also be clearer information about the range of ‘passported’ help available to people receiving certain levels of tax credit, such as free prescriptions or school meals.

Department for Trade and Industry

1.25 The DTI remit covers a very wide area, within which we have focussed on consumer matters as a priority.

1.26 Many bureaux already work in close partnership with Trading Standards Offices, and Citizens Advice has developed a strong relationship with the Office of Fair Trading. Citizens Advice should be given the ability to look up ongoing regulatory investigations. There should also be a facility for bureaux to make online complaints about consumer credit licence holders to the OFT licensing division, and to check the progress of any investigations. The OFT should make its register of consumer credit licences available online.

1.27 Calls to bureaux working within the European Extra-Judicial Network (EEJ-Net, which is working to resolve cross-border disputes on consumer matters) frequently require gathering information about the way EU member states have implemented EU Directives. A useful service to address this would be an accurate website containing information about the implementation of EU directives in member states which could be accessed by advisers in order to provide advice.

Lord Chancellor’s Department

1.28 The Lord Chancellor’s Department has recently secured funding to develop an internet-based transaction channel to allow advisers and the
public to complete certain forms online. We welcome this news, and wish to work with the Department as it designs the system. We have listed a number of specific forms, and the functions we see as necessary for them to be most useful, in Section 12 of this document.

1.29 Many bureaux are now operating contracts to deliver advice as part of the Community Legal Service. We hope that current research will contribute towards the development of management information tools to enable performance monitoring across the advice sector.

Home Office

1.30 The Home Office intends to make non-asylum immigration applications available online. This suggests that many of the immigration and nationality forms which we would like to see available as electronic services could be developed starting later in 2003. We welcome this statement of intent from the Home Office. Other services such as the tracking of claims are dependent on finding a suitable technical solution.

1.31 The Department also intends to provide clearer information about services available to asylum seekers, as part of an overhaul of the external Immigration and Nationality site.

Department of Health

1.32 It would be helpful to clients and advisers to have access to previous documentation where a client has made a medical complaint. The ability to submit and monitor complaints online would also be a welcome move. Clients who make medical complaints are generally motivated by the desire for an apology and to prevent further occurrences of what they believe happened to them, rather than by money compensation.

Local authorities

1.33 Bureaux are already working closely with local authorities in many areas, using IT to offer an improved service to clients. There is scope for further work, for example in developing email links between bureaux and local authorities. A large proportion of CAB benefit enquiries relate to housing benefit. Our priority is for a system for housing and council tax benefits that offers advisers secure access to housing benefit records, and which allows online claims, claims tracking, and notification of changes of circumstance.

1.34 We recognise that this sort of priority is linked to the wider DWP support for an improved service for all housing and council tax benefit claimants, and that therefore solutions are likely to be national rather than local. We are following the National Benefits Project, which is sponsored by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister, and are keen to work with the project.
Citizens Connect contact

1.35 We welcome contact from government departments on any of the issues raised in this paper. We are also very interested in discussing how we could co-operate in the development of electronic services. Please contact Citizens Connect Programme Support on 020 7833 7198, sarah.miller@citizensadvice.org.uk
2. Introduction

2.1 At the e-Summit in November 2002, the Prime Minister Tony Blair MP said “for the public services, the real opportunity is to use information technology to help create fundamental improvement in the efficiency, convenience and quality of our services.” Public services needed to see the development of high quality electronic services as “crucial to implementing public service reform”.

2.2 Previously, in April 2002, the National Audit Office had identified two main risks that needed managing if the benefits of e-Government were to be achieved. The first risk was that people would not access services electronically, seeing no advantage in doing so. The second, related risk was that government departments did not provide the services people wanted to access electronically. (*Better Public Services through e-government*, National Audit Office HC 704-1 April 2002).

2.3 The Government has set a key target for all public services to be available electronically by 2005, and achieving high levels of use. However, the DTI currently estimates that only one in ten people has ever made use of an electronic government service. OFTEL surveys show that 50% of adults use the Internet at various locations, and that 42% of homes are connected to the Internet. However, only 23% of households with annual incomes below £17,500 have internet access. This evidence points to a need for electronic services that are accessible to people on lower incomes.

2.4 Citizens Advice Bureaux are now, with assistance from government, being equipped in a way that will allow access to government services. The Citizens Advice service is now, therefore, in a position to help government to ensure that electronic services genuinely improve public service delivery and to address the risk that people will see no advantage in using electronic services. We can do this by working to identify services that Citizens Advice Bureaux clients and advisers would find useful, and by testing and piloting the use of beneficial electronic services.

2.5 This document sets out general matters that government needs to address in the provision of electronic services if they are to be useful to Citizens Advice Bureaux clients and advisers. It also lists a number of specific electronic services the Citizens Advice service would like government departments to introduce, and describes how the Citizens Advice service could work with government to pilot proposed services.

2.6 This document does not cover every government department comprehensively, but has instead been drawn up with the main advice areas in mind. **It is intended to set out key proposals for beneficial electronic services now and to facilitate discussion between Citizens Advice and government on the direction of services for the future.** Citizens Advice is contacting government departments to validate our priorities and proposals for public e-services, and to seek information...
about plans which may be under discussion or at an advanced stage of
development, but which are not necessarily in the public domain.
Comments received from Departments have been incorporated into this
document as far as possible.
3. The Citizens Advice service

3.1 The Citizens Advice service was established in 1939. It is a trusted and reliable provider of free, confidential and impartial advice to the whole population. Bureaux are rated highly by their users on the People’s Panel, with over three quarters satisfied and over one third very satisfied (MORI August 1999). The service deals with 6 million problems each year, giving information, advice and assistance, comprehensively covering every area of government law and public policy. It also uses the information about these problems to exercise a responsible influence on the development of policies and services.

3.2 Citizens Advice Bureaux deliver high quality advice and information from over 2000 different outlets across England, Wales and Northern Ireland, as well as by telephone, by email, through the media, and via the Internet www.adviceguide.org.uk. There are around 850 ‘high street’ bureaux premises, but advice is also regularly provided at many other locations, such as GP surgeries or health centres, community centres, hospitals, courts, schools, and prisons. Advice is free, confidential and impartial and open to everybody, regardless of race, sex, disability, sexuality or nationality. The Citizens Advice service aims to ensure that individuals do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities or through an inability to express their needs effectively. Equally, the service aims to exercise a responsible influence on the development of social policies and services both locally and nationally.

3.3 25,000 people work for the service, of whom 79% are volunteer advisers, administrators, members of trustee boards, fundraisers, IT and social policy co-ordinators.

3.4 Every CAB is an independent charity, and the service depends on funding from local authorities, the community legal service, community and regeneration funds, and other donations from charitable trusts, companies and individuals. The national organisation, Citizens Advice, of which every bureau is a member, sets standards for advice, training, equal opportunities and accessibility.

Main areas for advice

3.5 Citizens Advice Bureaux dealt with nearly 6 million new problems in 2001/02. Of these (28 per cent) related to benefits and tax credits, and 21 per cent concerned consumer or utilities problems. A breakdown of the main enquiry areas is shown in the table below.
3.6 More details within each of these enquiry areas are available from Citizens Advice on request.

Citizens Connect

3.7 The government has given the Citizens Advice service a grant of £20 million to fund a two-year programme called Citizens Connect. Citizens Connect is an IT-led initiative that will enable Citizens Advice Bureaux to use new technologies to provide an even better service for clients, and a more efficient working environment for staff and volunteers. To maintain our high levels of support and advice we need to help shape, develop and then use e-government services. This will be especially important for groups in the community who will not be able to access services themselves, and for those who would benefit from using a service within an advice setting.

3.8 The Citizens Connect programme aims to achieve the following by April 2004:

- A virtual private network (VPN) infrastructure for around 850 bureaux in England and Wales that will also allow remote access, home visits and outreach sessions to take place at around 2000 locations
- A new, secure, electronic case recording and filing system called CASE, to enable advisers to record, find, update and convey client information to one another
- Access to e-government services on behalf of clients - especially those unable to use them for themselves
• To utilise CASE and e-government services to capture hard data, and provide feedback to Government, and so increase the effectiveness of our social policy work.

Intermediaries, but not agents

3.9 The Citizens Advice service has very high public recognition and trust. According to MORI in 2001, 95% of the population know about our work, and almost half have benefited from our service. The public trusts us, and our independence from government is well understood – both by the public and by government itself. The Citizens Advice service is already an intermediary between clients and government. This status puts us in a unique position to act as intermediaries in the use of electronic services, where it is to the advantage of our clients to make use of services.

3.10 Our definition of an ‘intermediary’ in the context of electronic services is embedded in our concept of independent and impartial advice. We are clear that advisers will continue to act in the best interests of clients. It is possible to illustrate our view of how bureaux act on behalf of clients by referring to the standards set by Citizens Advice for adviser and other bureau roles.

3.11 Our standards for advice are backed by a membership scheme and by a set of competences. The membership scheme covers both the professional practice of giving advice, and the technical content of good quality advice. The Citizens Advice Competency Framework ranges from generalist adviser and skilled adviser competences, to competences for specialist advisers, advisers working in mental health settings and diagnostic interviewers, as well as competences describing what is required in bureau roles other than providing advice.

3.12 The Citizens Advice generalist advice competences set the minimum standards, which all advisers must achieve and on which other competences may be built. The generalist competences require that the advice process is managed to give a service that is appropriate to the individual client, in a way that enables the client to explain, explore and clarify the problem they have sought advice about. A good indication of the intermediary role is contained in the standard that specifies that advisers must assist clients in taking action by giving them support to plan and take action and by acting on their behalf.

3.13 As a further example, the competences for general advice on benefits indicate that advisers should, with appropriate supervision, be able to assist clients with claims for benefit, and be able as appropriate to use computer systems to calculate benefit entitlement. Benefits case workers and specialists would be expected not only to be able to assist clients to claim any benefits to which they were entitled, but also to help clients to challenge a benefit decision, by seeking a review, submitting an appeal, or perhaps entering into further legal challenges to the decision.
3.14 **Maintaining our independence is vital for us to continue to offer the same respected service to the public.** A shift towards agency status would represent a serious risk to our service, and could not be contemplated. Clients use our services because we are not part of Government, and will continue to need access to independent advice. The CAB service role in providing access to e-services will therefore need to develop in accordance with this principle. CAB advisers will act as intermediaries to enable clients to access services electronically, where it is in the clients interest to do so.

**Citizens Connect – e-government team**

3.15 A small e-government team has been established to set a strategy for the use of e-Government services by Citizens Advice Bureaux; to promote the use of beneficial electronic services; and to seek to influence the development of government electronic services.

3.16 The team exists to discuss with government departments their plans for developing electronic services, to offer views on the value of services in planning stages, to suggest other services, and to help to establish the impact of online and other electronic services. We are also already initiating contact with many government departments, and have good contacts with the E-envoy’s office.

3.17 The team can work with government and bureaux to pilot and test actual services, or to assist with the development of ideas and designs for services.
4. Electronic government— the Citizens Advice perspective

4.1 Putting forms on line does not help people to identify which benefit they may be able to claim, or necessarily provide advice on filling in the form. Online form services also don’t help people if their claim is refused and the client needs help to challenge the decision, or needs representation at an appeal. There can also be a range of other problems, for example with the administration of benefits, and clients may need help sorting out payment problems, mistakes, or in contacting a government department or agency about delays.

4.2 Therefore, even with successful ‘e-transformation’ of services that genuinely improves public services, independent advice will remain vitally important. People applying for housing benefit, claiming jobseekers allowance or a disability benefit, or seeking to challenge a warrant of possession on their home, for example, may eventually find the process of making a claim or application made easier by electronic services, but will still have a right to seek advice to challenge a decision not to award them benefit, to stop that benefit, or to seek representation at an appeal or court hearing.

4.3 Electronic services should develop alongside other services, and not be used as a reason to withdraw other channels of communication. Electronic services should be incorporated alongside other traditional channels, including face-to-face services, post and telephone. There are likely to be cost savings as more people use online services, but other means of delivering and accessing services should not be withdrawn.

Existing services

4.4 A number of government departments have already made information accessible through websites, including making forms available for downloading online. These services are already benefiting CAB advisers and clients.

4.5 There is so far only a limited number of transactional services online that are relevant to our clients. These include submitting a claim for tax credits, or child benefit, applying to an employment tribunal, obtaining a pension forecast or making a small claims application. Major benefits to government and CAB clients of online services could be achieved by putting more transactional services on the Internet, and by providing proper ‘joined up e-governance’, offering ‘one-stop’ services across government agencies.

4.6 Existing services could be improved to enable easier access to and use of forms. For example, forms should be made easier to find. For example, benefit claim forms are available through the Department for Work and Pensions website, but are not readily accessible without searching or being very familiar with the site structure.
4.7 **Forms and sites need to be easy to use.** Common ‘look and feel’ standards across departments will help to develop better public acceptance of services. CAB advisers, clients and the general public are now encouraged to access numerous government sites. Different styles and layouts make services confusing and reduce the likelihood of successful take-up.

4.8 **The needs of people with visual impairments and other problems should be taken into account** when designing services.

4.9 People usually take more than one attempt to complete a form. For this reason, a **facility to save partially completed forms** needs to be built into the online equivalent form. Without this facility, CAB advisers and clients will be much less likely to use them. For example, clients may not have all the supporting documentation when they first start to complete the form. Also, advisers want the ability to get clients to start completing the form without them, and then later will help them with any outstanding issues.
Department for Work and Pensions

4.10 Benefit and tax credit problems represent the biggest area of advice for Citizens Advice Bureaux. 28%, or 1.6 million problems were identified from advice provided to clients in 2001/02. More details within each of our main enquiry areas are available from Citizens Advice.

4.11 Benefits and tax credits also generate large numbers of reports from bureaux concerning administrative and policy-related problems. Citizens Advice has a long record of working with DWP and its predecessors, and has close working relationships with DWP executive agencies and directorates built up over many years. This is a relationship we would like to build upon as the department develops its e-services.

4.12 Advisers currently spend a large amount of time helping to determine whether a person is receiving a particular benefit, assessing eligibility, and assisting with applications. Access to forms online via the DWP website is therefore useful, as forms can be downloaded for completion or completed on screen and printed. At present forms are not sufficiently visible on many of the key websites, for example, the Jobcentre Plus site contains general information about many benefits and has links to forms that may be downloaded and to the child benefit online service, but they are not easy to find. The Minimum Income Guarantee form is also not immediately obvious from the Pension Service homepage.

Key priority

4.13 A variety of mechanisms are currently used to confirm that the CAB client has authorised the CAB to act on their behalf. Existing DWP guidance covers the use of these mechanisms. It recognises that it makes sense for DWP staff to disclose information to third party advisers, where they are satisfied that the adviser is acting in that capacity and on behalf of the client/claimant. In case of doubt, DWP staff may ask to speak to the client if s/he is present. Occasionally advisers are asked to fax a copy of a client authority form, or may be recognised as a bureau through previous contact. These mechanisms generally work well, particularly where there is a good working relationship, allowing advisers to discuss cases with DWP staff, in Jobcentre Plus, Pension Service, Disability and Carers Service, and Child Support Agency as well as other sections.

4.14 Disclosure of information with client permission, in the context of independent advice is to the advantage of clients, and also benefits the Department when claims are submitted with all the required information, and problems with claims can be resolved more easily. We therefore want to see this working relationship replicated for electronic services, to allow CAB advisers to act as intermediaries. This will require the introduction of workable systems that recognise bureaux and allow client authority to be recognised by electronic systems.
Forms

4.15 Forms need to be made more obvious to users of the DWP departmental website and executive agency sites, with access to online forms from the main page.

4.16 Most importantly, forms need to be easy to use; offering a better service than using a standard printed or downloaded form. The current PDF forms available on the DWP site are not designed to encourage high levels of use. Once a form is located, the potential claimant or adviser receives three successive warning messages - “you will not be able to save this form”, “it is important that you read the notes”, and “you must contact your social security office to establish the date of claim – your claim could be affected if you do not do so.” Users of the interactive forms, which can be completed on screen, receive an Acrobat reader warning message, which states “Because this form is interactive, pressing control P to print the form will result in an invalid claim.... warning – You will not be able to save this form”. We feel that this warning is likely to put many people off using this service.

4.17 Any electronic service should not reduce the amount of benefit payable to the client, offering the same service as other channels. For this reason, there should be a date stamping facility on downloaded forms, so that benefit, if awarded, is payable from the date the client downloaded and completed the form. For example, Disability Living Allowance (DLA) claims are currently date stamped and have to be returned within six weeks for the claim to be backdated to the date stamped. The DLA claim form is complicated, and takes a considerable time to complete (advisers typically set an appointment time of two hours to assist clients with a DLA application). For some benefits, evidence requirements may currently preclude this as claimants have to supply all the necessary information for their claims to begin, but the date stamp will be useful for others.

4.18 There should be a mechanism to ensure that all downloadable forms are kept up to date. We understand from DWP that it is in the early stages of developing transactional services for the main benefits and pensions, which will provide an improved service. However, the Department advised us that it does not intend to ensure that the forms available on its website are kept up-to-date. We hope that the Department will clarify this. Advisers already tell us that it is useful to have access to online forms precisely because it is possible to download a copy of the latest form. We would therefore urge the DWP to ensure that, as well as developing improved, transactional forms with greater functionality, it ensures that all its forms are available electronically and are kept fully up-to date.

Claims and claims tracking

4.19 Online applications, renewals and a facility to apply for revisions and changes of circumstance/supersessions will be welcome developments.
Using existing channels, these common benefit ‘transactions’ can all be
time-consuming and subject to contact difficulties.

4.20 Advisers would find it extremely useful to be able to access completed
claim forms online after submission, where the client has granted the
bureau permission to act on their behalf.

4.21 Basic contact details - including names and telephone numbers of people
dealing with a particular case makes it easier for advisers to speak to the
person dealing with the case.

4.22 Provide a return receipt. It is essential that advisers and clients
completing and submitting claims on line in the future are able to receive
immediate confirmation that the claim has been received. This will be
especially important for advisers working in outreach settings, or providing
telephone or email advice. To build confidence in online claiming a postal
acknowledgement or email return receipt will be necessary.

4.23 Estimated processing time. Most benefits already have target times for
processing set as part of executive agency business planning. This
information is also sometimes provided in customer charters. Providing
this general information to all claimants would at least give some overall
guide to the likely waiting time. In the longer term we would like to see
more specific information relayed to clients about the expected clearance
time for their claim.

4.24 Online progress of claim. Delays in processing benefit claims have
been reported frequently by bureaux, and a very large amount of adviser
time is spent trying to access administrative information, tying-up both
advisers and DWP staff on the phone. A facility to check the status and
progress of a claim through access to a benefit claim record or log would
therefore be very useful. Introducing such capability would represent a
clear improvement - provided the right information was made available.
Importantly, the information would need to be accessible by both the
claimant and their CAB adviser. The client could grant this access
permission when they submit their claim. The claim-associated
information would need to be full and accurate, generated
automatically by processes carried out in relation to the claim, and
associated communications. The facility should include clearly dated
information, and would need to include:

- the date the claim was received;
- whether the claim has been processed;
- precise details of any information awaited from the claimant or
  from a third party (such as a doctor, other benefit section, or
  other government department);
• details of any communications received or made with the claimant or with a third party such as an adviser;
• a record of changes such as revisions, supersessions, appeals lodged;
• details of amounts awarded and paid, broken down precisely to include e.g. premiums.

4.25 Claimants now have only one month in which to appeal against a decision to refuse a benefit application. In many cases, the original notification is sent to the client using second-class post, which diminishes the time in which to appeal. If the claimant asks for a written statement of the reasons for the decision, this deadline is extended by 14 days.

4.26 The Appeals Service is developing online services as part of its Modernisation programme. The plans for these services include a facility to lodge an appeal online and to fix or amend appeal dates. Advisers appear to have broadly welcomed the proposals as outlined so far, and we want to work with the Appeals Service on these developments.

4.27 As outlined to us so far, the plans look beneficial, as they will provide facilities to lodge appeals online, and to re-arrange dates if the hearing has to be postponed whilst evidence is awaited. It would also be useful if the Department provided a fuller statement of reasons automatically and online. The statement would need to include details of the legislation used reaching benefit decisions. This would increase the transparency of decision-making, and speed up the process of appealing where the claimant or their adviser believes that the decision is erroneous.
Inland Revenue

4.28 Citizens Advice Bureaux dealt with almost 90,000 problems relating to Working Families’ Tax Credit and Disabled Persons’ Tax Credit during 2001/02.

4.29 The introduction of Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit, with awards commencing from April 2003, represents a substantial shift in the role of the Inland Revenue in combating poverty and promoting flexible employment.

4.30 With the integration of support for children in CTC, the Inland Revenue is likely to be dealing with many people receiving income-related payments for children who have previously only had contact with the Department for Work and Pensions. Many of the same points we make in relation to DWP will therefore become relevant to the Inland Revenue’s plans for electronic service delivery. For example, we would like to see a claims tracking facility for tax credit applications, which allows advisers to see the completed application on line, in a secure manner, and which provides details of progress made on the application, including full and accurate information at each stage of an application and award, with full reasons for refusal if an award is not made.

Key priority

4.31 The Inland Revenue has already developed transactional e-services by allowing claims for new tax credits to be made online through the Inland Revenue website. The online service allows forms to be saved if partially completed, includes a calculator to provide an estimate of entitlement, and gives basic details of tax credit rules.

4.32 It is also now possible for individuals to register for online access to their own tax credit account via the Government Gateway, using a password and a Personal Identity Number which is posted to the individual after they have accessed the tax credits online service (whether or not their application for tax credits was made online). However, this mechanism for individuals is not likely to be entirely suitable for use by intermediaries such as Citizens Advice Bureaux.

4.33 CAB advisers will be making increasingly frequent contact with Inland Revenue through Tax Credit offices. Advisers will also need to have access to their clients’ tax credit application details and award notices. Developing the role for CAB advisers as intermediaries for clients claiming tax credits is, we believe, important for the Government to achieve targets on take-up and child poverty. The problems that were evident in April 2003 for some people trying to contact a help line find out about tax credit awards illustrate the potential value of a secure online facility, available through intermediaries, to check the progress of a tax credit claim.
4.34 The key priorities for electronic services will, therefore, be a **facility for advisers to authenticate themselves to the Revenue, and to access tax credit ‘account’ information whilst acting on behalf of clients.** This is one of our key general priorities for electronic government services.

**Changes in circumstance**

4.35 The shift to an annual system of awards, with adjustments for changes in circumstances, puts much more of an onus on tax credit recipients to notify the Revenue of changes. The new system represents a substantial departure from its predecessors Working Families’ Tax Credit and Family Credit under which awards were fixed for six months almost without exception regardless of even quite major changes in circumstance, such as ceasing to be in paid work. Under the new system, the Inland Revenue requires people to report a wide variety of changes within three months of the change, such as:

- Marrying or living with someone after claiming as a single person (or vice versa).
- Changing employer, changing number of hours worked, or stopping work.
- Changes in income (though increases up to £2,500 over a year are not counted).
- Ceasing to pay childcare charges for four or more weeks, or when average weekly childcare charges fall by more than £10 for at least four weeks in a row.

4.36 There is an initial penalty of £300, which may be imposed at the discretion of the Inland Revenue, for a failure to declare any of these changes, and the Revenue may also add daily penalties of up to £60, and interest, if required information or evidence is not supplied.

4.37 There should therefore be clear information about all of the changes it is necessary or advisable to report on the Inland Revenue website, together with a facility to report such changes electronically.

4.38 Clients frequently seek advice from bureaux about the financial consequences of taking paid work. Bureaux are accustomed to providing detailed ‘better-off’ calculations to help the client decide whether or not they can take a paid job. A key factor in making this decision is the loss or availability of other benefits or passported help – for example, clients will want to know how any other benefits, such as housing and council tax benefit, may be affected, and whether they will qualify for free school meals for their children, free prescriptions and so forth.

4.39 The Inland Revenue is currently working hard to assemble a leaflet giving information about the range of schemes to which people receiving tax credit at various levels may be passported. In addition to providing details on written tax credit award notices about entitlement to the main
passported schemes, we would welcome a mechanism to show passported entitlement on the electronic tax credit 'account'.
Department for Trade and Industry

4.40 The Department of Trade and Industry’s broad remit covers several key areas of CAB advice and social policy work – including employment, consumer matters, debt and utilities. In 2001/02 CAB handled 1.2 million consumer and utility problems, including 647,000 debt problems, and 601,000 employment problems.

4.41 There are many issues that relate to these areas that are not within the direct control of the DTI. Nevertheless, we set out some priorities here, in the knowledge that discussions may need to take place with a range of organisations with responsibilities in these areas.

Office of Fair Trading and Trading Standards Departments

4.42 Citizens Advice and many bureaux already work in close partnership with trading standards departments and the OFT to raise concerns about individual consumer credit licence-holder’s fitness to hold a licence. Services can be further improved by introducing measures to enhance communication and allow online complaints submissions.

- Citizens Advice Social Policy Department should be given the ability to look up details of ongoing regulatory investigations
- Bureaux should be able to send complaints about consumer credit licence holders to the OFT licensing division, and should receive an initial response, with the subsequent ability to check on the progress of any investigation online.
- The OFT should make their register of consumer credit licences available on-line.

4.43 Consumer Direct is an initiative based on NHS Direct that will, over the next four years, offer clear information and advice on scams, loan and credit agreements and buying goods and services, using a single contact number. The DTI estimates that there is unmet need for consumer advice of the order of 1.5 million enquiries a year

- We suggest that services available through a website would also be useful to CAB clients and advisers, providing an additional means of addressing unmet needs for consumer advice.

4.44 The European Extra-Judicial Network (EEJ-net) provides support to people who have a complaint about goods or services bought in European Union member states. A number of bureaux are now part of this network, providing advice to European citizens on consumer issues, often involving cross-border disputes. A frequent difficulty is that advisers have to spend
a lot of time and effort establishing whether and how different EU member states have implemented EU directives.

- **Information on the way in which EU member states have implemented EU directives should be accessible through a dedicated website.**
Lord Chancellor’s Department/Constitutional Affairs

4.45 The Lord Chancellor’s Department covers a number of different functions, including the Court Service and the Legal Services Commission. The Department also has responsibility for some tribunals.

4.46 The priority services for the Department are online civil claims, interaction with the criminal justice system, and electronic conveyancing. The Department is working with the Office of the E-envoy to take work in these areas forward. The launch of Money Claim Online has resulted in over 23,000 claims using the service, an average 600 claims each week. The Community Legal Service has also launched a website Just Ask!, which provides an independent gateway to a range of legal information sites. Links to the site are provided through the Citizens Advice Adviceguide site www.adviceguide.org.uk.

4.47 The Court Service has already put many forms on line - a move that is welcomed by Citizens Advice. Bureaux can get a copy of a form if stocks on paper have run out, and can be confident that the form will be up to date. The Department has recently secured funding to develop an internet-based transaction channel to allow people and advisers to complete certain forms online. The Department will be working closely with Citizens Advice as it designs this system. LCD also hopes to develop an online ‘possession claims’ service for non-payment of rent or mortgages, though this and other initiatives for civil justice are dependent on public spending decisions.

4.48 The Legal Services Commission is developing online methods of monitoring contracts with bureaux. We hope that current research being undertaken by the Legal Services Research Centre will contribute towards the development of management information tools to enable performance monitoring across the advice sector. Existing data collected for audit purposes does not, in the main, allow performance monitoring.

4.49 All tribunal services are being moved within the remit of LCD, which provides further opportunities to simplify and unify online services. The Employment Tribunal Service already allows online submission of applications. However, this is an example where the letter rather than the spirit of the requirement to get services online by 2005 is being met. There is a warning message, which may discourage people from using the site – “It is not guaranteed that the Tribunal will receive your form on the same day as you submit it and you may wish to consider an alternative method of delivery if your application is time critical.” It should be possible to create a more welcoming online presence, which encourages clients to use this channel.

Courts Service:

4.50 Advisers interact with the courts on a frequent basis, often advising clients on debt. Submitting court forms often requires payment of a fee, however
there are exemptions for people in receipt of certain income-related benefits and tax credits. Clients who do have to pay the fee in connection with debt court cases are usually not able to pay using a credit card but those clients who pass the means test could use an online application.

4.51 Citizens Advice priorities to improve services for advisers and clients:

- make sure downloadable forms are kept up to date
- provide a clear statement of the benefits of using any online transactional services above other channels
- enable online application or submission (see below for the forms we would like this for)
- enable access to online application progress, including the outstanding reason for any delay
- provide an estimate of the waiting time before a decision can be expected so people know before an application is made
- provide an ability to lodge an online appeal against a decision, as appropriate
- provide contact names/email addresses/telephone numbers of people dealing with particular case
- provide an ability to get a copy of a submission/application, or to view it on screen, if one is not available in the bureau. Sometimes a new client will arrive at a bureau with no papers. Being able to see their submissions would speed the processing of their query, both for advisers and the Court Service
- provide the flexibility to enable an application to progress via electronic channels, rather than via the post. For example, directions (a timetable for the case which the tribunal lays down) could be provided via an online channel. Applicants could be contacted by email, if they prefer.

This functionality should be prioritised for the following forms:

- N9 (acknowledgement of service)
- N9A Admission (specified amount)
- N9B (defence form)
- N11B Defence form (accelerated possession procedure)
- N11M Defence form (mortgaged residential premises)
- N11R Defence form (rented residential premises)
- N20 (Witness summons)
- N92 (Application for an administration order)
- N244 (Application notice)
• N245 (Application for suspension of a warrant and/or variation of an instalment order)
• N332A (Application to enforce an award)
• Ex 160 (application for exemption from any fee payable on an application).
• Form 6.27 (Debtor’s Bankruptcy Petition)
• Form 6.28 (Debtor’s Statement of Affairs)

For the Tribunal Service:

4.52 The Tribunal Service should:

• Make sure downloadable forms are kept up to date
• Provide a clear statement of the benefits of using any online transactional services above other channels
• Enable online application or submission
4.53 The Immigration and Nationality Directorate has already put many forms on line - a move welcomed by Citizens Advice. It means that bureaux can always get a copy of a form if stocks have run out, and can be confident that the form will be up to date. This is particularly important for some immigration forms, as if an older version of a form is used it is invalid and a new claim has to be submitted. Given the time delays in getting applications dealt with – more than 6 months in some cases – it is crucial that the correct forms are used first time.

Citizens Advice priorities to improve services for advisers and clients

4.54 Provide a clear statement of the benefits of the online transactional service above other channels. The Department is aware of the need to encourage take-up of e-services. For example, the cost of processing applications for work permits is cheaper online, and the saving could be passed on to online applicants.

4.55 Make sure the downloadable forms are kept up to date. Forms on the external site are, the Home Office advises us, always kept up to date, with the exception of the work permits form that has been removed temporarily whilst on-line charging is set up on the site. The aim with other forms is to make them easier to find by developing dedicated Managed Migration and Ceremonies sites.

4.56 Enable online application for certain forms (see below for details). Non-asylum applications are intended to be made available online. Significant changes are underway to business process, which will result in detailed consideration of e-enabling these services later in 2003.

4.57 Enable online application progress, including the outstanding reason for any delay. Provide an estimate of the waiting time before a decision can be expected so people know before an application is made. The Home Office has noted to us that this is difficult to achieve for some types of application. Some applications are already turned round quickly, in other cases it would depend on the circumstances and type of case. In general, a service improvement programme is looking to reduce the turn-round time of applications.

4.58 Provide an ability to lodge an online appeal against any decision. The Home Office plans to e-enable this service subject to any legal requirements.

4.59 Provide contact names/ email addresses/telephone numbers of people or teams dealing with a particular case. The introduction of the Immigration and Nationality Enquiry Bureau call centre aimed to enable case-workers to focus on cases rather than handling the large volume of enquiries. This policy is not likely to change except for non-asylum cases.
4.60 Provide an ability to get a copy of an application, if one is not available in the bureau. Sometimes new clients may arrive at a bureau without copies of applications they have made. Advisers are better able to advise clients – and save the Immigration and Nationality Department time and effort - if they can see a copy of the original application. This raises issues about security and current Home Office IT structure. At present forms are not scanned into the system. Once core application phases are e-enabled, this could be a future phase.

4.61 Provide a separate website for NASS and make more information available on the site such as where to go for other services eg local authority services, better guidance and useful contact numbers. The Home Office informs us that this should come about as part of the IND external site overhaul. The aim is to develop the whole site into a more structured and sensibly sectioned site, that enables the user to find the specific information they require, without having to wade through lots of other areas.

**Our order of priority for Home Office forms, based on current information, is as follows:**

- Form FLR (M) to apply for an extension of stay in the United Kingdom as the spouse (husband or wife) or unmarried partner of a person present and settled here.
- Form SET (M) to apply for indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom as the spouse (husband or wife) or unmarried partner of a person who is present and settled here.
- Form ELR to apply for an extension of stay or indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom by a person who was granted exceptional leave to remain following the refusal of asylum.
- Naturalisation application form to become a British citizen (Guide AN (NEW)).
- Form SET (O) to apply for indefinite leave to remain in the United Kingdom if you have completed, or are nearing completion, four years of continuous leave to remain in the United Kingdom in one of the following categories: domestic worker, employment which does not require a work permit such as Minister of Religion, United Kingdom ancestry, work permit employment, writer, artist or composer.

4.62 The Home Office has indicated to Citizens Advice us that the Immigration and Nationality Directorate wants to enable electronic claims and claims tracking, but that doing so depends on migrating its current system to a service-based architecture, which will inevitably take some time. For the time being, queries about the status of applications will be dealt with through the call centre, the Immigration and Nationality enquiry bureau.
Department of Health

4.63 Citizens Advice Bureaux receive numerous enquiries from clients who are making or who want to make a complaint about medical treatment they have received. Generally, clients are much less interested in seeking financial compensation than they are in receiving an apology, and seeing adjustments made so that others do not suffer in the same way.

4.64 Bureaux would be able to provide additional support and advice to people making medical complaints, if they could monitor the progress of a complaint, and access previous documentation. Access to an online system, subject to client authority and authentication of advisers, could enable bureaux to offer this service without the need for health staff to respond directly to enquiries.

4.65 We would therefore like to discuss this suggestion with the Department of Health.
Local authorities

4.66 Bureaux are ideally placed to help local authorities ensure that the services they provide are the right ones for local people. Bureaux already work closely with local authorities, and in many areas there is partnership work using IT systems to benefit local people. Citizens Advice has issued briefing to bureaux stressing the need for bureaux to work closely with local authorities in the development of e-services, for example by making contact with E-Government champions.

4.67 Local Strategic Partnerships provide a forum for discussing the development of e-services, and using email links for a wide range of functions can make efficiency gains. There is clearly further scope to develop electronic links between local authorities and bureaux.

Housing benefit

4.68 A large proportion of CABx report frequent problems with housing benefit, and this benefit has been the focus of a considerable amount of social policy work over many years. The government is very conscious of the need to improve the overall quality of housing benefit.

4.69 Bureaux frequently advise clients facing possession action where rent arrears are due to housing benefit delays. Many clients seek advice because they have difficulty in travelling to the Housing Benefit office because of age, illness or disability, and clients often report documents being lost or mislaid in the benefit office.

4.70 Most recently Citizens Advice has taken steps to promote good practice and facilitate continuous improvement in housing benefit service delivery, by publishing a guide to partnership working between local authorities and Citizens Advice Bureaux, and by issuing key extracts from DWP housing benefit national performance standards, to bring together those parts of the standards likely to be most relevant to the common problems facing CAB clients. Both these documents have been produced in conjunction with Camden Housing Benefit Service.

4.71 In addition, Citizens Advice is interested in working with the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister on a variety of projects now under discussion. These include a national benefits project, which would encompass benefit service delivery at the local level, and a rural intermediaries project that will explore the role of third party intermediaries. Preliminary discussions have been held with both of these projects.

4.72 The DWP Housing Support Division has confirmed that the priorities we outline in this document reflect a common sense, pragmatic approach which is in line with a similar drive within the Division, to improve the service to claimants. The Division agrees that these priorities should be considered in any review or future development of the housing and council tax benefits claim process.
4.73 The tracking of individual claims is primarily a responsibility for local authorities, but the Housing Support Division would want to provide standards and good practice guidance which local authorities would be expected to adopt.
5. Conclusion and next steps

5.1 Discussion of e-government services in early 2003 is generally agreed that the government’s target for all its services to be available online from 2005, and achieving high levels of use, will only be met if the needs of people with and without internet access are recognised and addressed. There has to date been no revolution in the delivery of electronic services, and no radical improvement in public services.

5.2 Progress in developing useful services has, from our perspective, been slow. Access and take-up are real issues for electronic services, so it is important not only that people are able to use services, but also that electronic services should have clear advantages – why use them otherwise?

5.3 Citizens Advice Bureaux, dealing with over five million people each year, are in an ideal position to offer information about the electronic services needed. By April 2004 Citizens Advice Bureaux will be equipped to offer access to electronic services, in the context of independent advice, to people who do not presently have access to these services.

5.4 This document represents an initial ‘shopping list’ of the electronic services we believe are required by Citizens Advice Bureaux and their clients. The list is not intended to be definitive, but to indicate the services that we have currently identified as the most potentially useful.

5.5 We are therefore keen to continue, or enter into, discussions with government departments, local government and the Office of the E-envoy, to shape the future role for Citizens Advice Bureaux as intermediaries for electronic services.

5.6 We welcome contact from government departments on any of the issues raised in this paper, and to discuss co-operation in the development of electronic services. Please contact Citizens Connect Programme Support on 020 7833 7198, sarah.miller@citizensadvice.org.uk