

Get in Touch

your guide
to Channel
Management





www.

When it comes to accessing Government information and services, the expectations of our citizens are changing, and changing rapidly.

Members of the public see the high standards and wide range of channels available from the best of the private sector, and rightly expect the same from Government. They also want Government to be efficient in delivering services and to provide value for taxpayers' money. And these principles are strongly supported by the Northern Ireland Executive in its Programme for Government¹.

We've made a start through NI Direct. The single www.nidirect.gov.uk website is arranged by themes of interest to the citizen, rather than the way Government Departments happen to be organised. And the NI Direct accredited contact centre provides information and undertakes transactions over the phone on behalf of Departments.

But how can we improve our level of citizen service and at the same time provide value for money? How can we do this in the face of intense funding pressures?

One way is to consider the most effective and efficient channels to use for giving information and undertaking transactions. It is important to know your business and the key questions and outputs that citizens require of it. It is important to optimise the channel mix, given that an online interaction is more efficient than by telephone, which in turn is much better than a face-to-face meeting or correspondence. But it doesn't have to be all or nothing and it is also important to remember the needs of those who cannot access the internet.

This Guide has been produced as a reference for Departments as they consider the best, and most efficient, channels of communication with their customers. Encouraging migration to more efficient channels is something that has to be actively managed, and we set out here the 8 key principles to help Departments do just that:

- 1. MANAGING CHANNELS TO GOVERNMENT SERVICES**
- 2. KNOW YOUR CUSTOMERS - UNDERSTAND THEIR NEEDS**
- 3. KNOW YOUR BUSINESS - GATHER DATA**
- 4. OPTIMISE THE CHANNEL MIX**
- 5. PLAN YOUR CHANNEL STRATEGY AND SET TARGETS**
- 6. INCENTIVISE TO PROMOTE PREFERRED CHANNELS**
- 7. EFFICIENT TRANSACTIONS IMPROVE CITIZEN EXPERIENCE**
- 8. AVOIDING THE NEED FOR CONTACT**

Stephen Peover,

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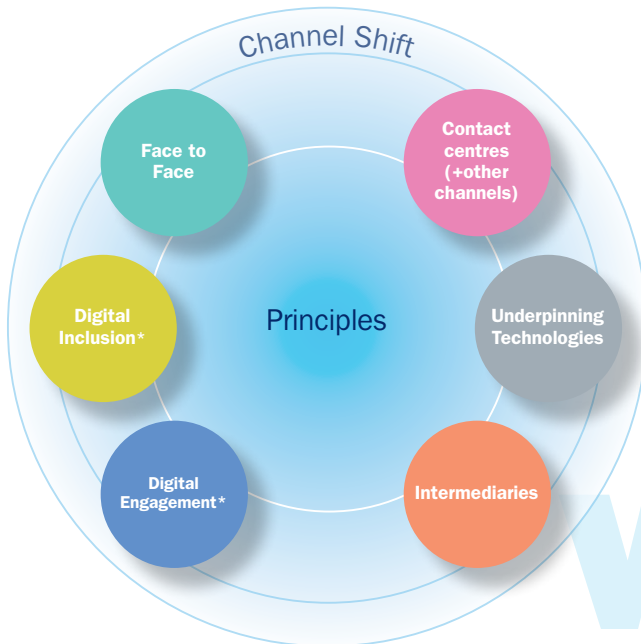
¹ Source: <http://www.northernireland.gov.uk/index/programme-for-government-and-budget-v1.htm>

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Managing Channels to Government Services

Government provides a range of channels by which citizens can access services. These include face to face at a public counter, letters, telephone, SMS and on-line information and self-service transactions. Some channels suit our citizens' needs better than others. And the cost to the public service of operating different channels can vary enormously. As a rough rule of thumb an on-line transaction costs 20p, a telephone transaction £2 and a face-to-face meeting costs £20.

Organisations within the public sector currently manage channels with varying levels of expertise and sophistication. A common starting point often includes the development of a Channel Strategy. The diagram below ² provides a simple illustration of how different components fit into a channel strategy and how they relate to each other. Key factors and messages across the organisation must be clearly aligned in all strategic documents, which you should aim to refresh every 3 years.



The **principles** you use to build a channel strategy

Channel shift - the process of change as you optimise your channels

The **elements** of a channel strategy which will be covered individually* denotes the first modules

Throughout development of a channel strategy and action plan, the 'human' element must remain the central focus. Appreciate customer values and the differences in their needs. A digital divide still exists across different parts of the Northern Ireland population (including urban/rural; age; literacy; and socio-economic areas) and any move to provide services through new channels needs to be matched by efforts to increase accessibility.

Key Points to Consider

- Put your customer first: understand the citizen's viewpoint and their perspective of what a quality service looks like – approach from 'outside in' when developing and evaluating service delivery channels.
- Establish what type of contact you and your customers need to have with each other (not necessarily just a continuation of the current system) based upon the nature of the service(s) you and others provide, and the channels available.
- Understand the cost of using the various channels.
- When developing a new channel consider the potential impact in terms of build up of customer traffic, fulfilment capability and the effect on other existing channels.

Reference

DARD Customer Channel Strategy – This document outlines DARD's vision to work with customers to ensure that they can use their services easily, efficiently and effectively and in different ways. Whilst the principles and recommendations within the document are targeted at a very specific customer group, the document itself will be made available for public consultation online at: <http://www.dardni.gov.uk/index/consultations/activeconsultations.htm>

Comments on the strategy can be submitted to DARD through the online feedback form.

Cabinet Office Guidelines – More general guidance on channel strategy development can be found on the Cabinet Office website: http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/media/261368/channel_strategy_modules.pdf



Know your customers - understand their needs

Customer expectations are rising as developments in technology enable increased accessibility and improvements in service. Private sector organisations have taken huge steps in developing new access channels for example banking, travel, online retail, and in doing so have influenced customer behaviour in how they choose – or need – to access their services. As Government departments often have a monopoly in delivery of their particular service they must move to meet or exceed customer expectations to achieve desired channel shift and deliver efficiencies in service delivery.

Key Points to Consider

- Develop an 'insight' into your customer base; this will help you understand varying views, needs and preferred methods of contact and influence your future approach.
- Provide services which are easily accessed, simple to use, streamlined and convenient
- Understand that needs may change depending on the type of issue, type of service, life stage, or previous experience, and retain the flexibility to adapt and refine channels based on feedback and usage patterns
- Be aware of potential barriers such as age, education, skills, language needs, and privacy concerns to help develop a service that is truly accessible
- Citizens will judge your customer service against the same standards as the best of the private sector. Benchmark your service delivery approach against the 'best of breed' in public sector or comparable private sector organisations



Reference

OSNI Online Map Shop – Up until April 2006 government mapping services provided by the former Ordnance Survey of Northern Ireland were accessed by post or over-the-counter from the Colby House Map Shop at Stranmillis. Under the e-Government scheme an online alternative to this service provision was developed to increase access and immediacy to a growing number of customers with online access.

The innovative project aimed to provide, through the website, a comprehensive range of OSNI branded paper and digital mapping data. The result was the <http://maps.osni.gov.uk/> website which has, to date, provided 53,000 items of mapping to customers and accrued an income of £1.7 million.

This service negates the need for a counter, eliminating the need for face to face customer contact, provides 24 hour instant access to the mapping products is accessible from anywhere and provides an address search tool and mapping down to individual building level accurate to 1 metre – surpassing Google capability!

Reference

DEL Essential Skills – The Essential Skills campaign currently has a number of calls to action for potential learners including a text line, the web and direct contact with local colleges. To complement and extend awareness raising, the topic was first profiled on NI Direct Online in September 2009 resulting in a 300% increase in visits to the Essential Skills information site since September 2008.

This has enabled the Department to reduce duplication in its marketing campaign, secure greater value for money in its activities and contribute to the early achievement of the PSA target which aims to ensure that 42,000 adult learners achieve a recognised qualification in Essential Skills by March 2011.



Know your Business - Gather Data

Before embarking on the development of a long term channel strategy and associated migration plan, and agreeing on recommendations for future service delivery, it is vital that you have a thorough understanding of your business area and any requirements and constraints in the operational environment. It is important to gather data on current service delivery and usage across your business area, as this will allow the business to assess the cost, performance and reliability of existing services and put in place realistic plans for potential performance improvement.

Key Points to Consider

- Know your business: What are the top ten things citizens want from you? How do they access this information and these transactions at present?
- Are there statutory or compliance obligations which will influence your service, channel offerings and priorities?
- Collect relevant data on how citizens interact with you – this should include both qualitative and quantitative data depending on your needs; this could be done using surveys, research or feedback forms.
- Analyse the current service access channels used by citizens and businesses, along with those channels' performance and reliability.
- Gather cost-to-serve data on current channels to know what channels actually cost you, to enable you to calculate savings/investments for the future.



Reference

PRONI electronic catalogue - eCATNI – In the Information Age, the customer base of the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland (PRONI) has expanded across geographical boundaries and time-zones. Demand for electronically searchable resources continues to increase as more and more information is made available online. In order to respond to legislative responsibilities such as Freedom of Information and the Data Protection Act, which empower citizens with the legal right to request access to publicly-held information, eighty years of catalogue descriptions relating to PRONI's archival holdings – some 1.5 million entries - were made available through an Electronic Catalogue launched in 2008. At the same time, a programme for digitizing collections and making them available on the Internet commenced with the publication of popular genealogical resources such as wills, street indexes and freeholder records.

Throughout the design process, PRONI engaged with its User Forum - representative across a range of customers, including genealogists, third level education, etc - and regularly consulted and involved the Forum over the selection of material for digitization, on the design (look and feel) of the web and on the development and implementation of the Electronic Catalogue.

The outcome is that visitors to the website now constitute the largest single group of PRONI users. In 2009/10 the number of virtual users totalled 635,460 - and of those 83% were international visitors.

PRONI

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Optimise the Channel Mix

Your approach to channel management will need to demonstrate new ways of delivering services, and is likely to include a mix of appropriate channels in order to provide your customers with a level and type of service delivery that best meets their needs. In developing your approach you might look at how others have utilised IT innovation or it may be appropriate to learn from the private sector.

Your strategy should seek to encourage customers to access, or interact with, services via channels other than those they would normally use, and key goals in optimising channel combinations will include the resolution of queries at first point of contact, and promoting empowerment through enabling citizens to take control of their relationship with government. Both of these will make your service delivery more effective and cost efficient.

Key Points to Consider

- Focus especially on resolution at the first point of contact and empowerment of citizens by ensuring channel combinations are accessible and relevant to the full range of customer groups
- Understand that different people use different channels and channel combinations for different purposes under different circumstances. Identify and analyse customer 'channel jumping' points during the completion of an end to end transaction
- Be innovative in the application of IT - learn from other public and private sector areas where relevant
- Prompt channel shifting at the point of contact when customers access a less effective channel. For example, during face-to-face or telephone contact mention the web channel as an alternative for future contact; include the website address at the bottom of existing paper correspondence
- Identify opportunities to establish and develop new partnerships to improve service delivery and hide the organisational complexities from the customer
- Be aware that channel shift could deliver benefits to another organisation rather than your own.

Reference

Driver & Vehicle Agency - Booking Services – For many years DVA customers had a choice between postal and counter services for booking MOT tests and practical driving tests. However, evidence from annual surveys indicated that customer expectations were changing and that a wider range of booking channels was essential. At the same time the Agency was experiencing a significant surge in demand, for vehicle testing in particular, but because of the pressure to avoid increases in fees it was clear that expansion of traditional booking channels was not an option.

As a result, the Agency decided to introduce telephone and online booking facilities, in addition to the existing services, and to vary its channel mix as customer preferences developed. Around two thirds of customers now book electronically, and delivery capacity is being progressively adjusted to match. Customer satisfaction levels for the Agency's booking services, as measured in monthly surveys, currently average 99-100%. The migration to more cost effective booking options has helped the Agency to maintain the majority of its fees at current levels for over five years, and the MOT fee that a garage in GB can charge is now significantly higher than the comparable figure in NI.



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Plan your Strategy and Set Targets

Your channel strategy, and associated action plan should contain targets to enable you to demonstrate improvements in performance over a specified time period. Targets should be realistic but challenging enough to encourage a change of behaviour both in your staff and your customers. Integrating the principles and approach in day to day operations will help develop a change in culture across the organisation and an increased focus on value of service delivery from the customer perspective.

Key Points to Consider

- Be prepared to adapt to any internal or external factors which may influence your channel planning, incorporating necessary changes to maintain optimal service delivery
- Establish a robust and effective feedback mechanism and adjust service delivery appropriately to demonstrate a willingness to adopt a continuous improvement approach
- Analyse likely future business and customer behaviour, channel preferences and IT developments to inform longer term strategic decisions.
- Consider developing measurable targets in terms of:
 - Percentage shift from existing to newer channels for example from face to face to telephone, or from telephone to online
 - Percentage increase in customer satisfaction ratings
 - Notable improvement in timeliness of service delivery for instance end to end turnaround time
 - Improved accessibility such as 24/7 availability online, or extended hours for telephone contact
 - Reduced cost to serve due to increased uptake of cheaper channels



Reference

nidirect.gov.uk –NI Direct is a new type of government website designed for the citizen. It stems from the Varney Report of 2006 and a subsequent review of NICS websites which showed that many of them were neither up-to-date nor easily accessible. NI Direct requires no knowledge of the workings of government or the structure of departments and is part of the broader programme to improve citizens' access to government information and services, empowering them and making their life simpler. All citizen-facing web content is being consolidated into one site making access easier for the citizen and reducing maintenance costs for Departments & the tax payers.

www.nidirect.gov.uk is a clear demonstration of government in Northern Ireland responding to the need for clear and concise user-friendly information. It is written in language that everyone can understand and it brings together information and services from all government departments and agencies, organised under 16 easily recognisable themes.

It is in line with the Transformational Government agenda and it is a further step in electronic service delivery promoting wide use of online transactions. The development of NI Direct met defined Public Service Agreement (PSA) targets for launch date and consolidation and exceeded targets for expected customer traffic. It currently attracts in excess of 60,000 visits per week – more than 2.1 million visits in the last year.

Encourage your customers to move to preferred channels by introducing a mix of incentives and disincentives. By doing this you will influence behaviour and bring benefit to the business process.

Key Points to Consider

- Reduce cost to citizen, for example via quicker transactions, on-line discount, bonus payments
- Easier to utilise and harder to make errors during transaction, for example pre population of forms
- Provision of helpline facilities
- Range of payment options and payment/delivery tracking facilities
- Guarantee of secure personal data
- Increased priority given to on-line applications, or use of extended deadlines
- Certain 'disincentives' such as making specific channel usage more expensive or switching off certain channels for specific services could be considered but only with care and consideration of potential impact on varied customer groups

Reference

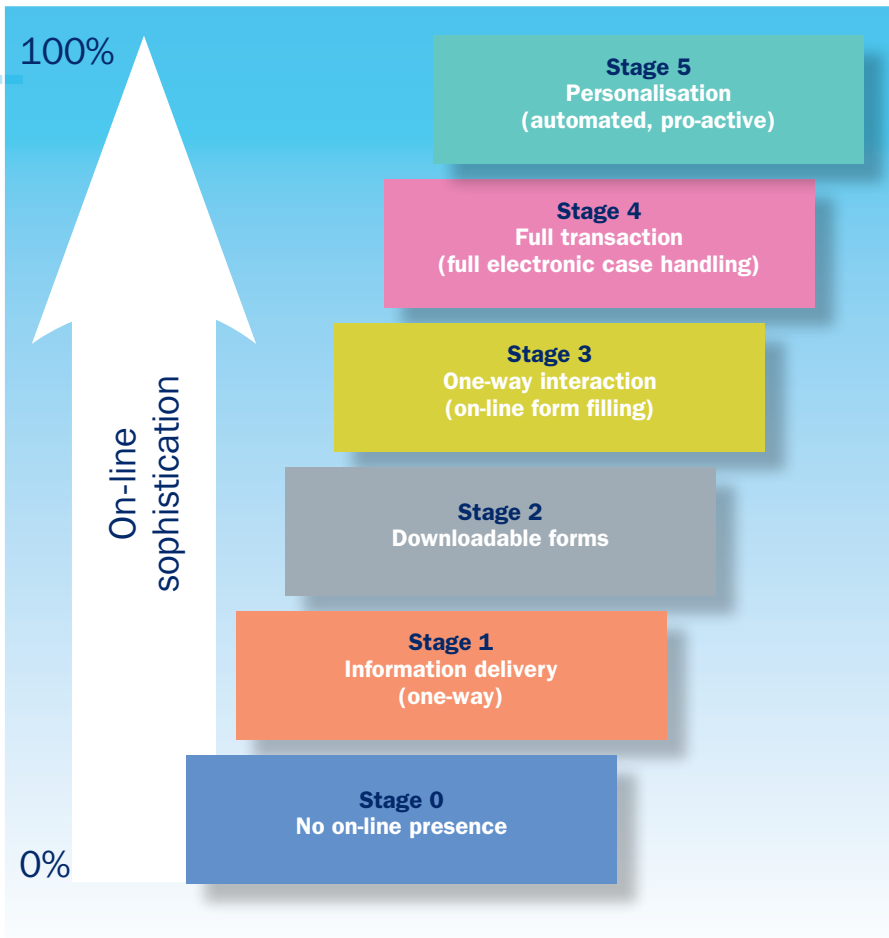
DARD – Farm Modernisation Scheme Applications – Under tranche two of the Farm Modernisation Programme, applications will be scored across four selection criteria with 5 marks being awarded for those applications submitted via the European Union Funding Programmes Grant Application website online facility. The maximum points score available is 95 so the E-communication criterion represents around 5% of the total score.

Promoting the online channel fits well with the aim of the Programme which is to provide support to farmers investing in items of equipment which modernise their agricultural holdings and improve the overall performance of the farm business. Applications to the Programme will be accepted until 26 November 2010.

Efficient Transactions improve Citizen Experience



When defining your approach to channel management and future service delivery it is important that you create a model which has a robust foundation which can be built upon. Uptake of new methods of service delivery will only happen when trust is established in the new channels offered and customer confidence increases. One approach of a staged development for online delivery is illustrated in the model below. The starting point will be dependent on the complexity of your service and where your organisation is in the development of new channel offerings.



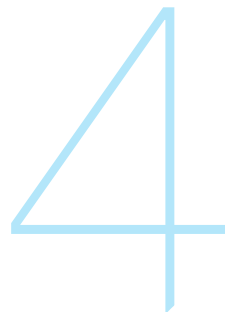
Stage 1 – Emerging Presence represents the provision online of information only. For example: contact details, publication of a scheme, FAQ, or press release.

Stage 2 – Enhanced Presence includes the use of forms online that can be printed and submitted by the citizen, more frequently updated material, and an increased number of links to other content.

Stage 3 – Interactive Presence includes more interactive services such as email and online form filling and submission. Online channels are interactively capturing parts of citizen-government transactions. Access to a wider range of services is available.

Stage 4 – Transactional Presence allows for the completion of a secure transaction to decision stage (like tax returns or benefit claims) entirely via the online channel. Online payment, user passwords and digital signatures may be employed.

Stage 5 – Integrated Presence integrates services across government departments and agencies, where, for example the registration of a birth at a local Council would automatically initiate Child Benefits. There is capacity to instantly access any service in a 'unified package'. Departmental/agency lines of demarcation are removed in cyberspace. Services will be clustered along common needs.



www.

Reference

SSA – State Pension Claims – As part of the modernisation of Public Services and in line with Department of Work and Pensions in Great Britain the Social Security Agency introduced new technology to State Pensions in May 2008. This new technology facilitates the taking of ‘signatureless’ Fresh Claims and notifications of Changes of Circumstances by telephone and negates the need for double-keying of information by staff, thus contributing to process efficiencies, shorter clearance times and increased accuracy.

Before this service was introduced claim applications for State Pension were made on paper forms and took an average of 18 days to clear. Currently 90% of State Pension claims are telephone claims with the rest still paper based. 60% of the telephone claims are cleared on the day of contact in just over 10 minutes and all claims currently take an average of 6.79 days.

55% of change of circumstances are reported by telephone with 78% cleared and processed on the day of contact in just under 4 minutes. The average year to date clearance for change of circumstances is 1.2 days compared to 10 days under the paper based system.

The most recent stage in this transition, State Pension Online (SPOL), is in the final stages of testing with formal launch expected early in 2011. This online service will:

- provide customers with a simple, user friendly, efficient, attractive and secure on-line claims service;
- pre-populate the customers’ State Pension application with the information that we already hold about their circumstances;
- interface with PDSC Customer Account Management (CAM) system thereby eliminating re-keying of data; and
- customers can access the service, via the nidirect website, whenever and wherever they wish.

SPOL will deliver the facility for State Pension claims to be ‘auto awarded’ where all relevant customer information is available, however some exceptions may require manual intervention by a New Claims State Pension Customer Advisor (CA).



Avoiding the Need for Contact

Many people have experienced the frustration of having to contact a government service provider because things have gone wrong or because the information they need is not easily available. They may also have experienced the double frustration of having to contact a service a second or third time having been given inaccurate or incomplete information. Cutting this kind of ‘avoidable’ contact is in everyone’s interests and frees up resources to provide more effective service delivery

Examples of avoidable contact include calls from citizens to chase progress on previous service requests, and contact resulting from the citizen not being able to find the information they need on your website. This sort of contact is usually of little value to either the citizen or your organisation, however, it is often a significant proportion of overall contact volumes - estimated to be around 40 per cent of all calls to contact centres - which means that the cost of handling these calls is significant.

Avoidable contact is a relatively new concept and is an area in which the UK public sector is taking the lead. Where case studies from the public and private sector are available they imply that major improvements in service efficiency and customer satisfaction are achievable. Each Department has its own distinct set of services, its own history and its own unique challenges, all of which affect the level of avoidable contact it has identified and is attempting to eliminate.

Key Points to Consider

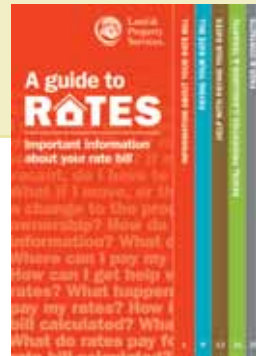
- Capture evidence of avoidable contact and use it to help redesign services to meet needs more effectively and efficiently – in many instances avoidable contact occurs because a service has not been explained properly
- Think about your FAQs: why are these questions being asked so frequently, and can you do anything to provide service users with the answers before they ask?
- Think about continuous improvement – the ongoing success of your service requires flexibility and sustainability
- develop a real understanding of the needs of your service users, and use that understanding to drive lasting service improvements

Reference

Land & Property Service – “A guide to Rates” – LPS devised a comprehensive guide to the domestic and non-domestic rating system, and sent a copy to every ratepayer along with their 2010-2011 rate bill.

The guide explains what rates are and what they pay for, and explains how to pay your rates – and the reliefs and entitlements available to help ratepayers. By explaining the complex rating system, and giving the answers to a range of FAQs, the guide aims to reduce avoidable telephone contact.

The guide is being revised for issue with next year’s rate bills, and will include more detailed information on what your local council uses your rates for.



Conclusion

This guide has been put together as a reference for NICS business areas as they develop their approach to channel management. In the constantly changing environment of improved technology and accessibility to information, Government service providers cannot afford to remain static in their approach to customer service.

This guide is available online at: <http://online.nigov.net/>

Further advice and information on the principles outlined within the Guide, or further detail on any of the reference examples used is available through the following contact points:

NI Direct Project team: **NIDirect.CSG@dfpni.gov.uk**

NI Direct Online Central Editorial team: **feedback@nidirect.gov.uk**

Business Consultancy - for advice and assistance with process re-engineering:
BCS@dfpni.gov.uk

www.

All the info,
all in
one place.

For instant answers on
government services, look online.

nidirect.gov.uk

A direct way is a better way



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A direct way is a better way

Contacting government

Online
Visit www.n1direct.gov.uk and you will find information on government services all in one place.

Frequently used numbers
We have now made it easier by grouping key numbers under themes. Find the theme closest to you and ring the right number.

Government offices
If you would like to speak to someone at a particular office or building, simply look up the appropriate number.

Government Services

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