

# Part 3

## How our focus groups viewed the case study forms

### *In this Part:*

We report on how participants in our focus groups saw:

- The sequence of questions and the structure of forms
- The design of questions
- Documents, fees and other elements often required with forms
- Guidance notes and getting help with forms

3.1 To assess how citizens view government forms we undertook a series of 11 focus groups covering five of our case study forms. For our last form (the European election ballot paper) we used qualitative interviews instead of a focus group. Annex A gives details of the research methods, and Annex C gives a diagnostic tool which agencies can use to assess the level of difficulty of their own forms.

3.2 The central message of this research is that agencies need to adopt a behaviourally realistic approach to how people fill in forms. Given the customer-service orientation of current government policy, the design of forms should be grounded in research into how people actually behave, rather than assuming an ideal-legal citizen who can wade through many questions and extensive guidance notes without difficulty. Of course, no responsible civil servant would wish to encourage people to short-circuit acquiring the best feasible information before they fill in a form. But officials also recognize that it is pointless to devise guidance on an artificial assumption of how people will proceed, which has little basis in research into how people actually do behave. Getting this orientation right is not just a question of using 'plain English' in questions, but also involves the whole way that forms are structured and citizens informed about what they need to do.

3.3 Across all our focus groups the key design features that people ideally wanted for forms and guidance leaflets were:

- A quick start to the form, with simple items first, like name and address to get users going easily (see Box 13 overleaf).
- A few words of mini-explanation for any difficult bits on the form itself, plus giving synonyms for unfamiliar terms.
- A single guidance leaflet that begins on page 1 with a short bit of advice called 'Getting Started' or 'Quick Start', designed to get across just real priority information. The quick-list should preview other elements people will need to fill in the form (such as key documents, or photographs), preferably using pictures or icons.
- A Reference Guide section in the rest of the leaflet should give at least a short note about every question, that people could turn to easily if they got stuck.
- Sections of connected questions in the form and in the guidance need to be numbered simply in the same way, and colour-coded where possible.
- At the exit points from the form and frequently in the leaflet as well, a clearly visible helpline phone number and Website look-up address would be useful.
- Forms should end with a checklist reminding people of other elements they need to send in and giving the postal address to return them.

We explore these issues in more detail below, and Figures 14, 15, 18 and 19 give a guide to the prevalence of some of these features across all Government forms.

## The sequence of questions and the structure of forms

3.4 First impressions of forms are important because of renunciation, the potential for citizens to be put off even starting form packs that seem too lengthy or complex. Our groups found three of the form packs very bulky - the self-assessment tax return, and the applications for student financial support and Attendance Allowance. On all the forms our focus group respondents found the initial layouts on the first page off-putting, with too much text and too many instructions.

### Focus group comment on the photo card driving licence application

*'Its busy, intense, squashed'.*

### Box 13: The renunciation problem and under-claiming of Attendance Allowance

Many old people in the Attendance Allowance groups said they wondered if completing the two forms could be worth what looked to be the amount of trouble involved. Care workers also suggested that the front of the application should give more indication of incentives to motivate people to complete it. After all, the allowance pays eligible people a significant amount of money weekly for an indefinite period, once the form is completed.

### Inland Revenue self-assessment tax return

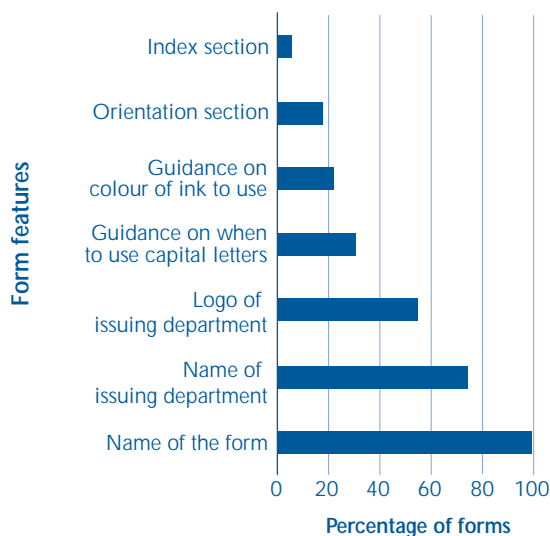
*'I am just horrified by it because I don't know where to begin.'*

### Attendance Allowance form

*'There is far too much all at once, especially if you're not feeling well.'*

*'They could make this form a lot smaller which is less daunting because they see all this information and they go into panic mode don't they?'*

## 14 Basic form features that appear on the front page that facilitate 'quick and assured' start up



Source: National Audit Office census of Government forms

3.5 Respondents wanted forms to start quickly and simply, and to look up guidance only where really necessary (see Box 14). But four of our six forms routed people to very substantial guidance notes. Many of our respondents were very reluctant to even open these notes, unless they felt completely at a loss. Only small minorities conscientiously sat down to read preambles and long sections of guidance on what they should do first. Even they were somewhat defeated. One person in the passport group complained that she read the four text-heavy pages of initial guidance, only to forget what she was supposed to be doing on the form itself by the time she reached the end.

3.6 The biggest problem for our respondents concerned complexities in the sequencing of questions. Agencies often prefer to have a single form catering for multiple types of user, rather than several forms targeted at different groups (see Part 2). As a result:

- The internal structure of forms becomes complex and harder to follow, with some parts relevant to one category of users but not others.
- Users have to read through many more questions in order to find the ones which relate to them.
- Uncertain users may fill in sections not relevant to them, often finding the questions perplexing because they are not meant to be tackling them.
- Other users may leave blank sections that they really need to fill in. After scanning several sections and finding them irrelevant, people start skipping boxes, which then can carry on across mandatory elements, specially signature boxes often hidden at the ends of forms after less well-used sections or questions.

**Box 14: Slow start versus quick start**

Rather than encouraging a 'quick start', most of our case study forms actually stated on the front page that users should read lengthy guidance notes before or during the completion process.

• Please read the notes called 'HE1 Notes' before you fill in this form.

You must read booklet INF1D when filling in this form.

Please carefully read the accompanying Information Guide as you complete the form in order to avoid mistakes which may lead to the delay of your application.

Although the European elections ballot paper was unfamiliar to British voters in 1999, it was clearly designed to be picked up and used without any complex introduction or explanation. The instruction on the ballot paper itself provided essential quick start guidance, saying 'You have one vote' and 'Mark in one box'.

**You have one vote.**

→

Mark  X  
in one  
box.

|  |   |  |  |  |
|--|---|--|--|--|
|  |  |  |  |  |
| <b>British National Party</b>  | <b>Labour Party</b>   | <b>Natural Law Party</b>   | <b>Pro Euro Conservative Party</b>   | <b>Scottish Green Party</b>  |
| Kenneth Angus Smith  | David Weir Martin   | James Barr McKissock   | Paul Gillman Dwyer   | Maria  |
| Scott McLean   | William Ronald Miller   | George William Stidolph  | Joanna Susan Lavender  | Elean  |
| Russell Bradley  | Catherine Dalling Taylor  | Diana Jocelyn Kras   | Douglas Roy McConchie  | Philip   |
| Mark Allen   | Christine Elizabeth Mary May  | Kenneth Robert Blair   | Richard William Ashurst  | Graer  |

Some respondents complained that the ballot did not explain the system, or say how many people would be elected. Because all of each party's candidates were listed on the form, substantial numbers of respondents also believed that everyone in the winning party's list would be elected at one go, rather than their being chosen from across the parties in proportion to votes cast. But the ballot paper was highly fault-tolerant, registering the votes of these misconceived respondents as easily as those with more accurate views.

**European Elections ballot paper**

*'It's useless information because you don't have any choice. You are not selecting a candidate.'*

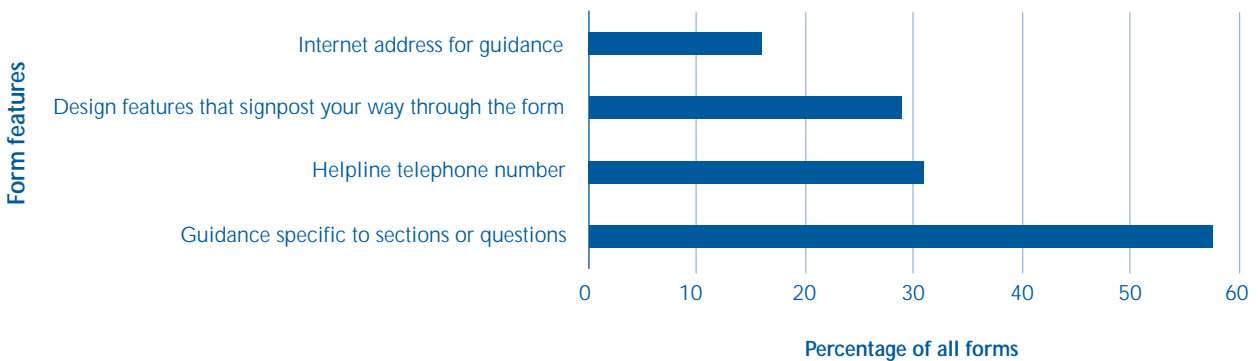
*'Much too big. Yes too big. Too much information.'*

## Photocard driving licence application

'The eyes tend to cross over from section 1 to 3, rather than go down columns from 1 to 2.'

'My overall impression is that they were desperately trying to fit it all on one A4.'

### 15 Basic form features that provide help with sequencing or navigation

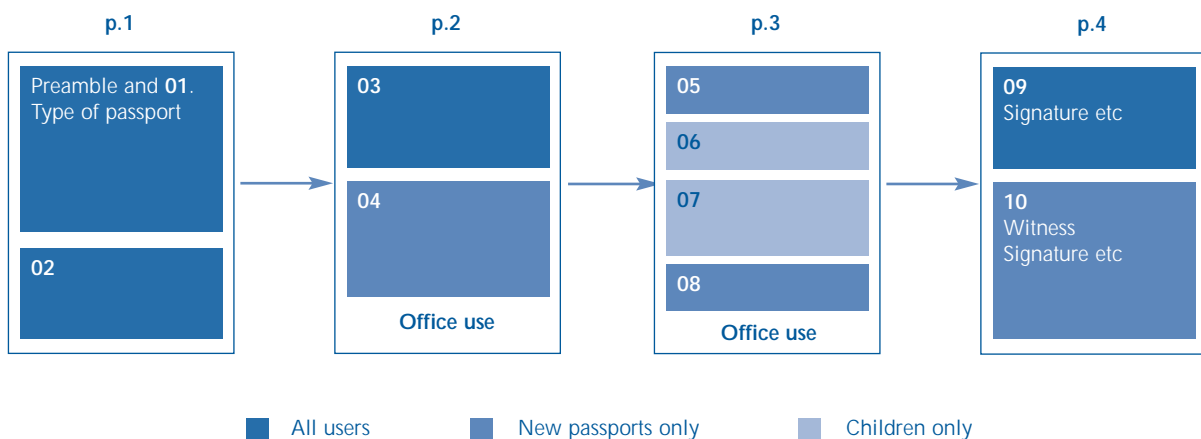


Source: National Audit Office census of Government forms

### Box 15: Sequencing in the passport application

The passport application has a complex sequencing of parts for three categories of customer, those renewing an existing passport, people applying for a new passport, and applications for children's passports (Figure 16). Most respondents in our focus group only tried to complete a renewal application, but many also filled in one, two or three of the sections required for a new passport. The presence of three age categories of children is also not well signposted. Many respondents believed that there should be a separate application form for children's passports, and some felt that renewing a passport should have its own short form. The Passport Service will retain a single form in a new version issued in 2004, but aims to achieve a simpler and more streamlined structure.

### 16 The sequence of questions in the current passport application



Source: National Audit Office

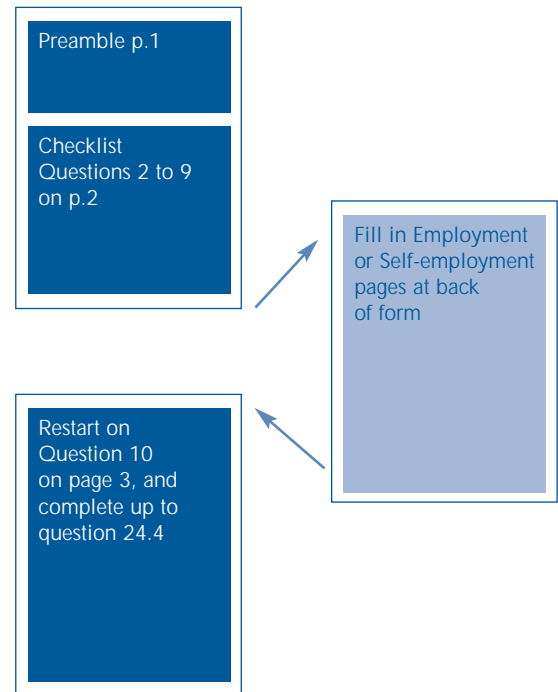
### Box 16: Sequencing in the income tax self-assessment return

The core return has additional pages for different types of tax payers bound in after it, so that each type of customer already gets a form tailored to their needs. **Figure 17** shows that users are supposed to look at the first page, tick boxes on the second page, turn to the employment pages (section 1) or self-employment pages (section 3) at the back of their form and fill these in, then turn back to page 3 and the beginning of the core form questions. In our focus groups none of the respondents noticed the directional information provided in the form of green flashes, instead turning directly from page 2 to page 3, where the first question is numbered 10. Within the core tax return there are filter questions at the top of most pages (and sometimes half way down), which are designed to avoid people having to read through every question. But in many cases the filter questions are too general or the issues asked about are too eclectic, so that respondents said they still had to plough through the component questions in each section. Our focus group participants felt that the sequence of questions within the core return appears to follow an accounting logic, grouping together questions which an accountant might see as related. An alternative sequence, which grouped together the most commonly relevant questions, would have been easier.

### Inland Revenue self-assessment form

*'The green flashes seem the other way round. They give you the things to ignore first. It's not immediately apparent which ones apply to you.'*

### 17 How users are supposed to answer questions in the income tax self assessment form



Source: National Audit Office

- 3.7 All these problems especially affect first-time users of a form and citizens who have the most problems in reading and understanding them. When respondents ran into such difficulties they said that they may tend to leave off doing the form altogether, or to postpone finishing it until they can get someone else to help. Alternatively they may plough on less attentively, simply trying to get to the end. Three examples illustrate the problems here (Boxes 15 to 17).
- 3.8 Across all our focus groups, it was apparent that people often miss routing instructions in forms because they are not very visible. Most forms are printed in just one or two colours, so that directions are easy to miss - as in the passports form, which is a uniform brown throughout. Even in the income tax form which is the most colourful one we studied, some directions were poor, see Box 18 overleaf.

**Box 17: Sequencing in the higher education financial support forms**


These forms for new students applying for funding for their university studies are designed to be filled in by two groups. Over four fifths of applicants are school leavers still living with their parents, while the remainder are mostly mature students living independently or in families of their own. Each form has three different sequencing patterns - page numbers, question numbers and a large number of 'Parts' with two to ten questions in each. School students should fill in only around half the Parts, at various places in the form. On the new pilot form (called PN1) students should fill in Parts 1 to 7, 9 to 11, and 15, while their parents should fill in Parts 13 to 15, unless they are claiming 'non income-assessed support only', when they should fill in parts 1 to 8 and 15. In our focus groups many students worked through virtually the whole form, trying to give responses wherever they could. The PN1 form has extra guidance for students and parents on which sections to fill in. But in our focus groups only one person in 24 fully understood the routing instructions given, or could work out the reasons for them. Everyone else spent time getting stuck, worrying over whether questions applied to them, puzzling over why seemingly inappropriate information was being asked of them, comparing answers with fellow students, or asking their parents or teachers for help.

- 3.9 Routing instructions, telling users where to go, are usually provided only as text. None of the forms we looked at uses photographs, icons, diagrams or pictures to show people which bits of a multi-user form they should fill in. This approach was suggested by Siemens Business Systems (which scans and pre-processes forms for the Passport Service) and will be incorporated in the Service's revised form guidance. Pictures are helpful for people with literacy difficulties. They could be especially effective in a quick guide or a 'Getting Started' section at beginning of the guidance, rather than users having to find them in a lengthy text. Giving brief story examples illustrated by a photo could also help in routing people where forms have to cope with multiple users.
- 3.10 But the most consistent and forcefully expressed demand from focus group respondents was for separate forms to be filled in by different groups of people, an approach used, for example, by DVLA who created separate applications for licences to drive heavy goods vehicles. Especially where a group of people are all filling in the same form at the same time, and yet it is not tailored for purpose, they can come to have an adverse view of the agencies concerned, as both focus groups of school students did about the higher education support forms. Similarly people born in the UK with British citizens as parents wanted to be able to say this simply on their passport application, and not to have to answer questions directed to people with more complex histories of naturalization or arrival in the UK from overseas.
- 3.11 Some forms include blank spaces or boxes, where people are supposed to write in any additional or alternative kinds of information. But these fall-back facilities are poorly signposted and few of our respondents noticed their existence or would have used them when they were uncertain what to write. A quick and standard way of signposting would be helpful in knowing where to put supplementary information: for example, 'More to say? - Write it in on page 4, box 2'.
- 3.12 The ends of forms often created difficulties. Signature boxes for legal reasons are always placed towards the ends, and are often surrounded by dense declarations text. Often users with simpler needs have to skim through later sections of forms primarily to find the signature box. Regrouping the questions that different sets of users need to answer into discrete parts of the forms, might also mean having separate signature boxes at different stages, so users could sign off immediately. These sections could perhaps be colour-coded for easy reference ('If you are in category X, fill in the pink parts of the form'). Wherever the signature is, respondents wanted a 'What to do next' checklist section also to remind users to send in documents, photographs, fees and so on, a feature liked on the driving licence pilot D1 form and in the passport application envelope (see Box 19). Addresses to post forms back to and helpline numbers or Web sites would also be useful here.

**Box 18: Directions and the use of colour in the self-assessment form**

Directional routing that focus groups participants found helpful occurs in the self-employment pages. Self-employed people with turnover less than £15,000 a year can fill in the three boxes shown below, instead of giving the fuller accounting information required from larger businesses.

**Income and expenses - annual turnover below £15,000**


*If your annual turnover is £15,000 or more, ignore boxes 3.24 to 3.26. Instead fill in Page SE2* 

*If your annual turnover is below £15,000, fill in boxes 3.24 to 3.26 instead of Page SE2. Read the Notes, page SEN2.*

- Turnover including other business receipts and goods etc. taken for personal use (and balancing charges from box 3.23) **3.24** £
- Expenses allowable for tax (including capital allowances from box 3.22) **3.25** £

Net profit (put figure in brackets if a loss) **3.26** £

box 3.24 minus box 3.25

*You must now fill in Page SE3* 

Lack of directional routing that participants found unhelpful affects Box 18.3 of the main return. (In 2002-3 this section should be filled in by some 4.2 million taxpayers submitting after September in each year to state their liability to tax, if any). Yet this key box is hidden away anonymously in a string of other boxes, mostly relevant only for accountants.

**OTHER INFORMATION for the year ended 5 April 2003, continued**

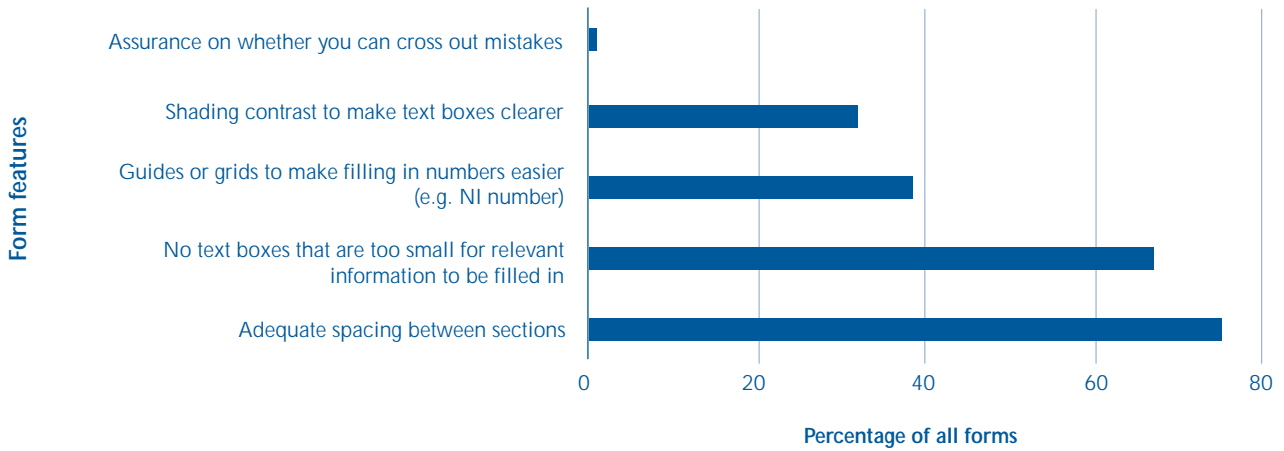
**Q18** Do you want to calculate your tax and, if appropriate, any Student Loan Repayment? **YES**  Use your Tax Calculative Code then fill in boxes 18.1 to 18.8 as appropriate.

- Unpaid tax for earlier years included in your tax code for 2002-03 **18.1** £
- Tax due for 2002-03 included in your tax code for a later year **18.2** £
- Student Loan Repayment due **18.2A** £
- Total tax, Class 4 NIC and Student Loan Repayment due for 2002-03 before you made any payments on account (put the amount in brackets if an overpayment) **18.3** £
- Tax due for earlier years **18.4** £
- Tax overpaid for earlier years **18.5** £
- Tick box 18.6 if you are claiming to reduce your 2003-04 payments on account. Make sure you enter the reduced amount of your first payment in box 18.7. Then, in the 'Additional information' box, box 23.5 on page 9, say why you are making a claim **18.6**
- Your first payment on account for 2003-04 (include the pence) **18.7** £
- Any 2003-04 tax you are reclaiming now **18.8** £

**Use of colour in the income tax self-assessment form**

Colour coding indicates the sections that different groups of taxpayers need to fill in, and this carries over to the information booklet also for easier reference. Our groups found the colour coding helpful, but it refers only to supplementary pages rather than to the core form and most users will have only one or two differently coloured sets of pages. Within the main body of the form, respondents did not notice green colour dashes supposed to direct them where to go, nor blue-shaded boxes scattered across the form, supposed to indicate particularly key boxes to fill in. Many of these problems are sorted out in the new Short Tax Return which makes exemplary use of colour.

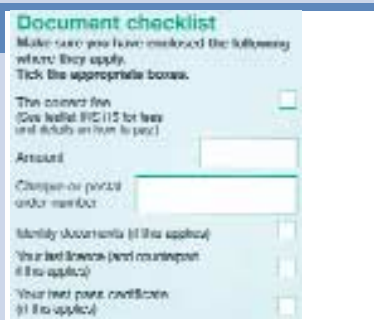
**18** Basic design features on the form that improve clarity during the filling out process



Source: National Audit Office census of Government forms

**Box 19: Ending forms with a checklist**

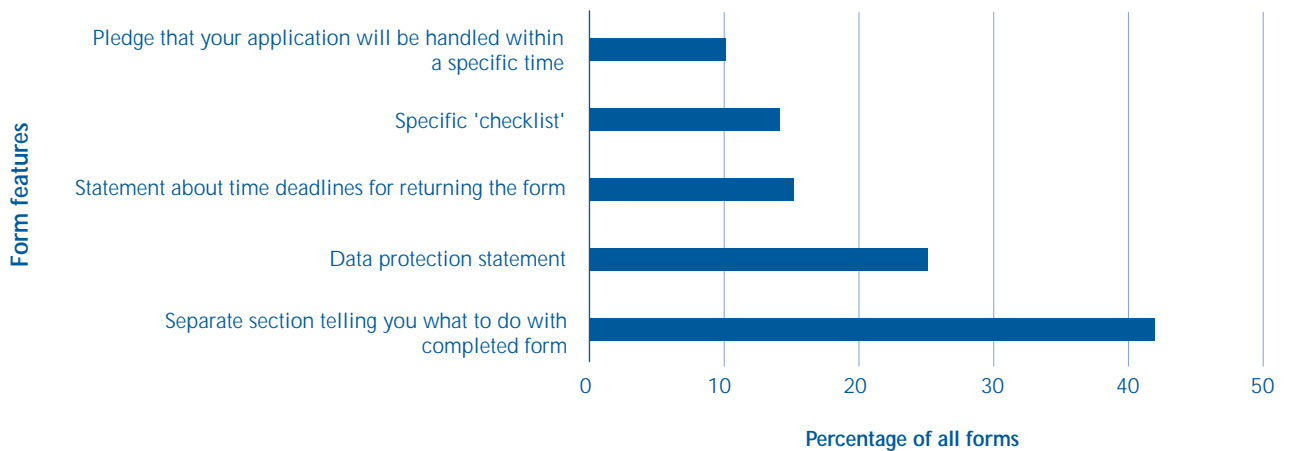
The new D1 driving licence



The checklist inside the passport application envelope



## 19 Basic features offering guidance and information at the end of the filling in progress



Source: National Audit Office census of Government forms

## The design of questions

3.13 The need to use straightforward language in government forms has been a theme of press commentary and interest group campaigns for many years, and most analysed here already do so. The HE1 and HE2 forms produced by the Department for Education and Skills carry the 'crystal mark' logo of the Plain English Campaign. But designing effective questions involves more than just the words used (as the Campaign recognizes). Our focus groups ideally wanted to be asked unambiguous questions to which they can give simple replies, for instance by ticking 'Yes'/'No' boxes. They encountered difficulties wherever questions came across to them in an ambiguous way or generated uncertainty about what was being asked for.

3.14 Sometimes a wide gap can open up between the official label used for something and the way it is described in the media or ordinary conversation. For example, the HE1 and HE2 forms refer to:

- *non-income assessed support*, which means 'the bulk (75 per cent) of the student loan, the element available to all irrespective of income'; and to
- *income-assessed support*, which means 'an additional amount of loan (up to 25 per cent of the maximum amount), plus help with the university tuition fees', both elements available on a means tested basis.

In our focus groups only one young person in 24 could translate what the official terminology meant. And for the Attendance Allowance form, some care workers believe that speaking of 'attendance' seems to suggest attending somewhere else (rather than being attended to). The label may contribute to under-application by those old people who are most isolated at home by physical or mental disability and rarely go out, a core group who the benefit is supposed to help.

3.15 Technical or legally specific terms used in forms often created problems for people in our groups (see [Box 20 overleaf](#)). Mistakes where people fill in boxes not applying to them can often be simply ignored by the staff who are processing forms, who are more expert in the form's requirements. But even so, struggling with unfamiliar terms often adds to citizens' difficulties in filling in the form, even if it may not materially affect the application or can be corrected ([Figure 20 overleaf](#)).

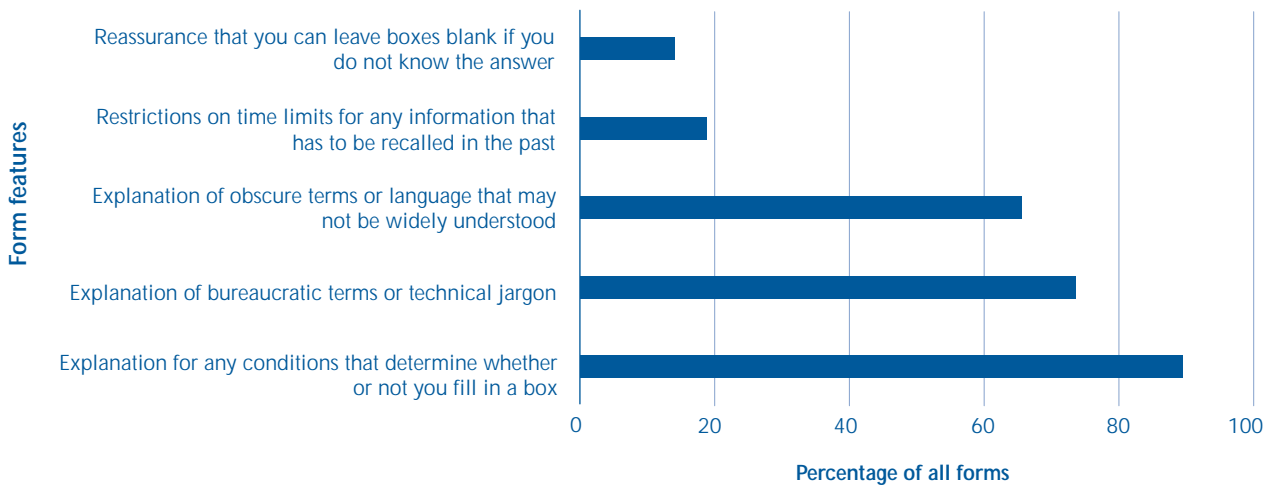
### *Inland Revenue self-assessment form*

*'I know it is written in English. But they need to put it in sentences that the average person can understand.'*

*'The whole thing looks to me like it was put together by accountants for accountants.'*

3.16 Questions that are too vague, open-ended or susceptible to different meanings create problems (see [Box 21 overleaf](#)).

**20 Basic form features that offer guidance for uncertainty over terms used or information required**



Source: National Audit Office census of Government forms

**Box 20: Are you 'naturalised'?**

On the passport form a question asks whether people have been 'naturalised' or registered as a British National. Many respondents for whom this was not relevant (because they were born in the UK from UK parents) nonetheless filled it in, fearing that to leave it blank would be taken as meaning they had no British citizenship.



3.17 Questions that seem too over-specific also cause problems for people. Passport applicants born after 1982 and seeking new passports, must supply information about their father's and mother's birthplace, and under the British Nationality Act 1981 this will extend to the grandparents of applicants born after January 1983. And the HE1 form and its replacement ask teenagers about their past in an open-ended way, which they found difficult to interpret (see Box 22 on page 48).

3.18 The introductory text on the forms themselves often set a tone that our respondents found worrying. Users of the driving licence form objected to initial sentences where the agency said 'We will not accept forms filled in ...' finding the phrasing authoritarian. They asked why not put such an important point more tactfully, as: 'We cannot accept...'

3.19 Citizens dislike re-supplying information to an agency which they feel they have already given, or that the agency should have. For the self-assessment tax form, employees saw it as odd that they have look up on their P60s and then write out for Inland Revenue information about their salaries and tax paid which they believe that the department must know already (see Box 4). Similarly our focus groups of old people were unhappy that the Attendance Allowance form asked them to provide such information on their dealings with the department, when it must already 'have all this stuff on computer'. Care workers believe the current form is difficult for even them to fill in. It can often take several hours or repeat visits to an old person to assemble the required information. There is also a lot of duplication between the two higher education forms HE1 (sent or handed out to students in February/March) and HE2 (distributed in April/May), hence the Department's initiative to merge them (see Box 17). The first pages of the HE2 form are exactly the same as those asked of students in form HE1, which occasioned many adverse comments in the group which looked at both forms.

**Photocard driving licence application form**

**'They say they "will not accept this application unless.....". So rude! Why not say 'we will be unable to accept?'**

**Box 21: Overly repeated questions in the Attendance Allowance form**

In the current Attendance Allowance form a sequence of open-ended questions asks applicants to explain 'in your own words' their difficulties with getting up and getting dressed, moving around their house or flat, making meals, taking medication, going out, and so on. Users are given a lot of space to fill in across seven pages and are asked separately about daytime and night-time problems. Our groups found these questions very confusing. People found themselves entering the same information time and again, referring to the same problems - causing many of them to fear that they had misunderstood what was being asked. People could not partition their own experience into the fine-tuned categories used by the forms designers (see below for the information required from pensioners about problems during the night or in bed).

The new pilot form cuts these questions down to two pages, and care workers in our focus groups believe it is significantly easier to use.

**Describe in your own words the problems you have and the help you need getting out of bed in the morning or into bed at night.**

**Describe in your own words the problems you have and the help you need when you are in bed.**

**Tell us about any equipment you use to help you when you are in bed. Tell us how the equipment helps you and how useful it is. Tell us if someone helps you use the equipment.**

**Describe in your own words the problems you have and the help you need with your toilet needs.**

During the day

During the night

**Describe in your own words the problems you have and the help you need with medical treatment. And tell us what would happen if you did not take your medication.**

During the day

During the night

**Attendance Allowance form**

*'It's a silly question - "Tell us what would happen if you don't take medication"! I'd die!'*

*'You are forced to write down your disabilities again in order to say how long you have had them'.*

**Inland Revenue self-assessment form**

*'Every year they ask you [this]... Surely they have records!'*

**Attendance Allowance form**

*'With computers, they know all this'.*

**Box 22: Asking school leavers about their past**

On the HE1 form respondents complained that people who have arrived in the UK from overseas are asked to give their arrival date to the nearest day and month, even if this was many years ago. Similarly people are asked to list every place where they have lived for the last 3 years with precise dates. Another question asks: 'Have you always lived in the UK...?' and asks for all periods outside the UK to be itemised.

17 Were you born in the United Kingdom (UK), the Channel Islands or the Isle of Man? (Please read the notes on Q17.)

Yes ▶ District where you were born

Sub-district where you were born

Please send us your original birth or adoption certificate, which we will return to you.

No ▶ Your country of birth

Your place of birth (for example, the name of the town or village)

The date you came to the UK  (DD/MM/YYYY)

The reason you came to the UK

Please send us your passport, which we will return to you, and a letter or other documents filled in by a responsible person confirming information about your birth.

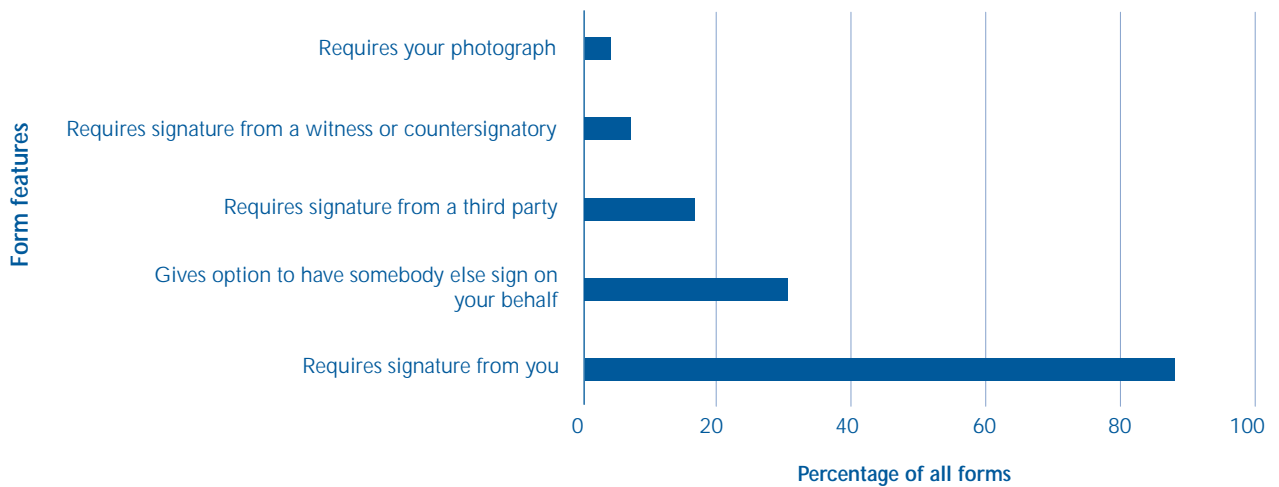
3.20 We also asked all of our groups about how they felt about divulging the information asked for on government forms and how much assurance they were given about how their information would be kept or used by government. Most respondents felt that they were told very little on the forms or in the guidance leaflets about who would have access to the information they supplied or the conditions under which it could be used. They complained that there was no proper Data Protection Act statement on forms, nor a 'Privacy Policy' such as that found on private companies' forms and Web sites. Respondents worried about identity theft, and about information getting into the wrong hands, especially on the student financial support forms (HE2 and PN1) - where sensitive income information goes to local authority staff, rather than to civil servants. People disliked vague statements on some forms that information they supplied could 'be made available' to unspecified 'other government agencies'. Public sector agencies at present seem to rely on an inherited

reputation for trustworthiness. They should consider giving citizens more explicit assurances on forms that their information will always be treated as confidential except in some specific circumstances, such as formal investigations by law and order or fraud agencies.

**Documents, fees and other elements often required with forms**

3.21 Departments and agencies issuing forms rarely seem to consider an overall picture of the compliance costs faced by individuals filling them in. Officials correctly point out that they are not responsible for the extent to which people have their affairs or paperwork well organised. But this stance may also underlie a problem that cropped up in many of our focus groups, that forms rarely mention at the start what documents, photographs or other material people will need to complete and return them correctly.

## 21 Basic signature and photo submission requirements of forms



Source: National Audit Office census of Government forms

3.22 Documentation requests can be sources of anxiety for users of forms. On the passport form, there is a question about lost passports where people are asked to give details of a document that they no longer have. The national higher education support form HE1 says applications should be returned to people's local council, with a passport or birth or adoption certificate to establish their identity. But in one of our focus groups, students reported that a particular local authority's staff sent them away when they went with these documents, and required them also to produce an NHS medical card.

3.23 Where forms require photographs, agencies often have quite demanding requirements for the kinds of photographs they will accept, especially with scanned-in forms. Our respondents liked the guidance issued with the photocard driving licence application, which shows examples of what an acceptable photograph looks like, and also shows common mistakes, such as photos that are too light or dark, too close up, or taken against the wrong kind of background. In this context a set of pictures is worth a thousand words.

3.24 Some forms require citizens to authenticate information by obtaining witnesses for photographs or supplying the name of professionals who will verify information provided (Figure 21). For passports, the need for establishing identities was well recognised, however the whole arrangements for counter-signatories were seen as troublesome. Since summer 2002 the Passport Service has been using a wider range of counter-signatories than in the past. To enhance potential identity and security checks, the Passport Service now ask counter-signatories to give their own passport number. Some counter-signatories object that their passport number thus becomes accessible to applicants, a complaint made by the BMA, and which came up in two of our focus groups. For attendance allowance, respondents did not like the

fact that they have to nominate so many different people (four) for the department to consult. Respondents mostly wanted to just rely on their doctor validating their condition. But some also said that their doctor might not know as much as the district nurse or a care worker about their home lives. Others suggested that doctors nowadays often require payment for signing anything.

3.25 Where forms have fees, incorrect payments are potent additional sources of error. This is the single biggest cause of mistakes in mailed-in applications to the Passport Service. The passport fees leaflet is also presented in a complex way, with 19 different types of application, although there are in fact actually only three main fee levels. Respondents suggested giving an address for a simple web page checker or a phone hotline just to check fees, an option under consideration by the Passport Service.

## Guidance notes and other help with forms

3.26 Four of the forms studied here had substantial guidance leaflets accompanying them - the exceptions being the ballot paper and the Attendance Allowance form (which has only a small leaflet). The bigger leaflets show similar characteristics:

- They are comprehensive in a kind of legal or administrative style, spending most space and effort on explaining users' obligations to supply particular types of information, defining specialist terms, or explaining exceptions. For instance, the notes and guidance accompanying the income tax self assessment return are 68,000 words long.

- The leaflets all start with long preambles or background material in a 'throat-clearing' way and explain material using text only. The leaflets are not organised in any fashion that would help people to start filling in the form quickly. For instance, the Passports Service leaflet in use until early 2004 begins with four pages of introductory material before telling people how to put letters into the boxes for scanning.
  - Agencies primarily seem to view the guidance leaflets as explaining what matters to them (in official terms) in the form, rather than anticipating what citizens might want to know.
  - In addition to the leaflet explanations, there are often wordy and crowded bits of text at the top of the forms themselves, taking up 10 to 20 per cent of the form space.
  - Where further information is available to form users via a call centre or the agency's Web site, this information is often not prominently highlighted on the form or in the guidance.
- 3.27 In none of our focus groups did more than a small conscientious minority of users try to read the guidance first before beginning to try and fill in the form. Several users pointed out inconsistencies between instructions in leaflets and at the start of forms, as in the passport form. The extent to which people ignored the leaflets and even the start of forms in part reflects the fact that the information provided is not currently designed well to meet users' needs. The guidance provided is too bulky and users find it off-putting. Many respondents remarked of leaflets or form preambles that: 'It looks heavy, very heavy' or 'There's too much!' People deplored so much text and pointed out that pictures or diagrams could often say things more dramatically. On the self-assessment return the tax calculation guide does provide a tool for users, but it was seen by many respondents as unusable for people who are not professionally trained. In the form itself, filter questions were provided but they did not always work (**Box 23**).
- 3.28 Many users complained that when they got stuck on a question and looked it up in the guidance provided, there was nothing at all written about it. The school leavers filling in the HE1 and HE2 forms particularly contrasted them unfavourably with university admission forms, where every question is explained. When people looked in the guidance without finding what they needed, they often gave up on the guidance leaflet altogether and resorted to trying to guess what was meant, or else they sought advice from a friend or family member. They rarely went back to the guidance once it had failed them once or twice.
- 3.29 We noted in paragraph 3.3 above our respondents' suggestions for a 'getting started' page at the front of guidance leaflets. Respondents suggested that it should be light on text and use pictures as much as feasible, so as to look accessible. For instance, it could illustrate how to fill the form in (especially for scanned forms where clear writing is needed). It might include pictures of documents that users need - so that people do not start on the form only to discover later on that they don't have a key document to hand. Where photos are needed, pictures showing how they should be taken are greatly appreciated by users. Where different users must use the same form the start guide could also use pictures to show the sections relevant for each. Later on in the reference section of the guidance, picture or illustration elements could again be useful - for instance, on the tax form guidance in explaining turnover, costs and profits for self-employed people, or using pictures to illustrate lists of what things count as allowable costs and what do not. All our respondents complained of the difficulty of finding material they wanted in guidance leaflets full of unrelieved text. Small photos, icons or diagrams can help people scanning through in a hurry to recognise material relevant to what they need.

### **Box 23:** *Filter questions and guidance notes on the self-assessment return*

For the self-assessment tax form, the guidance notes (between 34 and 51 pages long) were seen as cumbersome and too long and detailed. Information that could have been given on the core form was not there, and some filter questions were confusing. For instance, question 10 asks: 'Did you receive any income from UK savings and investments?' Million of savers hold the popular ISA, Tessa and PEP accounts and they must apparently tick 'Yes' here. Users are next instructed to fill in the boxes on that page, which all relate to taxed interest except for boxes 10.12 to 10.14 - so ISA holders for example could find themselves entering their interest received here with zero tax deducted. Only if they turn to the notes for question 10 in the guidance leaflet will they find wording saying that these accounts are excluded. Respondents asked why question 10 did not say 'any taxable income', rather than 'any income'.