

# Preface

To gather information and implement government policy, central departments and agencies issue and receive back millions of paper forms per year, as well as handling a minority of forms by phone and the Internet. How well the bedrock tasks of issuing and processing forms are accomplished can have significant implications in shaping both the cost efficiency of departments and agencies, and how citizens perceive the public services.

This study focuses on how public sector organizations design their forms, why some forms are seen as difficult to fill in by many people, and what can be done to ensure that forms impose the lowest feasible burden upon citizens. The key findings and conclusions are:

- Major improvements are feasible in the design and usability of government forms. Agencies which focus hard on reducing the length of their forms can now cut the burdens imposed on citizens dramatically in some cases, by focusing their information-gathering better and making more use of modern IT systems' potentialities.
- Departments and agencies need to use diverse methods to keep their forms under review and to speed up changes in response to problems. Officials need to take a behaviourally realistic view of how citizens fill in forms and to cut back the length of guidance leaflets as well as forms themselves. Forms and guidance should be designed to facilitate a 'quick start' approach by people.
- Agencies may need to reappraise the common pattern of making diverse groups of citizens fill in a single form. By using 'customer segmentation' techniques, handling different groups of people in well-focused ways, agencies can often greatly simplify citizens' tasks.

The report identifies good practice across six major departments and agencies and collates the responses of a range of focus groups, where citizens looked in detail at government forms. In addition we will be publishing in the near future a supporting guide on *Reviewing and Improving Government Forms*, which will be available on the NAO Web site at [www.nao.gov.uk](http://www.nao.gov.uk) and at the LSE and UCL website at [www.GovernmentOnTheWeb.org](http://www.GovernmentOnTheWeb.org). The paper will help agencies evaluate their forms and research ways of improving their ease of use and effectiveness.

