reform scotland

BRIEFING......PUBLIC SERVICES NEED INTERNET JUMP-START

FAST FACTS

- Government wants digital progress across public services
- Up to half of schools have no website
- In some regions, almost 40% of GP practices have no website
- All public services need an online presence. This requires not just health boards or local authorities to have websites, but individual GP practices and schools as well

BACKGROUND

In Reform Scotland's report 'Patients First: Improving Access to GP Practices', published in September 2012, we highlighted the wide variation in the online presence of GP practices, looking particularly at Edinburgh CHP and NHS Borders. While some had fully functioning websites which enable users to make appointments and repeat prescription requests online, others had no online presence at all; not even basic contact details.

This prompted Reform Scotland to investigate whether a similar situation exists within other health boards and other areas of the public sector. As a result, we examined two more health board areas and looked at the situation regarding the online presence of Scotland's schools in four local authorities.

CONTEXT

The internet has become an indispensable tool in the developed world, and is fast repeating this in the developing world. In a relatively short timescale, it has become one of the great inventions of mankind.

Although there may be inter-generational differences in relation to the extent to which people use new technology, more and more people are living internet-driven lifestyles, given the move towards smartphones and tablets.

The Scottish Government clearly recognises the importance of being at the leading edge of internet use and development; it has a national indicator to "widen the use of the internet"[i] and launched *Scotland's Digital Future – Delivery of Public Services* in September 2012, setting out a vision of digital technology which:

- provides a foundation for innovative, integrated public services
- captures patterns of service use and feedback so that users are more involved in service design/improvement
- provides a firm basis for a shared commitment to, and responsibility for, public services

RESEARCH

Reform Scotland widened the scope of the research in its September 2012 report to include GP practices in NHS Highland and Forth Valley and schools (meaning primary, secondary, specialist and special needs schools funded by the local authority) in Glasgow, Fife, South Ayrshire and Aberdeenshire council areas.

We used lists of schools and GP practices on council and health board websites and used online searches to see if each had a website. We were not concerned how detailed or interactive the website was, or even if it was simply a basic one-page site hosted on the council or board's own site, we simply wanted to know if the school or GP practice had any online presence.

COUNCIL AREA	NUMBER OF SCHOOLS	SCHOOLS WITH WEBSITE	SCHOOLS WITH WEBSITE (%)	SCHOOLS WITHOUT WEBSITE (%)
Aberdeenshire	172	169	98	2
South Ayrshire	51	37	73	27
Glasgow	202	126	62	38
Fife	168	80	48	52

AREA	NUMBER OF GP PRACTICES	GP PRACTICES WITH A WEBSITE	GP PRACTICES WITH A WEBSITE (%)	GP PRACTICES WITHOUT A WEBSITE (%)
NHS Borders	26	26	100	0
Edinburgh CHP	78	62	79	21
NHS Forth Valley	70	45	64	36
NHS Highland	109	67	61	39

Our research shows a varied picture, ranging from nearly total coverage to a very low online presence. It is worth highlighting that in NHS Borders all GP practices have at the very least a one page site on the main NHS Borders website, though many of those sites give just very basic information. Similarly in Aberdeenshire, 20 school websites provided only very minimal contact information.

RECOMMENDATION
Though it is clear that the primary concern with regard to GP practices and schools is the service provided, finding out information on how to access the service is also vital.

For busy parents wanting to plan ahead by finding dates for school holidays and events, or patients waking up ill at the weekend and wanting to establish the process for seeing a doctor on Monday morning, the internet could be an indispensable resource for users and providers alike. However, individuals whose public service providers are not online are at a disadvantage and the research undertaken by Reform Scotland would suggest that this affects a substantial number of people.

Basic websites can be inexpensive to design and build and, in the case of schools, there is also an opportunity to involve pupils in their production, as was the case in some of the

websites we came across.

Reform Scotland would aspire to a situation where *all* users of public services could do more online – whether it was checking their medical test results or using a school online payment system. However for this to be a success in the long term, Reform Scotland believes that we need to start with a simple, straightforward step in that direction.

Therefore, **we recommend that there is a requirement placed on any organisation, public or independent, which is providing a service to the public and is in receipt of public money, such as a school or GP practice, that they must have a website containing at least basic contact details and how services are accessed (such as opening hours).**

NEXT STEPS
The Scottish Government's Digital Future publication stressed the ambition for "*citizens and businesses to access public information and services in the same seamless and effortless way that they access services from the highest rated online commercial offerings*". For this to be achieved we need to start with the basics and Reform Scotland believes our recommendation can help contribute towards this longer term ambition.

i http://www.scotland.gov.uk/About/Performance/scotPerforms/indicator/internet