



... GOVERNMENT CONNECT

The name may sound like techno-babble, but what the Government Connect Secure extranet (GCSx) actually does is simple. It promises to securely deliver e-mail messages and information between local and central government and between local authorities. In doing so, it's meant to make our lives, as taxpaying citizens, easier. How? Read on:

**The nuts and bolts.** GCSx promises to connect UK local authorities with each other as well as central government, the NHS and the Criminal Justice system. The service is hosted from two separate data centres to ensure that it is fail-safe.

**What's in it for me?** "You can tell us something once and we will use that information multiple times where appropriate," says Struan MacDonald, the IT strategy manager at Northamptonshire County Council, which is piloting GCSx. For example, if you are suffering a bereavement you don't want to speak to forty different officials about it.

**What's in it for councils?** At the moment, if someone leaves hospital needing care from adult social services, the information passes from the NHS to the relevant local authority via fax. Whether or not the patient has to pay for their care is determined by forms and phone calls. Passing on information is even more complex in two-tier authorities where responsibilities are shared between county and district and borough councils. An electronic system will allow councils to streamline these processes, helping them meet demands from the Treasury to cut costs.

**Any problems thus far?** Central government already uses a prohibitively secure intranet to monitor e-mails and IT operations, but local government operates a number of commercial systems with a different level of security. "It's a clash in the middle," says MacDonald. "I physically can't go through the whole of my organisation and change it to the civil service view." How to keep everyone happy while securing the information flow is still under discussion. "It's very early stages," he says. "I haven't got an e-mail yet."

CLARE DIGHT

TALKING POINT

# Is it safe to sign on?

While the efficiency benefits of the Government Connect programme are clear, **Fay Schopen** asks whether security fears over its 'single sign-on' ambition are justified

IF YOU have ever bought anything over the internet or set up an e-mail account, you'll be familiar with the routine. You log in, input a password and away you go. Now the government is getting in on the act — almost 2.9 million people filed their tax return online last year. And now the software that is used to authenticate users is to be deployed by local councils. This means, in theory, that users will be able to sign in once and move through a range of central and local government services. So, if the mood strikes, you could file your tax return, check out your latest council bill and pay a parking fine without having to stop at each website and re-establish your identity.

This single sign-on, known as the Government Connect (GC) register, will use the same software as the Government Gateway, the site used to log on to central Government services. The idea has, however, been criticised by some.

"Single sign-on is something companies have been trying to sell for years," says Ross Anderson, professor of security engineering at the University of Cambridge's computer laboratory, and the chair of the Foundation for Information Policy research, a think-tank. "Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't".

A report published by the Foundation in response to a Cabinet Office consultation paper said that government IT security guidelines were "perused with last-century assumptions about online dangers." Anderson says that sensitive information, like medical records, could be hacked into.

"They are hopelessly behind," says Anderson. "It's not the machines that get hacked, it's the users. If you want to stop people being phished you have to use far more sophisticated [mechanisms] than have been suggested."

CLARE DIGHT



Government Connect makes it easy to get around — but are hackers waiting in the wings?

But in his 2006 report, Sir David Varney says users of multiple services are "left to join up the various islands", validating their identity at each transaction. He calls for more integrated public services.

That's what Jason Gooding, the deputy chief executive of Carlisle City Council is aiming for. Cumbria is sparsely populated so the internet is a good way to access services. The council is due to trial the register in August, with the project delivered by Capita.

Deane Greenouff, e-government unit manager at Capita, says the Government Gateway software that sits behind the register is proven to be secure. Gooding agrees: "Whenever you make services easier to

use there is that risk. But it's not something I'm losing sleep over." And the GC register, says Gooding, will save money. "People accessing services through the internet is much cheaper per transaction."

But Ian Dunmore, the director of the website Public Sector Forums ([www.publicsectorforums.co.uk](http://www.publicsectorforums.co.uk)), says the cost to implement the register is "onerous and expensive" for smaller councils. "Neither I nor they are convinced there's a sound business case to do it."

Lee Grafton, the manager of the contracts, legal and vendor group for GC, says 33 councils have installed the Government Gateway and one, Liverpool, is using it. "It is true that we wanted a higher uptake by now," says Grafton. "But the outcome is better." Govern-

ment Gateway is funded for five years, and is, says Grafton, a "secure asset".

He is backed by Paul Kilner, head of business relationship management at the Cabinet Office's e-delivery team: "I wouldn't say that there had been [no security breaches] but Government Gateway offers the highest level of security."

And Grafton says that sensitive information like health records is "highly unlikely" to be accessed via the register: "You will always have the choice to go into your local council and access services directly. But if 20 per cent of people [access them online], it frees up resources [for] needier users like older people and foreign migrants. You've got to start somewhere and this seems like a good place."

CENTRAL GOVERNMENT

# Getting in on the act

Government Connect is designed to serve local authorities, but **Mark Hunter** reports on central government's growing interest in using this new network themselves

GOVERNMENT CONNECT (GC) is not just about local authorities. Increasingly, central government is becoming involved with the programme and in recent months GC's central government engagement team has been working with a number of government departments and agencies to identify ways in which GC can help them improve their service delivery.

The aim of the exercise, according to Government Connect, is to "focus on specific benefits that GC Solutions can offer to the departments' agendas, in support of transformational government, with particular focus on joined-up working, shared services, identity management and Gershon efficiency gains." Central government departments involved currently include:

**Pensions and Benefits**

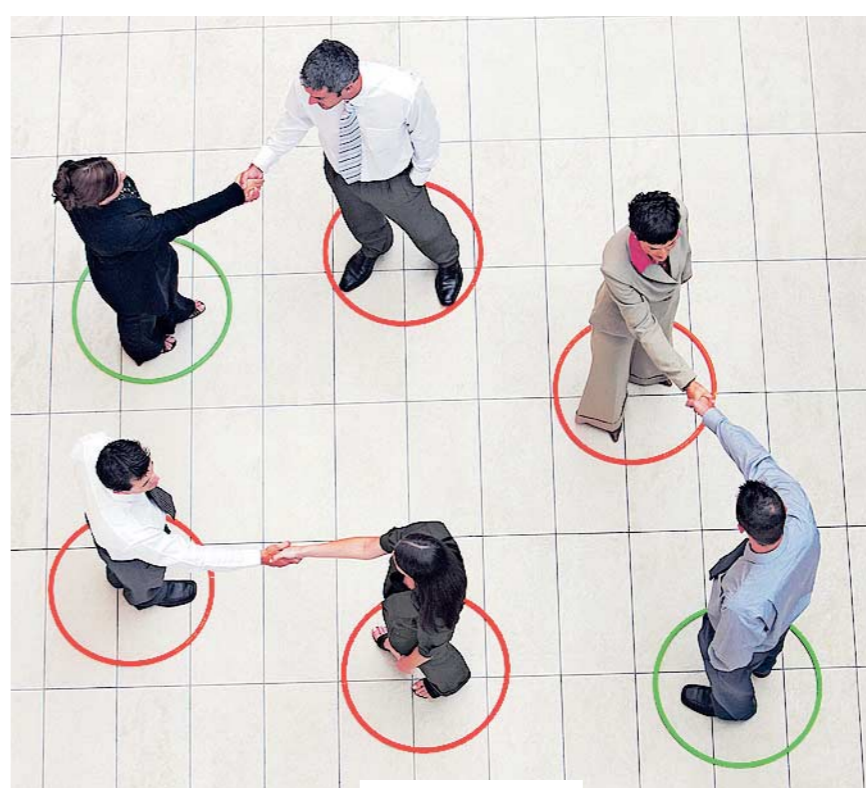
Foremost among central government departments working with GC is the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), which together with the Department for Communities and Local Government has committed £10 million to the programme. The DWP has already endorsed the Government Connect Secure extranet (GCSx) as its preferred route for connecting with local authorities, and is intending to use it to link up with all 388 local authorities in England, the 22 Welsh local authorities and eventually with the 32 local authorities in Scotland.

The potential advantages of GC for the department are huge. At present the DWP spends £600,000 a year alone on couriers to transfer secure data to local councils. The GCSx and GC Exchange (the technical name for the secure exchange of information that GC will enable) could allow most if not all of this data to be transferred across the network.

Elsewhere there are potential savings in streamlining claims management data which is currently accessed through stand-alone remote access terminals. Claimants of housing benefits and council tax benefits could also profit through the use of "auto fill" claim forms.

**Education**

The Department for Education and Skills (DfES) says it is currently "identifying aspects of GC that we think would be useful to us". Top of this list at the moment is GC Register, the authentication system that will allow DfES officials to verify the



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people and organisations with whom they are communicating before divulging sensitive professional information.

Work is also underway between GC and the DfES to identify ways in which the programme could support local authorities with the delivery of integrated children's services. One way in which this might work would be streamline eligibility criteria for free school meals. At present, each local authority has its own system for verifying school meal entitlement; the DfES hopes that GC Exchange will allow it to access information from the DWP, in order to verify eligibility criteria centrally.

"This could allow us to get eligibility information from the DWP in a way that is much quicker and more consistent," said a DfES spokesman. "That should make life a lot easier for us and also the customer."

**Your taxes**

A joint project between the DWP and HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) is reviewing how GC could help in transform-

ing the way in which personal information is managed when individuals' personal circumstances change. In a drive to prevent the endless filling in of forms that inevitably follows a birth, marriage or death, the "Tell Us Once" scheme will aim to share the information across different government departments.

Government Connect is also working with the HMRC to see if secure links between HMRC and local authorities could help reduce the £430 million a year that is currently spent on collecting and enforcing the council tax.

**Passports and paperwork**

Other central agencies currently working with GC include the Home Office and the Identity and Passport Service, who are working together on "identity management and citizen authentication," and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency which is looking at how secure on-line links to metropolitan authorities could streamline parking-related issues.

CASE STUDY



TAMESIDE TAKES LEAD ROLE

JUST the thought of another public sector IT initiative is enough to dampen the spirits of even the most optimistic person. But for Tim Rainey, the assistant chief executive ICT and transformational services at Tameside Metropolitan Borough Council, Government Connect (GC) is about to become as second nature as e-mail.

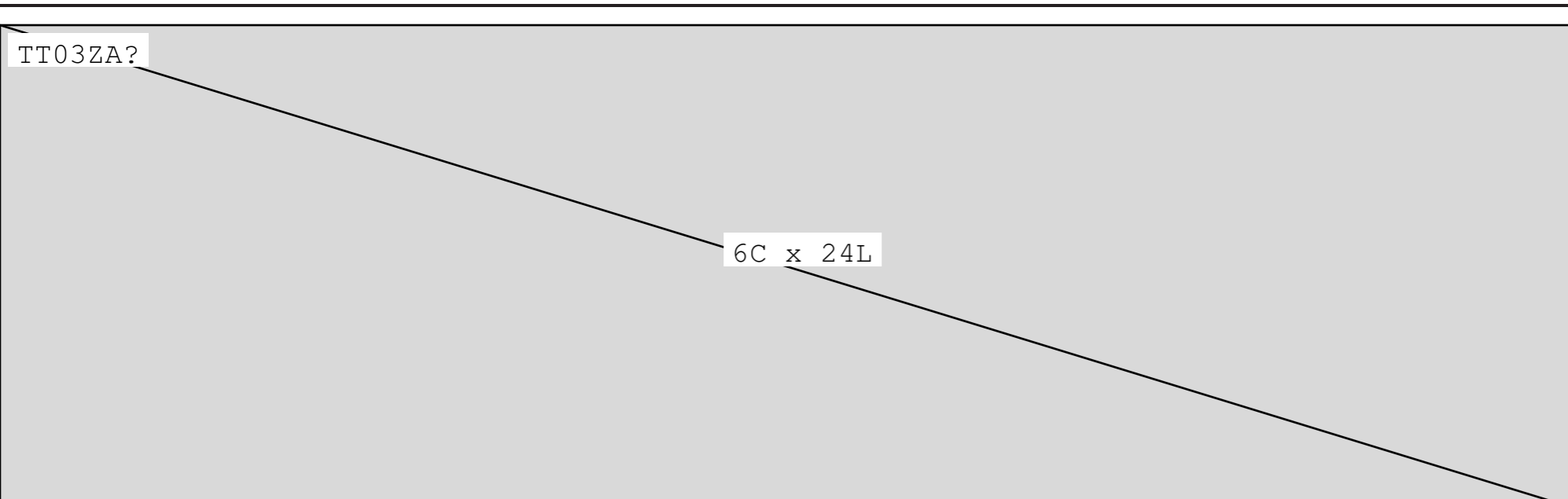
Tameside has been involved since the project began and became lead authority in 2006. It already led on the North West eGovernment Group, the Local e-Government Standards Body and the North West Centre of Excellence. "The Department for Communities and Local Government (CLG) has looked at us as an obvious home for Government Connect," Rainey says.

Tameside's responsibility has been to maintain a balance between central and local government wants and needs. Initially many parts of central government were apathetic and sceptical, but departments have increasingly seen GC as an important addition to their infrastructure. "One of the biggest successes we've had is the changing attitude of central government," he says. "If we're not careful the pendulum will swing towards something central government will want to use instead of something used by local government."

The main delivery departments so far, in addition to CLG, are the Department for Education and Skills and the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). DWP, for example, now recognises Government Connect as the way it can deliver its services in the future in a secure and cost-effective way.

Government Connect goes live in July at the Local Government Association conference and connections for the first local authorities are going in now. The hope is that, by the end of the year, 50 to 80 authorities will be connected, with everyone wired up by the end of the financial year. Funding models are still being explored, and Rainey says one option would be for money from CLG to be matched by other departments. He admits that "to a certain extent Government Connect is a leap of faith," but nonetheless remains optimistic.

"Government Connect is something that, even if you are a bit sceptical or looking for a business case, once we've got it we'll wonder how we coped without it."



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TECH TALK

**JERRY FISHENDEN**  
UK national technology officer,  
Microsoft

"Before Government Connect everyone was building local IT solutions and information was held in silos. The citizen's experience was poor. Now there is one solution that spans these silos: the focus is on the citizen as the end user, and transforming public services to improve service delivery and quality for the citizen.

As a company, we provide a mix of new and existing technology that improves services — from single sign-on to enabling information to flow quickly and efficiently to the right people.

Government Connect plays to the heart of what we are interested in as a company: to show that technology helps deliver secure citizen-centric public services... Soon people will say 'how did we ever live in a world where government services were so fragmented?'"

**LIAM KELLY**  
the director of public sector  
strategy, Solidsoft

"Our vision is that Government Connect and Government Gateway will deliver all e-government services. In the past two to three years we have worked with more than a hundred local authorities, laying down the foundations to connect with Government Gateway and e-government services.

There have been challenges up to this point. Local authorities represent some of the most challenging environments as there are so many different IT systems operating at once and many are built on tight budgets, which makes creating the interface complex. Stepping up to the challenge of integrating systems often requires local IT personnel to learn new skills, and busy employees need to be convinced that the new system is worthwhile."

**NICK KALISPERAS**  
a director at Intellect

"As a trade association representing technology companies, we are supporting the Government Connect (GC) vendor advisory group. It's important that any customer — in this case, GC and local authorities — has an accurate understanding of the market's capacity to deliver any given IT solution, and to discuss the advantages, disadvantages or alternatives to the proposed technologies. To this end, we would encourage other government agencies and departments to follow the same example of talking to the industry in developing IT projects.

In the past there hasn't been enough understanding that IT is only one part of any solution: there is also a business change angle. It's not just a matter of putting a new PC on a desk; it changes the way that people work."

**PATRICK SMITH**  
the client executive for local  
government, IBM

"We think this is a very important project. There are a number of parts to Government Connect (GC), one of which is creating a secure citizen authentication process. This will bring a high level of trust, and then the things you can do are endless.

As a company, we have been involved with an early GC user — Hampshire County Council — enabling residents to access services online, for example local libraries. It doesn't sound very exciting, but once the technology works it will change the way services are provided to citizens. One reads so much about failed government IT projects. This is not only a success but a very important one because it brings government and citizens closer together."