

Creating great online services: how we test services in our research lab

To design online services which improve the experience for users when they transact with DVLA, it is important to understand what our customers need from us.

Our User Experience (UX) team use several different testing methods to get this insight. Dan Williamson, User Research Lead, explains more about user testing at DVLA.

Why, when and where we test

Government services should be as simple, inclusive and accessible as possible so that everyone can use them. If we want our customers to complete a transaction using a certain channel, we need to make sure what we offer them is the best it can be.

Testing happens throughout a service development. We determine the frequency and the method of testing based on the features within the service that have changed.

Under normal circumstances, we do roughly 40% of our testing in [our UX Lab](#). It's a state of the art facility that uses connected devices, cameras and microphones so that we can test developing digital services with users. With participant consent to filming, we record what we find and this footage is used to inform changes to the services and provides evidence for why we make those changes.



The rest of our research is carried out across the country in meeting rooms, in context in a participant's home or place of work, or on the street.

Our testers

Some of our services are targeted at certain types of user (for example vocational drivers or [drivers with a medical condition](#)) and sometimes we will need to speak to specific segments within our customer base (such as [people who have received a fine](#), use certain technology or are of a certain age).

We have a contract in place with a participant recruitment company and we send these specifications to our recruiters together with details of when and where we want to carry out the research.

Before testing starts

Once we have agreed the objectives for the research with the service designer, we plan the session with the interaction designers who build the screens we test.

We may ask questions like:

- which features do we want to test/discuss with the user?
- where do we think we may identify pain points?
- which research technique do we think will work best?

Then we write a topic guide for the session. This contains the main points

and themes we want to cover during the session, as well as prompts for the researchers to remind them where to delve a bit deeper.

The day of testing

We always spend some time getting an understanding of the participants; how confident they are in using digital services, what devices or apps they use and a bit about their socio-economic background. This helps us to get to know them and puts the participant at ease too.

If we are testing screens for usability, we set the scene and give the participant tasks to complete. It is human nature to help people when they get stuck, but as researchers, the value comes from seeing where they fail.

Sometimes we conduct an in-depth interview with the participant. This is designed to understand their behaviour at a deeper level – why they do things in a certain way, how they feel about what we are talking about or what we could do to make things simpler for them.



Outcomes of testing

Every insight we get adds value – whether that is changing the flow of a service, moving things around on a screen or amending content. Every service we have been involved in has been changed based on our research.

It isn't often that we get a real 'Eureka!' moment and a lot of the insights we get are used to inform subtle, iterative changes to a service that make it

more useable, simpler and more inclusive. Equally these small changes could have a benefit to the organisation, such as increasing the ability for customers to self-serve or reducing casework and demand on the Contact Centre.

But sometimes user testing shows that a very small change can be beneficial. While testing the prototype for the [penalty payment online](#) with participants it was identified they did not understand that they needed to tax their vehicle or tell us they were keeping it off road, once they had paid the fine.

On the 'payment successful' page of the service, the participants were told in large bold print that they had to either tax, [register their vehicle as off the road](#) or dispose of their vehicle, however when asked what they thought they had to do next, the majority of users missed that instruction and thought they taken all necessary action to complete their task.

This was fed back and a new prototype was created so that the participant was taken to [pages where they could tax](#), make a Statutory Off Road Notification (SORN) or [dispose of their vehicle](#).



We are committed to user-centred design. We have a great record for user research at every Government Digital Service (GDS) Service Assessment which take place at several stages before we can put our service on GOV.UK.

Our research has been the basis for so many changes, from small tweaks to wholesale change in a constant effort to get these things right for our users.

Now you've seen all the hard work that goes into making a great online service – why not check out the [wide range of services we provide on GOV.UK](#) and try them for yourself?

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[How DVLA's corporate induction process helps new starters](#)

I applied for a job as a software engineer at DVLA because of my passion for coding. I have a degree in Mathematics, but after completing a Professional Graduate Certificate in Education I realised that coding was what I wanted to do. What also attracted me to the role is that it also allows me to study for an [MSc in software engineering at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David \(UWTSD\)](#).



Starting in September 2018 with 18 other eager students I had no idea what to expect, and I was naturally nervous (as we all are) on my first day. In the following days and weeks I would:

- be given a guide to my first 6 weeks, outlining all mandatory training
- be inducted into my new team
- attend several induction workshops

I fully expected my induction to cover security, data protection, health and safety, and how to conduct yourself at work – which it did. What surprised me was that we would also learn about unconscious bias, counterfraud, social media usage policies and sustainability. It was interesting and educational, and it gave me real insight into how DVLA values high standards of personal conduct which is vital when you work in the Civil Service.

Team induction

Initially I attended UWTSD for 4 days a week with one day with my team in DVLA. This allowed me to develop my skills, for example, problem solving and team working at DVLA and UWTSD.

After a warm welcome and introduction to my new team during the [daily standup meeting](#) I was placed into a squad, which is a cloud team [using microservices architecture](#). I observed and learnt the tools, processes and overall structure of DVLA services, gradually increasing the hours to allow me to become more confident in my new role.

A key turning point in my induction was a training course I attended with the other students. Split up into 3 squads we were tasked to build a news, sport and weather application [working in an agile way](#). We were all given a category of the app (mine was the news category) and asked to develop a webpage to display sport information. I needed to use software tools like elastic beanstalk and languages like java to develop the functionality of a webpage. The course taught me how to work as part of a team towards a common goal and we did it with time to spare.

How the training has helped in my role

I'm now [working in the emerging technology lab](#) where we develop new ideas for the organisation's digital services.

Using the skills I built up through the induction process I was able adapt to a role which needed me to communicate with key stakeholders, develop prototypes and demos for products we were working on and [make learning fun for children in a school hosting day](#). I've also taken part in a project to investigate robotic process automation and chatbots where [I worked with my team to develop a prototype robot](#).

The induction allowed me to settle in, understand my role, develop new skills, and gain the knowledge to do the job properly. I really enjoy my work. It has also helped me transform from schoolteacher to civil servant. Through this, I now know the difference between working in a class of children to working in a squad of experts.

Next steps

I'm really happy in my role at the moment. In future I'd like a role where I can experience all aspects of the organisation. For example: making business decisions, developing services, provide training or interviewing new

candidates. Who knows what the future may hold here at DVLA.

Roles at DVLA

DVLA will support you in reaching your full potential, offering rewarding and challenging jobs, training plans and ongoing development opportunities.

If you fancy a career at DVLA make sure you keep an eye on [Civil Service Jobs](#).

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DVLA: encouraging the IT experts of tomorrow

The UK needs 100,000 new graduates in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) subjects every year. But currently only 6% of the workforce in STEM related subjects are female. [Research conducted by the Welsh government](#) has shown that a staggering 93% of parents would not support their daughter to pursue a career in a STEM subject. But, when asked at school, 39% of girls said they enjoy Information Technology, Computing and Design Technology.

Employing around 5,000 people in Swansea, DVLA was one of the first government departments to bring its IT function 'in house' and has one of the largest self-sufficient IT departments in government. This puts us in a perfect position to share our knowledge and expertise with the up-and-coming generations, to try and encourage a culture change that will get more women into IT roles.

Bring your daughter to work

We've recently introduced a 'bring your daughter to work' day. Here we aim to close the gender gap in IT by inviting staff to bring their daughters to work in a bid to spark interest from girls to consider a career in IT.



We want to encourage girls, who often give up on IT once they join secondary school, to keep going with STEM subjects (science, technology, engineering and mathematics) and add them to their choices for exams as they go through secondary school.

DVLA's chief technology officer Brian Sullivan said:

"We're well aware that there are more men than women working in the IT sector and this is just one of the ways in which we are trying to change that here in Swansea.

"If we can encourage more girls to take an interest from an early age, in 10 years we will have more local women qualified and ready for a career in IT. It would be great to see them working here at DVLA."

Other initiatives

'Bring your daughter to work' is just one of our initiatives in this space. We also run events where all children aged 11 to 13 are invited to spend the day at DVLA and try some fun coding activities, learn about new technologies and pick up some new skills along the way.

All content is age appropriate, light and interactive where possible. At the end of the day there's a topical, fun quiz based on the learning gained from the day, with prizes too – always a hit with the children.

Some feedback we've had from the children, teachers

and parents:

“It was really good and a lot more interesting than I thought it would be.”

“I thought we were going to be sat at computers and that it would be a bit boring, but it’s been really fun. The activities were very good.”

“Good presentation. Activities were fun and pitched at the right level. The children were engaged throughout.”

“In the future these skills will be used back at school for coding tasks.”

“I think it was a great experience & should be rolled out for all schools.”

“Must have listened well as she told me about it after the day!”

This feedback is a good indicator that we were able to inspire participants to want to continue their learning journey. It certainly meets with our vision of investing in digital skills.

What’s coming next

Capability and Talent Development Lead, Karen Clark said, “Our aim is to ensure that as an agency, we continue to support and grow the digital skills of young people in the local region and this is a brilliant opportunity to inspire the next generation.

Along with promoting the learning of STEM subjects, this is a great way for us to position DVLA as a leading digital and technology employer and a great place to work for future generations.”

You can [read about what it’s like to work at DVLA](#) and [take a look at our latest vacancies on Civil Service jobs](#).

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[Our waste, our responsibility](#)

Reducing our carbon footprint is a great way to save money, boost staff morale and lessen our impact on the environment. But applying this to a business takes a bit more thought than remembering to separate plastic from paper.

The new contract

We recently awarded a new ITS waste contract to a local supplier that offers a complete asset management process. This includes data cleansing, repairing

and refurbishing old IT equipment.

The contract includes the option of selling our IT kit back to the private sector and, where possible, clawing revenue back in to the public purse.

Through this new contract we have reduced our destruction costs to zero, making an instant annual saving of £62,000.



How we do it

Our IT kit is carefully wiped of all data to make sure that everything is removed before it leaves DVLA.

It is then collected by the supplier and placed on a production line, where a physical check is carried out to check for any damage. Each element is given a monetary value, before being cleaned up and sent for resale or donation.

Where it all goes

We have a history of donating IT equipment to local schools, voluntary and charitable organisations through our sustainability team. Laptops, desktops and other redundant IT equipment have also been donated to schools in Zambia as part of the [Giakonda project](#) and to the [Sponsoring Academic and Medical Access charity](#).



Laptops have also been reused through our [ITS DRIIVE programme](#). We were able to identify which schools in the local Swansea area would benefit most from our old equipment by working with the [Welsh Assembly](#).

Why it matters

Awarding this contract means we are closer than ever to achieving the goals as set out in our [sustainability report](#).

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[#TaxItOrLoseIt: The story continues](#)



One of [DVLA's primary functions](#) is to collect vehicle tax on behalf of the [Treasury](#). Most vehicle keepers tax their vehicle when they should – over 98% did the right thing at the last count. We do lots of things to help remind vehicle keepers when their vehicle tax is due, such as millions of postal reminders every year, providing [quick and easy to use digital services](#) and targeted communications campaigns.

Despite all this, some motorists still don't tax their vehicles and continue to drive them on the road. This is where we come in. Our role is to spot untaxed vehicles and take action against them.

How we do it

I work with a fantastic team that makes these enforcement measures happen.

We've been really busy since we [last blogged about this](#). We've stepped up our enforcement activities with our partners such as local councils and the police in all parts of the country. No matter where you live, we take action against those who don't tax.

A range of measures, such as fines and penalties, stickers, wheel clamping and communications designed to change behaviour, are having a positive effect in combating tax evasion.

If you're caught without tax, it's expensive, inconvenient and just not worth it. When DVLA clamps an untaxed vehicle the motorist is charged a £100 release fee. If they cannot show the vehicle has been taxed when it's released, the motorist will have to pay a surety fee of £160. This is refunded if the motorist can show the vehicle has been taxed within 15 days.

If the release fee's not paid within 24 hours, DVLA impounds the vehicle and the fee rises to £200. There's also a storage charge of £21 per day. Again, a surety fee of £160 must be paid if the motorist cannot show that the

vehicle's been taxed.

Motorists who choose to evade tax take a very real risk of losing their cars, as well as the potential of multiple financial penalties.

Getting the message out there



As well as the hard graft we put in on the road every day, our communications team ran a locally targeted communications campaign in each of [the locations of the UK where vehicle tax evasion is highest](#). Adverts ran on lots of different channels including radio, print, online and social media. This helped to reach those who have avoided, or might be thinking of avoiding, their vehicle tax.

My teams are always out across the country but we'll be well supported by the communications once again when the advertising resumes in the areas we'll be in.

The message is clear to all those who continue not paying their vehicle tax – [tax it or lose it](#).

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