

BCE website

Issue & Decision required

1. Since the end of the 2013 Review, the BCE website has been effectively 'frozen', with a wealth of information relating to the 2013 Review still available for those interested, though accompanied by a clear notice that that Review is now historic. As The National Archives have taken a 'snapshot' of the BCE website, which will be available in future via their own website, over the next few months the Secretariat intends to condense down the information on the BCE's own website into basic corporate information about the organisation.
2. The BCE currently has an exemption from the Government's policy of bringing the websites of all UK government organisations (including arm's length bodies sponsored by government) under the aegis of the 'gov.uk' single website. The question is whether that exemption should be maintained, or **whether BCE should take the opportunity of slimming down its online presence to transfer its corporate site into the 'gov.uk' website.**

Background

3. The 'gov.uk' website has been designed to present a simple single portal for the public to find information about all Government organisations, replacing the previous separate 'Directgov' (for the general public) and 'Business Link' (for businesses) websites, plus a large number of other websites for individual governmental organisations (including arm's length bodies).
4. The Government Digital Service (GDS), which is itself part of the Cabinet Office, holds the overall responsibility for gov.uk, though day to day maintenance of organisational pages is devolved to authorised officials within the organisations to which the pages in question relate.
5. The basic principle is that all UK Government organisations should be brought into the gov.uk website, though this is a work in progress (in fact, the rationalisation of government websites is a policy that dates back to at least 2005, i.e. before GDS itself came into existence). The 24 main government departments have been transitioned onto the single site, but a number of other governmental bodies have not yet been migrated across. Additionally, from the outset it was agreed that some organisations should be exempt from being included within the main gov.uk website, though we are not aware of specific criteria for such an exemption: each organisation seeking such an exemption makes its own case individually. A full listing can be viewed at www.gov.uk/government/organisations: this shows which organisations have been fully migrated onto the site, how many are yet to migrate on, and how many are exempt and maintain a separate website.
6. At the time of transition of BCE's sponsorship from the Ministry of Justice to the Cabinet Office in Machinery of Government changes following the 2010 general

election, BCE sought retention of its then 'org.uk' website suffix, which it was felt helped the public appreciate BCE's operational independence from the government. Retention of the 'org.uk' suffix was not permitted, but BCE was not transferred onto a Cabinet Office corporate website. Instead, we were allowed to retain a separate website using an 'independent.gov.uk' suffix, exempting BCE from substantive inclusion on the main 'gov.uk' website. That remains the current position.

Consideration

7. It should be noted at the outset that all UK Government organisations (including sponsored arm's length bodies such as BCE) appear with at least a single page on the main 'gov.uk' website. The issue is whether an organisation has its substantive presence contained within the main gov.uk website, or the reference page there is simply a description of what the body is for, with a link to its own external website (as is currently the case with the BCE).
8. A key issue is the need to continue to underpin the public's understanding of the BCE as operationally independent from the Government. Whilst this would suggest remaining outside the main 'gov.uk' website, a perusal of the organisations list on www.gov.uk indicates no clear coincidence of exemption from substantive presence on gov.uk and organisational functions that need to be clearly seen as operationally independent from Government. For example, organisations that appear not to have a particularly strong reason to be seen as independent - such as the Advisory Council on National Records and Archives or the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council – are stated to have a separate website and therefore currently exempt. Conversely, there are other organisations that have functions where operational independence from Government would be thought to be very important, yet have their substantive online presence within the main gov.uk website, e.g. Civil Service Commission and Commissioner for Public Appointments, both of which to a certain degree regulate the Government itself in specific aspects of its operation.
9. A further consideration may be the resource required to maintain a website separate from gov.uk. The BCE's separate website is currently hosted and maintained through a third party web services company, which carries a cost of around £800 per quarter (including VAT). This service is only for hosting and a basic level of support (usually around any structural changes to the basic look and layout of the site): basic maintenance of content has to be handled by the Secretariat staff themselves, none of whom have technical web design training.
10. If the BCE transitioned onto the main 'gov.uk' website, there would be no costs involved in the maintenance of our pages, and we would also be able to manage the content of our pages through the Cabinet Office's specialist web publishing team. Conversely, we would lose control over the basic design of our pages, as they would need to conform to the standard 'gov.uk' style guide in terms of page layout and structure.