Technical guide – Digital engagement

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Introduction

The pensions industry, and the LGPS in particular, is changing. Administration is moving online and more of our services are being delivered digitally. The Communications Working Group (CWG) has produced this guide on digital engagement for LGPS administering authorities. The purpose of the guide is to:

- summarise how administering authorities are currently using online portals to deliver services to and communicate with their members
- record levels of member engagement with online portals
- share information about successful measures to encourage member engagement alongside useful information about pitfalls to avoid.

The CWG is run by the Local Government Pensions Committee Secretariat with established terms of reference. The group meets quarterly and represents administering authorities in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. You can read the group's work plan and minutes from past meetings on the Communications working group page of the LGPS administrators' website www.lgpsregs.org.

The CWG has identified that the journey to digital can vary between administering authorities. The experience can be affected by:

- the size of the administering authority
- what resources are available
- the level of technical expertise, and
- the geographical area in which members are concentrated.

The Coronavirus pandemic accelerated administering authorities' use of member portals. It has also increased members' willingness to go online. Members now have an greater expectation that they will be able to access information and perform tasks online rather than having to use post or telephone.

The CWG collected information about administering authorities' experiences of launching and maintaining a member portal. This technical guide summarises the results of that survey. It is intended to help administering authorities starting or continuing their digital journey.

The CWG surveyed all administering authorities in England, Wales and Scotland in January 2021. We received 47 responses. Some responses were from organisations that represent more than one administering authority.

30 per cent of responses came from administering authorities that did not offer an online portal for LGPS members at the time of the survey. This guide is therefore based on the 33 responses from organisations that do currently offer members access to an online portal. The guide also includes input from members of the CWG.

Administering authorities will be aware that the number of software suppliers operating in the LGPS market is very small. The experience of launching and maintaining a member portal, and the features that are available as standard may vary based on supplier. The respondents to the survey used three suppliers of pensions administration software:

- Heywood Altair: 26
- Civica UPM: 5
- Capita: 1.

One respondent uses Altair for their pensions administration system but a Civica product for their member portal.

What does the portal offer?

This section covers what the portal offers to administering authorities and members. This includes the:

- benefits of operating an online portal
- content and functions offered by portals, and
- decisions the administering authority will need to make before launching a member portal.

What is an online portal?

An online portal is a secure password-protected webpage that gives users access to information, generic and individual documents, tools and links.

What benefits does an online portal offer?

In the LGPS, providing an online portal gives members of the Scheme access to all or part of their LGPS pension data. It gives them the ability to engage with their data and check the information held on the pensions database. Members may also be able to amend their personal data and run calculations and projections.

The online portal is integrated in real time with the pension administration system.

Many members have an increasing expectation that information and resources will be available online. Offering a member portal can serve to meet that expectation. Using a member portal will also benefit the administering authority, allowing it to 'outsource' routine processes and work to the members themselves.

Once the portal is in place, administering authorities can expect to see benefits in the longer term, including:

a) saving time by:
- enabling self-service, especially in updating personal data which has previously been done by administrators
- integrating the portal with the workflow system, so that a certain action taken by a member in the portal automatically generates a task in the pensions administration system
- allowing members to run their own retirement estimates
- enabling the administering authority to fulfil its statutory duties as far as possible through the web portal.

b)	saving money for the administering authority and members by:

- reducing or eliminating postage and printing costs for bulk jobs like newsletters, annual benefit statements, P60s and payslips for pensioners
- reducing or eliminating postage and printing on individual cases and personal correspondence
- allowing members to upload correspondence and documentation rather than paying to post them
- allowing administrators to concentrate on complex cases rather than answering routine questions or performing basic administrative tasks.

c)	intangible benefits

- an efficient, accurate and user-friendly online portal could improve the perception of the LGPS and pensions in general. Historically, people became interested in their pension as their chosen retirement date approached. Convenient online access can serve to increase engagement among younger members and improve the image of the LGPS.

What does the portal offer to members?

1. Pension data

Portals allow members to view large parts of their pension record including:

- member documents and correspondence
- annual benefit statements
- Scheme section
- expression of wish details
- earnings and contributions
- personal details
- current pension value
- annual allowance history
- P60 (pensioners)
- payslips (pensioners)
- bank account details (pensioners)
- generic newsletters, factsheets, leaflets etc.

The table below shows what information or documents are most commonly made available to members on the portal and the percentage of respondents that make each item available.

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Table 1: Information made available on the member portal

Information	Percentage
Annual benefit statements for active members	100%
Annual benefit statements for deferred members	91%
Nomination details	94%
P60s for pensioners	75%
Payslips for pensioners	81%
Financial details for active members: annual allowance history, earnings, contributions	< 65%
Financial details for deferred members: annual allowance history, earnings, contributions	< 50%

2. Member documents

It is possible to provide member letters and statements via an online portal. The survey results showed that 75 per cent of respondents provide member documentation such as annual benefits statements and correspondence on the portal that they would historically have sent by post. The administering authority uploads the letter or statement to the portal and notifies the member that the correspondence is there. They do this by manual email, an email through the pensions administration system or another means. Some respondents use the GOV.UK Notify tool.

It is also possible to publish newsletters, factsheets and regular updates on the portal. Nearly 50 per cent of respondents do not use it for any of these, favouring their own website for this type of communication. The survey results indicated that some administering authorities are planning to use the portal in this way in the future.

3. Interactive tools and calculations

A portal offers users the ability to engage with their pension and take more control. It may allow them to run their own calculations or submit messages and requests to the pension team.

It is also possible to allow members to submit queries via the portal. This starts a workflow in the pension administration system. This feature is not used extensively yet with only 33 per cent of respondents offering this function.

93 per cent of respondents allow members to run calculations. These may include estimated benefits payable on retirement, early retirement, ill health or redundancy retirement, deferred benefits and cash equivalent transfer values. A significant

proportion of survey respondents said that the calculation function was the most popular feature on the portal.

4. Ability to amend data

The portal can also be used by members to update or amend data, usually personal data such as address. 96 per cent of respondents to the survey allow members to update personal data such as addresses. 90 per cent allow users to create, update or cancel their expression of wish for death grant. Some also allow pensioners to update bank details.

Users are generally blocked from changing key unique identifiers such as payroll references or National insurance numbers. Administering authorities generally do not allow members to change a data item which needs formal certification on the portal, for example their marital status, name or date of birth.

Choosing what information to make available

An administering authority can configure the member portal to show or hide data, depending on what it wants members to have access to. It may be able to restrict or open access to documents or areas of the portal based on demographics or member status.

Although there is a broad consensus on many data items and features made available to members, administering authorities take a different approach to some:

- **Annual allowance history** – some administering authorities do not make this available to all members. If a member has not had a pension saving statement, or if the record is in the process of being updated, the annual allowance history may not have been checked. Some administering authorities choose not to publish the annual allowance history to improve the accuracy of the information provided to members and prevent queries.

- **Cash equivalent transfer value (CETV)** – there are different approaches to allowing members to calculate their own CETV on the portal. Some administering authorities allow this for all members, which may lead to a reduction in requests for CETV calculations. Others permit deferred members to calculate a CETV online, but not active members. This may be due to the fact that an active member could make an irreversible decision to opt out of the Scheme as a result of seeing the CETV. Others switch off the CETV calculation altogether.

- **Change bank details** – some administering authorities allow pensioners to change their bank details on the portal. Others start a workflow process when a member makes a request on the portal to change their bank details. Which approach an administering authority takes will depend on their policy and audit requirements.

Engaging with members

Administering authorities that have the time and resource can provide a highly personalised service with one-to-one meetings with members. Not all administering authorities are able to offer this level of service. Delivering a user-friendly and comprehensive portal is one way to enhance the service offered to all Scheme members.

It is important to recognise that some members prefer to engage in person or by telephone. Administering authorities should consider the needs of members who may not be able or may not want to access online services.

Are there any disadvantages?

1. Time and resource – significant time and resource are required to set up a member portal. This is covered in greater detail later in this guide. Administering authorities will also need time to publicise the portal to members and encourage them to register.

2. Registration process – helping members to register for the member portal can be a time-consuming process. Robust authentication and security mechanisms are critical to confirm the identity of members accessing the portal. These mechanisms can make the registration process cumbersome and complicated.

3. 'Black hole' members – some members will neither register for the portal nor elect to opt out of digital communications. These are sometimes known as 'black hole' members. The advent of digital communications means that administering authorities can now identify these 'Black hole' members. You can read more about this group and the challenges they present later in this guide.

Who can access the portal?

100 per cent of respondents to the questionnaire that operate a member portal offer active, pensioner and deferred members access to the portal.

Some offer access to other types of members. The other types of members and the percentage of respondents that offer access to the portal to them are:

- dependants 91%
- pension credit members 73%
- councillors 45%
- deferred / preserved refunds 36%.

Of the 30 administering authorities that offer dependants access to the member portal, most do not have a lower age limit. The eight that do operate a lower age limit set this at 16 or 18, with one respondent making access available from age 13.

Administering authorities will need to decide which members will have access to the portal and whether to operate a lower age limit for dependants.

Is the default online or paper?

Before promoting the use of an online portal to members, an administering authority should consider whether its default option for communicating with members will be:

- online portal with the option to opt for paper correspondence, or
- paper correspondence with the option to opt for online portal.

Administering authorities' current experiences show that if the default option is paper with an option to register for the online portal, registration rates may be low. However, if the default option is to correspond with members via the portal and a member does not register to use it, then that member will not be able to access important pension information such as annual benefit statements and newsletters.

If an administering authority decides to make the portal its main method of communicating with members, it must make sure it complies with the relevant regulations. These are set out in the next section.

Making the portal compulsory

88 per cent of respondents do not make the portal compulsory for any group of members. They encourage members to sign up, but continue to deliver information and documents in different ways to members who have not registered for the portal.

Some administering authorities are moving towards a position where the online solution is the default, with members having to opt for paper only if they wish to continue to receive information and correspondence by post. Some respondents are planning to make use of the portal compulsory, but at the time of the survey, they had not yet committed to specific timescales.

Administering authorities must note a member's right to opt out of digital communications, and to request a paper copy of an annual benefit statement. Administering authorities must consider the relevant regulations concerning digital communications when deciding on their approach and policies.

- Regulations 26, 27 and 28 of the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Disclosure of Information) Regulations 2013 cover how information and documents must be given to members. These include what an administering authority must tell members before they can start to supply information on a website.
- The Public Service Pensions (Information about Benefits) Directions 2014 set out the specific rules relating to communicating with members about their annual benefit statements.

Digital signatures

Respondents to the survey recommended that administering authorities decide and publicise their policies on the use of digital signatures on member forms and declarations.

They may wish to consider:

- Will they accept a typed signature if it comes from a registered or work email address?
- Will they accept a scanned or photographed image of a manual signature?
- Do they require a 'real' signature on a document or form received by post?
- If they accept electronic signatures, would an explanatory guide be helpful for members who may not have submitted an electronic signature before?

Launching the portal

Resources needed to launch the portal

An administering authority must consider what resources it will need to launch an online portal. The administering authority will need to allocate resources to the project and its software provider will have a significant level of involvement. It will also need to consider whether input from other parties is needed.

Input from the authority's IT and data protection department may be needed. Some administering authorities have involved third party contractors in the launch, such as companies brought in to test cyber security. It is important for the administering authority to be clear on who must be involved before proceeding with launch preparation and a 'go live' date.

The view of administering authorities that responded to our survey was that the involvement of an in-house IT team was crucial to a successful launch. The IT team is also likely to assist with roll-out, testing and future upgrades. The prevailing view is that it would be impossible to undertake this project without robust support from IT services, particularly regarding IP settings and firewalls.

Member sign-up

Encouraging members to sign up to use an online portal should be treated as a project in itself. There are various stages in this process:

- deciding whether to allow **all members** to access the portal or only certain groups
- deciding whether to invite all members to sign up at once or to introduce access in stages for different groups
- promoting the use of the online portal to members
- determining a target sign-up rate and how to monitor this.

Which members have access to the portal?

Administering authorities must decide if they will roll out access to all members or only to certain groups of members. They will need to decide on whether to allow access to:

- 'undecided leavers' – members who have left the Scheme but their record has not yet been finalised as a refund, deferred, or pensioner

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- deferred councillors and councillors with a pension in payment, or active councillors in Wales and Scotland
- deferred pensioner members
- pension credit members.

Bulk or staged roll out?

Administering authorities must decide whether to roll out the online portal to all membership statuses at the same time, or to roll it out in stages to different member statuses, eg active members, deferred members, pensioners, dependants. Administering authorities that have chosen a staged roll out have done this in two different ways:

- restricting access on the portal so that only certain groups of members have access, or
- allowing all members to access the system but only publicising the portal to certain groups. One benefit of this approach is that members with records of different statuses in the same pension fund can see all their records when they access the portal.

An administering authority should consider whether:

- the portal has capacity for an influx of members registering at the same time, and
- it has enough staff to assist members needing help to register.

Responses to the survey advised against issuing too many activation keys or email communications inviting members to sign up for the portal at once. Too many members trying to log in at the same time can crash the system.

Common queries and how to handle them

Whichever approach an administering authority takes, it is likely that the number of member telephone and email queries will be higher than normal after it launches an online portal. A specific helpline for registration troubleshooting is likely to be required and should be factored in during the planning stage. Even after the initial sign-up of members, online portal queries will become part of business as usual. Respondents to the survey recommend allocating a dedicated resource to deal with these queries.

Some administering authorities did not anticipate how much assistance they would need to provide to members who were struggling to sign up for the portal. Some respondents to the survey recommended having a dedicated team to support the

initial launch. Many members require some form of assistance from their administering authority to sign up for the portal. It is best to take steps to address potential queries before they come in, and to be ready for the increase in query numbers. The survey responses suggest the main issues experienced by members are:

- The portal not recognising the member's name, date of birth, national insurance number and / or activation key. This can be a portal error or a keying error by the member.
- Members forgetting their usernames and / or passwords due to complicated password requirements. Members log in with a username, but using an email address as the username instead would make this error less likely.
- Members not activating their accounts within three days of registering.
- Members using internet browsers that are not compatible with the portal.
- Online portals not being compatible with older versions of IOS or Android.
- Problems arising when a member tries to register using a mobile phone or tablet.

Members who encounter problems registering for the portal may not persevere with registration. Respondents to the survey recommend having resources in place to support users through the login process before the launch. The resources produced by administering authorities to support registering members include:

- FAQs
- troubleshooting guides
- 'How to' videos
- a 'Help' screen explaining how to clear cookies and cache
- warning messages about using a mobile or tablet to register for the portal. Longer term we expect this to be resolved by software suppliers. No administering authorities reported that members had encountered problems using a mobile or tablet to access the portal after initial registration
- dedicated helpline.

Creating these resources before launch and quickly after any new issue is identified can help members find answers to their questions without contacting the pensions team.

An administering authority will need to know whether an error has arisen because of a problem in the portal or whether it is caused by user error. The portal may allow the administrator to access the system to try and replicate the issue the user has experienced. This can help to identify the source of the problem.

Promoting the use of an online portal to members

Once an administering authority has decided who will have access to the online portal and whether to roll out access in stages, it will need to decide on the best methods of promoting the facility to members.

When inviting members to register, respondents to the survey recommend providing members with any activation keys they may need to register. Using a personalised letter in this way will reduce the number of individual requests for activation keys. Activation keys may remain valid for a limited period only. When planning a bulk communication with a mailing house, an administering authority may need to ask its software provider to extend the length of time that the activation key stays valid for.

Other methods of promoting the online portal include:

- annual newsletters
- flyers, posters and leaflets
- via employer communication channels such as intranets
- website messages promoting the use of the online portal and built-in benefit projectors
- promotional paragraphs in annual benefit statements for active and deferred members
- promoting the portal and its features in member presentations or webinars
- signing members up to the portal at roadshows, employer visits, workshops and other member events
- offer floor-walking at members' places of work to help them register if they need assistance (dependent on social distancing rules due to COVID 19)
- promote the online portal in email signatures, and in every telephone query
- social media such as Twitter, Facebook or Linkedin.

Other ways of promoting the online portal that can be built into an administering authority's regular processes include:

- including activation keys and promotional paragraphs in welcome letters to new members of the scheme
- promotional paragraphs in all letters sent to members
- promotional emails to members' personal email addresses
- making estimates, retirement packs, CETV quotes available on the portal instead of posting a paper copy to members (unless they have opted out of digital). Members must register for the portal to access the information or calculation that they have requested. Some administering authorities have a

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limit on how far in advance they will produce a retirement estimate. Members who request an estimate with a retirement date after that limit are instead directed to the portal.

- asking new members to make their expression of wish for death grant on the portal instead of providing a paper form.

Encouraging members to sign up is an ongoing rolling programme, not a one-off exercise. Administering authorities should ensure they have processes and resources in place to be able to manage this.

Member events

Administering authorities are increasingly using member 'events' such as joining the scheme, leaving before retirement and retirement to promote use of the online portal.

Respondents to the survey said that members who are given the default option of updating death grant beneficiaries, completing retirement forms or uploading birth certificates via the portal are more likely to register.

Target sign-up rates

Each administering will need to decide if it wants to set a target sign-up rate for the portal. Currently, not many administering authorities have set target sign-up rates. The targets set by the six administering authorities that responded to the survey vary massively, ranging from 22 per cent to 100 per cent. On average, administering authorities with target sign-up rates are aiming for:

- 58% sign-up rate for active members
- 50% sign-up rate for deferred members
- 49% sign-up rate for pensioners and dependants.

Monitoring usage

Whether there is a target sign-up rate or not, it is important to monitor sign-up statistics. The reports may be run weekly, monthly, or quarterly. Some administering authorities share these reports with the Pensions Committee. The simplest reports show the percentages of registered members by membership status. The more complex ones can provide a more detailed breakdown based on other characteristics such as employer or age.

Some respondents were unaware of the reports that are available. Others confirmed that a full suite of reporting tools for the portal does not come as standard. Consequently, reports must be created locally. Those 'local' reports are configured

differently. For example, some reports are based on the number of pension accounts and others on the number of individual members. This can result in differences due to members with multiple records. Comparing sign-up rates across administering authorities should be done cautiously because different funds may have taken different approaches.

Some administering authorities have configured the portal to create a 'task' in the pension system database when a particular feature is used. It is possible to report on the number of these tasks to provide information about usage of a particular feature of the portal.

There was a consensus of opinion among respondents that standard reports should be available. These should provide comprehensive usage figures which include:

- the number or percentage of members signed up for the portal by member type
- when the portal was last accessed by member status
- number of registered users by age
- most frequently used page or feature by member status
- average time on spent on the portal
- average time spent on each page
- abandonment rate of sign-up attempts
- number of log in failures
- which members have accessed a key document, such as the ABS.

These detailed statistics can help to identify where promotion of an online portal is still needed. The administering authority can use this information to promote the portal to members of a certain status or to members employed by a specific employer or employer type.

Increasing member portal sign-up rates

Once an online portal is live and members have been invited to sign up to use it, this is not the end of the project. An online portal is a business as usual element of the service from this point forward. Communicating with members to maintain and increase sign-up rates should be an ongoing task for an administering authority. There are many ways this can be done, including:

- continuing to use the methods as outlined in the Promoting the use of an online portal to members section of this guide
- promoting new functionality of the online portal when it becomes available
- mandatory sign-up for new members of the scheme

- periodic promotional mailings to 'black hole' members - those members who have not signed up for the online portal nor opted for paper correspondence
- offering live or pre-recorded video demos of how to sign up to and use the online portal
- offering incentives through scheme employers
- making P60s and payslips online for pensioners and dependants
- campaigns with employers and trade unions
- sending out bulk correspondence to partially registered members - members who have begun to register and not completed the process.

Some administering authorities have noticed that their sign-up rates have plateaued. This may be because some members do not have access to a computer, tablet or smart phone. Some members simply do not want to access information about their pension in this way.

These attitudes may change over time, but it is important that administering authorities let members know that they can opt out of digital and continue to provide communications in a format requested by the member.

Maintaining member portal sign-up rates

Administering authorities that have operated a portal for some time recommend:

- striving to maintain registered members and
- monitoring the numbers of members who are signing up for and using the portal.

After they have registered, some members who do not use the online portal regularly will forget how to access the system. They also may not return to the portal without prompting. A member's record shows the last time they logged into the portal. In some cases, this may be several years ago.

Once the portal has been in operation for some time, an administering authority will need to think about ongoing resourcing. Other authorities in this position have:

- created a team to deal with portal and registration queries
- run regular statistical reports on registration numbers
- taken steps to ensure that any troubleshooting is done quickly.

Respondents to the survey stressed the importance of making sure that the portal works efficiently for members. If technical difficulties mean that a member cannot register for or use the portal or cannot easily access the information they need, they

may decide to opt for paper correspondence instead. Communicating about and correcting any technical problems quickly may help to maintain member interest.

What types of promotion have been successful?

The different methods of promoting the portal have different levels of success. Respondents to the survey told us what had encouraged members to sign up for the portal or continue to use it and what promotions had been less successful:

More successful:

- promoting through annual benefit statements
- articles in newsletters
- sending personalised letters with an activation key
- workshops, roadshows and floor-walking
- promoting the portal in telephone calls
- moving to electronic communications as the default option, with members being able to opt for paper
- making Scheme documents available online such as retirement estimates, CETVs, newsletters and annual benefit statements.

Less successful:

- promoting the portal in welcome letters to new starters
- bulk emails
- messages or articles on the pension fund website
- sending communications to active members via employers
- promotional posters in workplaces.

'Black hole' members

Members who have not registered to use the portal nor opted for paper communications are sometimes known as 'black hole' members. Black hole members have become a visible problem now as it is clear that they have not registered for the portal.

When annual benefit statements were sent by post, there was no way of knowing if members viewed those statements or not. If annual benefit statements are made available only online (for those who have not requested a paper statement), it is now possible to know how many members have definitely not viewed their annual statement.

Many administering authorities have identified these black hole members as a risk and are considering how to increase engagement. Administering authorities commonly use address tracing services to find current address details for deferred members. Administering authorities can ask Scheme employers for contact details for active members and to share pensions information with all or some of their employees.

It is important that administering authorities are able to show that they are taking reasonable steps to increase engagement and re-connect with 'black hole' members.

Time taken to launch a member portal

Administering authorities that are preparing to launch a member portal should factor in the amount of time they will need from the start of the project to the date the portal is made available to members. Responses to the survey showed the following timescales:

Table 2: Time taken from decision to launching a portal

Time taken	Percentage of respondents
Less than 6 months	63.64%
6 to 12 months	24.24%
1 to 2 years	9.09%
More than 2 years	3.03%

Administering authorities that responded to the survey had operated an online portal for a mixed amount of time:

Table 3: Time from launching a portal to survey date

Length of time	Percentage of respondents
Less than 6 months	3.03%
6 – 12 months	0.00%
1 – 2 years	9.09%
2 – 4 years	18.18%
More than 4 years	69.70%

Using the portal

Popular features

The main purpose of the portal is to improve the offering to LGPS members. The use of a portal also offers benefits to the administration team because self-service reduces the number of basic administrative tasks the team must perform. We asked administering authorities what features were most popular with members and the administration team.

Responses to the survey consistently showed that the features that were most commonly used by members were also those that reduced the administrative burden on the pensions team. These were:

- calculating retirement estimates
- updating personal details including addresses
- creating, viewing and amending death grant nominations
- accessing annual benefit statements
- accessing P60s and payslips
- submitting enquiries via the portal.

Calculating retirement estimates was the benefit mentioned by most respondents. Although some of those respondents reported a reduction in the number of estimate requests sent to the pensions team, this was not the case for all administering authorities.

Other features were mentioned less frequently in the survey responses. There are a number of reasons for the lower number of mentions:

- **They are features that some respondents had turned off** such as changing bank details, getting a CETV quote or death in service quotation.

- **They were new features at the time of the survey that were not available to all administering authorities** such as uploading member documents, self-service deferred into payment process and sending secure messages or queries to the pensions team.

- **Only a small number of administering authorities saw the feature as one of the top benefits** such as online newsletters, lump sum conversion tool and providing current pension values.

Member correspondence

Some respondents use the portal to upload letters to members. They then let the member know by email that a document is available on the portal. Using the portal to distribute documents in this way ensures prompt and secure receipt. It also reduces postal costs and printing, which is in keeping with environmental policies.

A newer feature at the time of the survey was the introduction of member uploads, allowing members to return completed forms or requested certificates using the portal. This development could also increase efficiency and reduce the time taken for certain processes.

An administering authority may choose to accept an electronic or typed signature. This would mean that members do not have to print forms to complete them. The member could download, complete and upload the document to the portal, without the need for printing.

Other requested documents could also be uploaded, for example birth or marriage certificates. This would ensure secure and prompt receipt by the administration team.

Using bulk emails

A bulk email facility is not offered by all software providers. If it is available, bulk emails that are sent directly from the system are recorded on a member's record which is useful for audit and administration purposes.

There are some disadvantages of the bulk email system:

- Bulk emails are labelled as being from the software supplier not the administering authority or pension administrator. These may not be recognised or trusted by the recipient and can end up in the member's spam folder.
- It may not be possible to include special formatting or images in emails sent via the system.
- There is no notification when an email is undeliverable. It is not possible to find out which members did not receive a notification, nor does the administering authority know to contact the member in another way to ask for an up to date email address.

Some administering authorities have chosen to use other products to send bulk emails such as GOV.UK Notify and GOVDelivery. These are not linked to the member database and so bulk emails sent using these methods are not recorded on

the system. There is therefore no easy way to identify if a member has been sent a particular message.

Some of these other products provide a list of recipients and undelivered emails. These allow administering authorities to identify members who have not received a particular communication. It can then:

- send the information to them another way and
- update the member's record so that no more messages are sent to an email address that is no longer in use.

Accessibility

Accessibility is a legal requirement, and this must be considered when offering a portal to members. The Government's guide to Understanding accessibility requirements for public sector bodies gives more information about accessibility requirements.

Users of assistive technology must be considered in both navigation of the member portal and in the production of any documents published on the portal.

The Public Sector Bodies (Websites and Mobile Applications) Accessibility Regulations 2018 contain an exemption for intranets published before 23 September 2019. However, a new public sector website must be accessible, and an older website must be accessible following 'substantial revision' (Regulation 3(2)(g)). Accessibility policies of the 'host' authority may require that all websites meet the relevant standards, irrespective of the date they were first published. There are over six million LGPS members. Administering authorities have expressed their ambition to improve digital accessibility and therefore to increase online access to pension information.

There are also specific requirements related to the production of annual benefit statements. These are covered in paragraph 5 of the Public Service Pensions (Information about Benefits) Directions 2014:

> 5. A benefit information statement may only be provided by being sent to a person's electronic address or being made available on a website if the scheme manager is satisfied that the statement is provided in a manner—
>
> (a) designed so that the person will be able to get access to, and store or print, the statement; and
>
> (b) that takes into account the requirements of disabled persons.

Opting out of digital communication

The percentage of members who have chosen to opt out of digital communications varies by type of member. The average opt out rates reported by the respondents to the survey are shown in the diagram that follows.
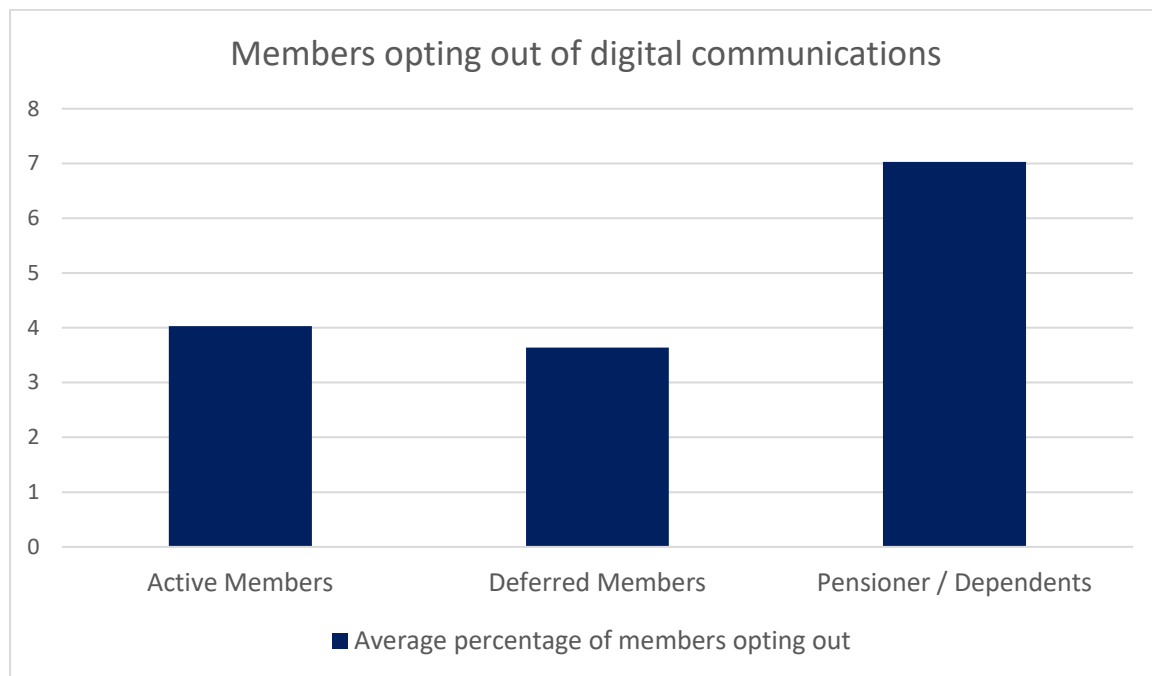
The group with the highest opt out rate is pensioner and dependent members with an average rate of 7 per cent. The average opt out rates for active and deferred members are lower, at around 4 per cent.

The majority of respondents accept requests to opt out of digital communications by letter, telephone or email. Some administering authorities require an audit trail or signature, so will not accept an opt out by telephone. Portals may also allow the member to express their choice by selecting the relevant option once they have logged on.

Portal compatibility

Some respondents found that the portal does not work if the member uses certain web browsers. Respondents recommend adding warning messages to alert users to this issue before they encounter a problem. It is likely that older web browsers will continue to become obsolete. Administering authorities may need to continue to monitor any issues related to unsupported browsers and keep any warnings up to date.

Maintaining and updating the portal

64 per cent of respondents use a mixture of both an in-house IT resource and their software supplier to maintain the portal. 9 per cent use only their software supplier and 27 per cent use only their in-house IT resource. This is shown in the chart below.

Who maintains the portal?

■ In House Team   ■ Software Supplier   ■ Both
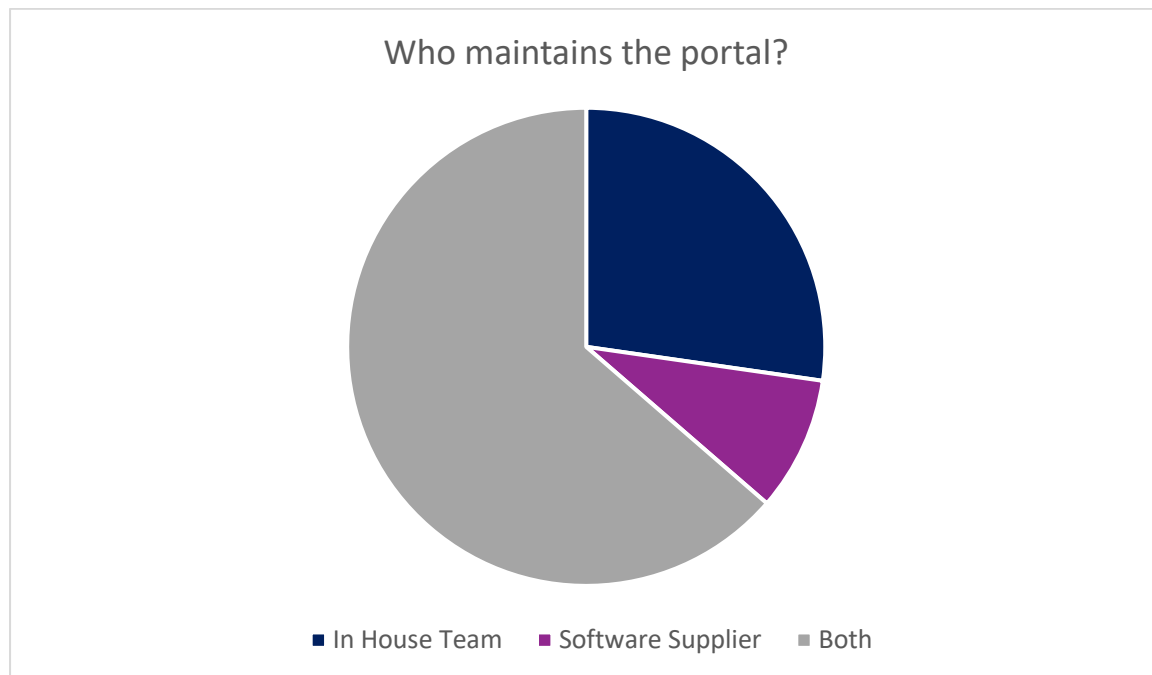
Survey responses suggested that a dedicated in-house IT resource can implement bespoke changes more quickly than the software supplier. The software supplier will often charge for any non-standard features, which could be completed more quickly and cheaply with an in-house IT resource.

Respondents to the survey did report some disadvantages to making changes to the portal in-house:

- Smaller administering authorities may not have the technical expertise to maintain the portal locally. They may not have the capacity to employ a dedicated in-house IT resource specifically for the portal. Administering authorities will have to consider the costs involved when deciding their approach.

- Bespoke features may be overwritten by software updates. Administering authorities that make bespoke changes will have to work with their supplier to ensure a thorough testing of each of the enhanced features, in addition to their normal software testing. This may add to the incidental costs when making any changes. The frequency of the software updates will also need to

be considered, as some suppliers provide version updates several times per year.

- Some technical experience is required to update the portal. A dedicated IT resource may not always be available to perform these tasks, particularly in smaller funds. If the local team cannot perform the changes, there may be delays in making necessary updates. The general view of the survey respondents is that the content management system should be easier to use. This would mean that simple changes could be made by team members without specialist technical skills.

Supplier updates to the portal

Respondents stated that their software provider provides frequent system updates. Some recent developments represent significant improvements.

However, with each new release or update there do tend to be some technical issues that need to be resolved by the administering authority's IT department and software supplier. Some administering authorities have reported upgrade issues that occurred because the portal is hosted locally. This means that the portal needs to comply with the host authority's security.

In addition to the problems caused to bespoke changes to the portal on release of an update (as discussed in the previous section), respondents reported that previous fixes that the supplier had implemented were often overwritten by an update.

This causes continuous issues with the maintenance of the portal. One administering authority recommends testing the portal regularly to ensure it is working as expected. Issues often seem to appear without warning, so this administering authority completes monthly business as usual (BAU) testing to check that all key functions are performing correctly.

In general, the respondents' experiences are that implementing and maintaining the portal can be a long and complex project. It may take significant investment from the administering authority and the in-house systems team, and ongoing discussions with the software provider to ensure updates are implemented and software supplier fixes and custom changes are made successfully.

The reliability of the portal is essential. If it doesn't work correctly, this can have a vastly detrimental impact on the administration team and the member experience.

One software supplier is no longer developing their portal. Not only does this mean that there are no new features, it also means that those existing features that are not performing correctly for some members will not be fixed.

Several respondents have stated that testing can be an issue. They felt that developers had not properly tested the software before it went live. Full testing of the new features and BAU testing will need to be considered as part of the overall portal maintenance.

Respondents believed that it would be more efficient if the upgrades required less testing before implementation and that they were more 'off the shelf'.

Communicating portal 'downtime'

Once the portal is rolled out it is important that administering authorities consider how they will communicate with members about maintenance and downtime, including unexpected downtime. If an administering authority does not have a clear communication plan, downtime can result in significant member contact.

Portal user groups

87.88% of respondents attend a user group with their software supplier, usually every six months.

The user groups offer the software suppliers an opportunity to display their upcoming release features and publicise chargeable features. User groups allow administering authorities to:

- ask suppliers questions about future system developments
- find out about bespoke solutions implemented by other administering authorities and the benefits they have seen
- discuss common problems and solutions
- discuss priorities for the portal with suppliers and recommend future developments to achieve those priorities.

Respondents to the survey recommended any administering authority that operates a member portal to attend these meetings. The more administering authorities that attend, the more quickly they will find out about problems or positive features of the portal. This allows administering authorities to implement changes quickly to improve the user experience.

Future developments

We asked respondents to let us know what future developments to the portal they wanted to see. Respondents to the survey are at different stages of implementing a member portal. Some have rolled out maximum functionality while others are at a much earlier stage. The possible developments listed below range from those that were in development at the time of the survey to a longer-term wish list for future improvements.

- **Document upload.** Many administering authorities make member documents available on the portal. They are looking to develop the ability for members to upload their own documents and correspondence to the portal. At the early stages of development, this presented challenges for members with multiple records.

- **Workflow.** Automated integration of the portal with workflow is a priority for many. The aim is for a member action on the portal to generate a task in the pension administration workflow system automatically. Some administering authorities are working on automating member-initiated processes such as deferred into retirement and refunds. Greater integration between the portal and workflow system could also allow members to track the progress of their case online, removing the need to contact the pensions team for updates.

- **Online webforms.** Webforms could be used for many different purposes. Respondents to the survey suggested they were looking to use them to start a cash equivalent transfer value request, or for the member's previous pensions declaration.

- **Improved registration process.** Many administering authorities reported that they spend a significant amount of time responding to queries about the registration process or changing passwords. Technical problems can lead to members abandoning the registration process altogether and opting for paper communications instead. Improving this process would be a significant benefit to both users and pension administration teams. We understand that at least one supplier is developing the use of biometrics to improve the registration and identification process. One fund uses email address instead of requiring a separate username. This bespoke development could be useful to other funds to reduce queries related to forgotten usernames.

- **Webchats and chat bots.** These could help with registration, navigation issues, user errors and other routine queries.

- **Simplified configuration.** The level of technical knowledge needed to make local changes to the portal is currently high. Making portal configuration simpler would allow administering authorities to make changes more quickly and reduce reliance on specialist technical staff. It would also reduce the ongoing cost of bespoke developments.

- **Standard reports.** Having a suite of standard reports would also reduce the need for technical expertise as this would mean reports do not need to be created or amended locally.

- **Enhanced benefit projector.** The benefit projector is one of the most-used features of the portal. Some administering authorities are looking for enhancements that will allow users to run more complicated calculations. Different tools may offer different features currently. Ideally, the projector should take into account future changes in:

  - pay
  - inflation
  - section of the Scheme (main or 50/50)
  - working hours.

  Some administering authorities are investigating allowing users to enter an AVC fund value to be included in the retirement benefits quoted.

- **Individual messaging.** Some administering authorities are investigating different methods to notify members that a letter or response to a query is available on the portal. Enhancing the bulk emails feature so that undeliverable emails can be identified would also be a welcome development.

- **Accessibility.** Ensuring that the portal can be used by, and documents accessed and read by the most members possible is a priority for many administering authorities. They are looking for enhancements that improve the accessibility of the portal for all users.

Conclusion

The contents of this guide are based on the experiences of administering authorities in England, Wales and Scotland. We gathered their views in a survey about digital engagement and in discussions at the Communications Working Group (CWG). There were a number of key themes revealed in the survey results and the CWG discussions. These key themes and other factors that may affect member engagement are:

1. **Don't underestimate the time and resources needed to launch a portal.**

2. **Encouraging members to sign up is an ongoing program, not a one-off exercise.** Administering authorities will need to allocate resources to assist those signing up for the first time, help those who have not accessed the portal for some time and to promote the portal to new members and existing members who have not yet registered.

3. **Don't expect a drastic reduction in workload.** Operating a portal can reduce the number of basic administrative tasks performed by the pension team such as address changes and expression of wish nominations. Requests for retirement estimates are also likely to drop. The pensions team will need to allocate resources to maintain and promote the portal, help with registration and logging in, and to respond to queries from members who dispute or do not understand information about their pension which they see on the portal.

4. **The need to support members through the registration process.** Some administering authorities reported that they received far more queries from members who had problems registering for the portal than they had anticipated. Having member resources in place to assist with registration could help more people successfully register and therefore reduce the number of queries. Those resources might include factsheets, 'How to' videos and on-screen warning messages. We encourage software suppliers to consider improvements to the registration process. The other features of the portal are irrelevant if members give up during the registration process. We welcome the possibility of using biometrics to log in. This could both improve the member experience and maintain high levels of security.

5. **Lack of member engagement.** Administering authorities recognise that members are more likely to be interested in their pension as they approach retirement. This may be reflected in low portal sign up rates among younger

members. Administering authorities must consider the rules around opting out of digital, disclosure and annual benefit statements when communicating with members. We encourage continued documented efforts to contact and engage 'black hole' members.

There will be central government initiatives in the near future that aim to improve member understanding of and engagement with their pensions. These include the launch of pensions dashboards and the possible introduction of 'pensions season' during which annual benefit statements will be produced. There may be increased interest in pensions as these initiatives are publicised. Administering authorities may be able to take advantage of this increased interest in pensions to encourage members to sign up for a member portal.

6. **Communicating with members in other ways.** Administering authorities must consider those members who do not wish to access information about their pension online. They will need to continue to provide pension information in other ways to those members who have opted out of digital communications. Making sure that a portal meets the relevant accessibility requirements will help by making the portal available to the majority of members.

7. **Conflicting priorities.** Some respondents were very positive about the potential of member portals, but thought that conflicting priorities meant that they were not getting the most out of them. One respondent said:

> "In order to fully utilise [the portal's] current and future functionality, we must undertake a comprehensive admin review of our existing back office processes and procedures. Unfortunately, we seem to be ever facing challenging projects and external pressures (GMP reconciliation, McCloud, cost cap). We are struggling to identify the resources in order to take the necessary review."

8. **It's worth it!** One aim of this guide is to help administering authorities navigate some of the problems they might encounter as they launch and maintain a member portal. It is important to bear in mind that administering authorities believe that the benefits offered by the portal outweigh those problems. One respondent to the survey told us:

> "The feedback we receive from members is really very positive and so we would encourage any [administering authority] who haven't utilised self-service to do so."

Technical Guide – Digital engagement v1.0 August 2022

Disclaimer

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