Our Ref: MP619223

Andrew Tyrie MP
Chair of the Treasury Committee
House of Commons Committee Office
7 Millbank
House of Commons
London, SW1P 3JA

29 July 2014

Dear Andrew,

Erroneous publication of press notice

I refer to your letter of 16 June 2014 about the publication, in error, of a press notice relating to the sale by UKFI of 7.5 per cent of HM Treasury's shareholding in Lloyds Banking Group. Firstly I apologise on behalf of the Government Digital Service (GDS) for this error.

As you will be aware, government websites are being consolidated into a single domain, GOV.UK. This award-winning website is designed around user needs, and saved over £60m of public money in 2013/14. It has replaced over 230 government websites already.

UKFI has been working with the GDS to plan the migration of its website. GDS and UKFI have been exploring whether additional functionality is required to cater for UKFI strict parameters regarding the dissemination of information to market. This includes restrictions on advertising and marketing share sales in certain foreign jurisdictions.

On 30 May 2014, during development work to establish suitable protections for the dissemination of price sensitive information, GDS published, in error, a test press release. The release was a repeat of the announcement launching the second sale of the Government's shareholding in Lloyds on 25 March 2014.

GOV.UK needs functionality to publish historic content as websites migrate over to it. However, content should first be tested in a private 'preview' environment (a separate copy of the website, hidden from the Internet). Then, when uploading content to the live GOV.UK site, it should be backdated using the 'First published date' facility. In this case, human error meant this facility was not used, making it look as though this was a new story being published (although 'Test' was included in the title).
The press release was taken down within 22 minutes, however GDS recognise the publication was unacceptable and measures have been taken to prevent this happening again. Many of these include improvements to the functionality of GOV.UK to make it more difficult for people to do the wrong thing, for example:

- Use of the "First published date" facility: GDS are reminding all publishers of content on GOV.UK that this must be included. They will update the publishing system on GOV.UK to make this field mandatory for anyone publishing an item.
- Working in the hidden preview environment rather than the live: GDS are reminding content designers that the private preview environment should be used when producing mock-ups of content. They have also made it more obvious when people are using the preview environment to reduce the chances of errors.
- Use of dummy content: GDS have reminded publishers that it is good practice for testing on GOV.UK to be done with dummy content unless specifically agreed with the organisation concerned.
- Sharing learning: GDS raised this case at the GOV.UK Steering Group on 19 June to share learning with other publishing organisations.

Once organisations migrate their website onto GOV.UK, they (not GDS) are responsible for publishing their own content. GDS works with them before migration to ensure the website meets their functional requirements. Therefore, they can ensure any information published is done in accordance with any regulatory, legislative or other requirements restricting the operation of that organisation.

GDS take errors such as this extremely seriously. I believe the prompt action taken is a robust response to preventing a recurrence of this type in future.

I am copying this letter to the Chancellor.

FRANCIS MAUDE