

PART ONE

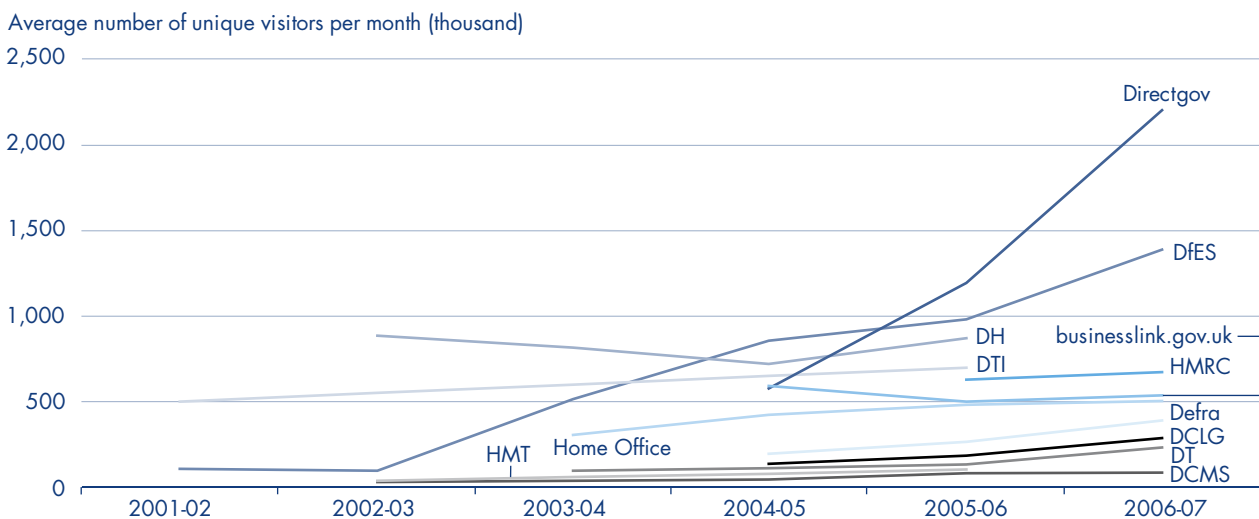
The quality of online provision

Usage of the main government sites has risen over time, in a period when background trends in web traffic have also grown

1.1 Since we last reported in 2002, visitor numbers to government websites have grown slowly but steadily, measured in terms of the number of unique visitors, shown in **Figure 3**. Two trend lines are especially rapid, that for Directgov, and for the Department for Education and Skills, which primarily reflects the provision of online information for schools and teachers.

1.2 This is against a background of increased internet use in the UK in the same period with 13.9 million households (57 per cent) in Britain able to access the internet from home in 2006.⁸ This is an increase of 2.9 million households (or 26 per cent) since 2002.⁹ Most households have also transferred from slow dial-up to speedier broadband services, making websites much easier to access and increasing traffic volumes.

3 Average number of unique visitors to government websites per month, from 2000 to 2007



Source: Survey of departments and agencies

NOTE

This Figure shows visitor numbers to corporate departmental sites only and does not include relevant executive agencies or NDPBs. In some cases this would make significant difference to the results shown here e.g. the Jobcentre Plus, part of DWP, website, currently the most popular Government online recruitment website, with around two million visitors every week, is not included here.

⁸ Sources: National Statistics Omnibus Survey, Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey and Survey of Internet Service Provider. www.statistics.gov.uk.

⁹ Sources: National Statistics Omnibus Survey, Northern Ireland Omnibus Survey and Survey of Internet Service Provider. www.statistics.gov.uk.

The European picture

1.3 There are no reliable comparable measures of take-up of e-government services across the European Union. Where data does exist it needs to be treated with care because there are differences in what people think of as a public authority across European states – for instance most public transport in the United Kingdom is provided by private operators. Additionally in some countries, such as the Netherlands, citizens must use the internet for some government services. **Figures 4a and 4b (overleaf)** provide an illustration of the picture across Europe. Figure 4a shows that the proportion of the United Kingdom population using an internet site to interact with Government has grown slowly but steadily in recent years. At 24 per cent in 2005 there is scope, however, to increase the use of the internet by both businesses and citizens; and Directgov and businesslink.gov.uk have shown some initial steps towards that end. Figure 4b shows the percentage of services that offer complete electronic case handling.

The public see government websites as generally satisfactory. Our census shows facilities have improved somewhat since 2001

1.4 In a national sample survey in February 2007 we asked respondents for their views on government websites, which were broadly positive. **Figure 5 overleaf** shows we asked respondents to assign marks out of 10 to government websites on ten different criteria. A key indicator here is the final column, showing how many more people gave government websites strong positive marks minus the proportion giving them the lowest possible marks. Government sites were net positively evaluated on being up to date, designed to help you find out information, easy to use and designed for different kinds of people. On half the criteria there was a small positive or negative balance. But sites scored low on people recommending them to others.

1.5 Focus groups participants saw department and agency websites as generally well run and trustworthy.

“I’ve used DVLA - that was easy to use . . . It was really quick and useful.”

“I have used the pensions forecast online and that was good.”

But some said that information was presented in an off-putting way and was difficult to understand. As one respondent put it:

“It came up with streams and streams of things and I’m thinking ‘Oh for goodness sake!’ ... I mean I’m not brilliant at the computer, so I like it at a really basic level.”

Participants also found some department and agency sites very text-heavy:

“A lot of it is wordy stuff. It would be good to have pictures or icons, to show what particular areas are – something that you can relate to.”

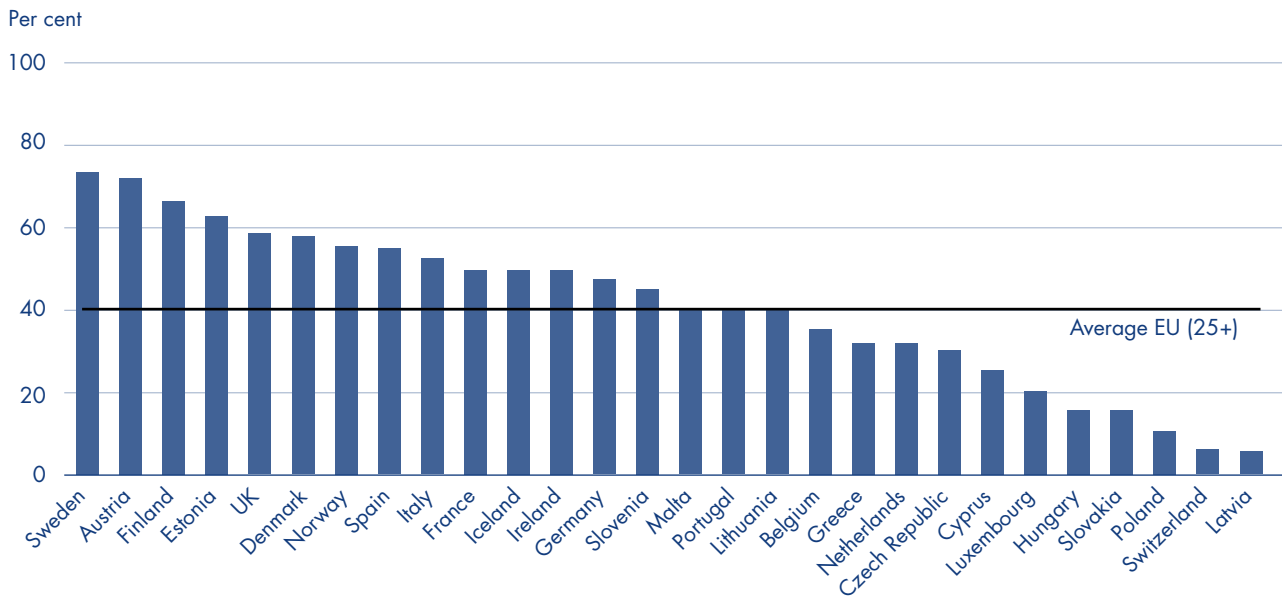
Most department and agency sites were unfavourably compared with participants’ experiences of commercial sites, especially banks and travel sites. Participants said that they found department and agency sites hard to navigate, particularly when arriving at the homepage. Internal search engines, in particular, were found to be unhelpful in finding the information being sought. The Cabinet Office consider that accessibility guidelines can at times make it difficult to use innovative features that are popular on some commercial sites and would welcome moves by accessibility standards bodies to reflect more recent developments in web design.

4a Proportion (%) of the population who have used an internet site to look for government information or interact with government on services in the last three months

	2002	2003	2004	2005
Iceland	–	56	58	55
Sweden	42	44	39	52
Finland	34	40	45	47
Luxembourg	16	28	45	46
Netherlands	–	–	–	46
Denmark	37	40	44	–
Norway	–	43	37	–
Germany	17	26	33	–
Estonia	–	–	20	31
Austria	11	20	21	29
Slovakia	–	–	25	27
United Kingdom	–	21	22	24
Slovenia	–	–	13	19
Hungary	–	–	16	18
Belgium	–	–	–	18
Ireland	–	–	14	18
Italy	–	–	–	14
Portugal	–	–	13	14
Latvia	–	–	13	13
Poland	–	–	13	13
Cyprus	–	–	11	11
Lithuania	–	7	10	12
Greece	–	–	8	7
Czech Republic	–	–	7	5
Turkey	–	–	6	–
Bulgaria	–	–	5	–
France	–	–	–	–

Source: Eurostat data

4b Country services that offer complete electronic case handling



Source: Adapted from European Commission Directorate General for Information Society and Media; *Online Availability of Public Services: How is Europe Progressing?*

5 How all respondents using the internet rated government websites on ten criteria in our national sample survey, February 2007

The question asked was: 'Thinking about government websites, could you give them marks out of 10 on the following (where 10 is excellent and 1 is very poor)?'

Criterion	Per cent assigning top marks (i.e. 8, 9 or 10)	Per cent assigning low marks (i.e. 1, 2 or 3)	Balance
Up to date	35	6	+29
Designed to help you find out information	30	7	+23
Easy to use and clearly written	25	5	+20
Designed for all kinds of people	24	9	+15
As good as private sector sites	20	12	+8
Designed to help you get things done quickly	18	12	+6
I can trust what they say	24	19	+5
Use icons, video and audio	12	10	+2
Help you find out what other users of government services think	12	15	-3
I have recommended them to friends or family	11	41	-30

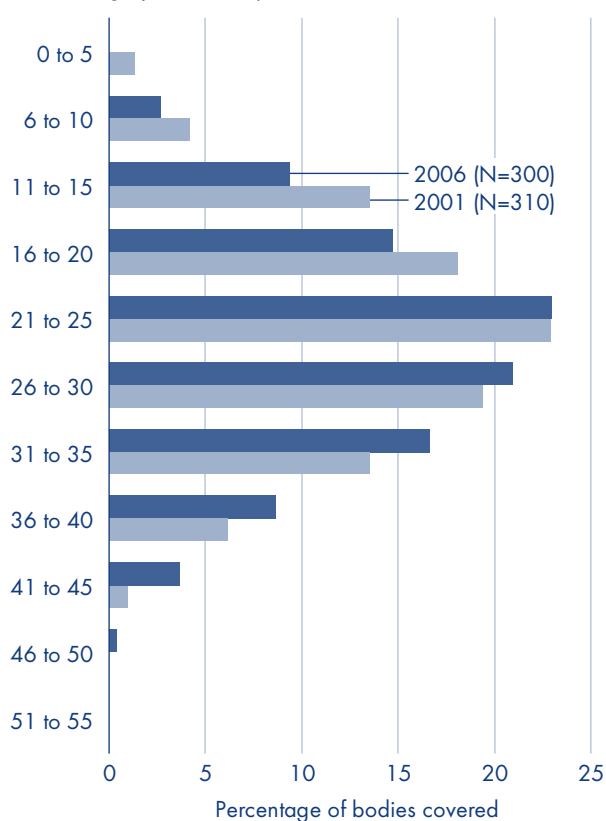
Source: National sample survey, carried out by ICM Research for National Audit Office

1.6 Assessed against a consistent basket of 60 features (used in our two previous reports on this subject), **Figure 6** shows that government websites improved slightly in 2006 on the quality standards of 2001. About a tenth of all government sites have made major improvements in their quality score, and a further one in ten have made modest progress. One in six government sites have got significantly worse on this basis in the period since 2001, while another one in eight have got somewhat worse.

1.7 A critical feature of modern web services is what visitors can do on the site. In our focus groups, the online service for renewing road tax was strongly appreciated by those who had used it, and described as ‘quick and useful’. The Department for Work and Pensions’ online pensions forecast was also seen as very helpful. Hospitals sending users a personal password for booking an appointment on their website at a time that suited them and online local school applications (sending receipts) were also commended. The three cases in **Case Example 4** highlight low-cost good practices that add value for users.

6 There are slightly more higher scoring websites in 2006 than in 2001

Score category (out of 60 possible features)



Source: Census of government organisations' websites

There is scope to develop more online facilities

1.8 In our census of 300 government websites we identified just under 3,400 forms that could be downloaded.¹⁰ Only one in eight of these forms can be both filled in and returned electronically. The vast bulk (85 per cent) of forms still need to be printed and filled out on paper, despite the major achievements in transactional services shown in Figure 1. It should be noted, however, that it can be difficult to cost-justify putting some forms online, such as those that are infrequently used or those where substantial reengineering is required behind the scenes to complex systems to make possible electronic data entry.

CASE EXAMPLE 4

Doing useful things online

The European Health Identification Card (EHIC)

This is a rare example of a fully electronic form in British government. The EHIC card is used by UK residents travelling in other European Union countries to access medical treatment that becomes necessary during their trip and replaced the E111 form. Users complete a short form accessed from the Department of Health website to apply for a card. The site promises fulfilment within seven working days. Applications can also be made by telephone or by post (the application form is available from the Post Office). In 2006, the mix of applications was 56% online, 25% postal, and 19% via the telephone.

Web address: <http://www.dh.gov.uk/travellers>

When to register for VAT

The interactive tool gives a simple conclusion to UK-based businesses as to whether or not they need to register for VAT. They are asked no more than 14 questions and for most users the process takes under five minutes. The conclusion links to download the relevant forms on the HMRC website. By contrast, the definitive official guidance, VAT notice 700/1 *Should I be registered for VAT?* runs to 20,000 words and 61 A4 pages.

Web address: <http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/vat>

The Legal Services Commission (LSC) online debt advice tool

LSC have teamed up with The Consumer Credit Counselling Service to provide free online debt advice to the public. The aim of the tool is to offer help to those who are challenging an unfair debt, need legal advice and want to speak to an adviser as soon as possible. The tool can also be used by anyone with a debt problem, as the user is asked a series of questions to determine what type of debt problem they have, and is directed to the most appropriate form of help and advice should they need it.

Web address: [https://www.cccs.co.uk/debtremedy/\(4hdclh45i0wntazytbwp1w45\)/midway/cls/cls-start.aspx?clspg=1](https://www.cccs.co.uk/debtremedy/(4hdclh45i0wntazytbwp1w45)/midway/cls/cls-start.aspx?clspg=1).

10 See Research Report (Section A: Part 1, Figure 8).

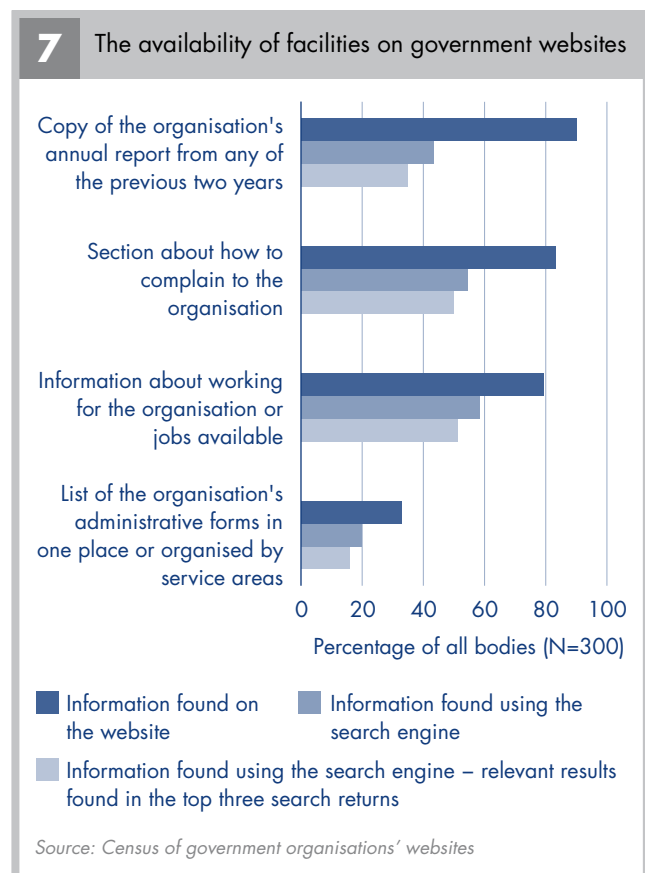
1.9 At a more detailed level there also seem to be some gaps in provision. **Figure 7** shows that while four in five department and agency websites provide jobs or recruitment information, or information about how to complain, only one in five government websites provides a list of the organisation's administrative forms (although this is not relevant for all agencies). The Cabinet Office Civil Service Recruitment Gateway site lists vacancies from across government.

Many people choose to access government websites using a search engine

1.10 Powerful search engines have transformed the way that people use the internet and therefore the way in which the public access government websites and look for and find information. In our national survey four fifths of respondents said they would access government in this way and 90 per cent of questions in our experiments with internet users were answered with the help of Google. Two thirds of departments and agencies told us in our survey that some variant of their organisation's name appeared in the top three search terms entered by users arriving via a search engine. However, some people

arriving by search engines are unaware that they have reached a government site. In our focus groups some quite experienced users thought that the search engine itself delivers all the answers. A search for government information using a search engine is likely to bring a wide range of results from many different websites. This can be confusing for some internet users. Directgov is designed to provide the information and services that citizens are most likely to need in a more focussed manner.

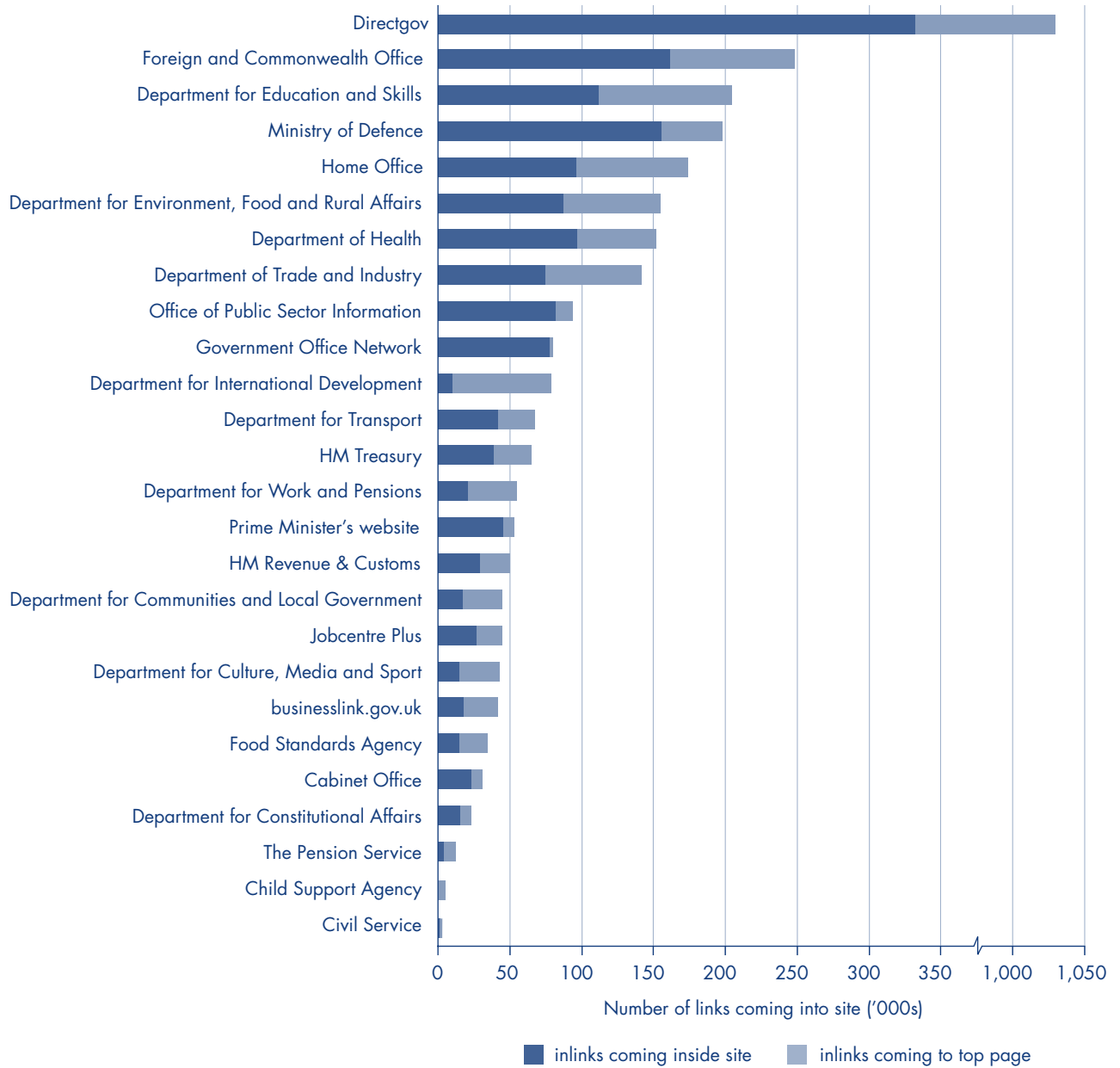
1.11 Achieving a high 'visibility' to search engines will lead to coming at the top, or high up, on the list of search engine results. Such visibility is in part determined by search engines counting the number of links coming into sites, as well as the extent to which the sites they come from are themselves 'authoritative' (that is, well linked to by other sites). There are 3.1 million links from external sites into all the central government department domains. (Over a million of these come to the Directgov website, mostly originating from relatively few government organisations.) For comparison there are 13.7 million inward links to the BBC website. **Figure 8** shows that departments and agencies have good visibility in relation to leading external search engines (the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, for example, has almost a quarter of a million links pointing to its site). But there is scope for greater linkage between government websites, with only three to 20 per cent of inward links coming from other government departments or agencies.



Visitors who reach government websites from other sites often arrive at the home page, and thus have to start their search for information again

1.12 When users are referred to a government website from elsewhere, they mostly go to a specific page, but at least a third will go to the home page. **Figure 8** shows that this proportion is much higher on some websites: for instance, our web crawl found that two thirds of the million links coming into the Directgov website go to the home page. Some government web managers prefer users to come directly to home pages as it can help to signpost users to the most relevant and up-to-date information and manage the risk of web links and addresses becoming broken because they are out of date. However, the result is that users will then have to start searching from scratch – for instance, scanning the home page for what they need or using the internal search engine. In our focus groups participants said that this can be offputting. In their view, most government sites' home pages are very text-heavy, with many different items competing for visitors' attention, so it can make finding information harder for users.

8 How many links go to government websites



Source: Web crawling search of .gov.uk domain

NOTES

- 1 The discontinuity mark is used in order to be able to show the results for Directgov at over one million links while retaining clarity for the rest of the Figure.
- 2 In this Figure the four DWP sites have been separated out (corporate DWP, Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service and Child Support Agency) because they are available via different domain names and, for the user, constitute four distinct websites.

Internal search engines on government sites are widely used, but attract criticism from users

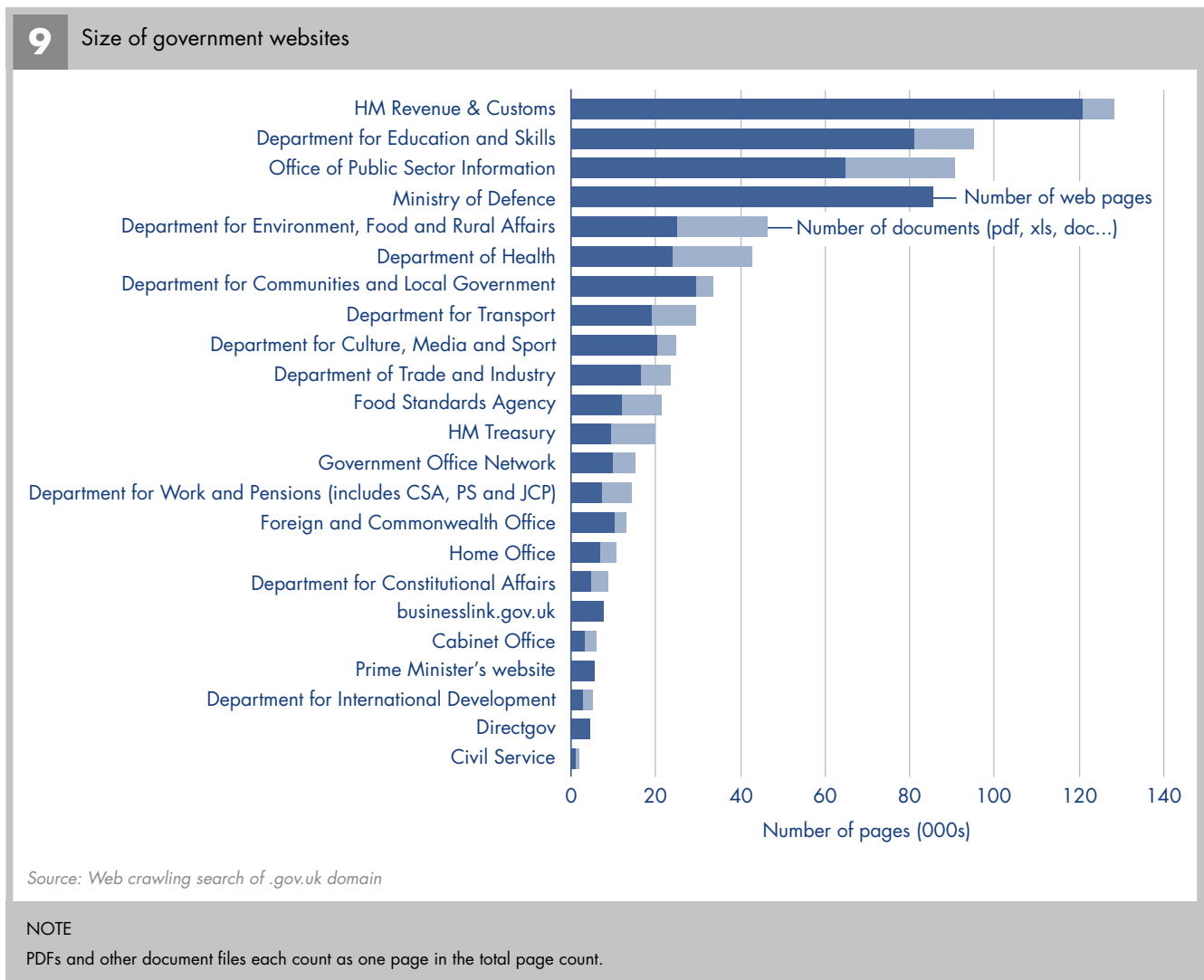
1.13 If people arrive directly to a home page they are likely to try using an internal search engine to find the information they are seeking. However, most internal search engines often fail to work satisfactorily (whether for companies or government agencies) because they crawl only a limited range of pages rather than the web as a whole. The most effective internal search engines are usually custom-built for an organisation’s site, as with the internal search engine of the US government’s portal site, www.usa.gov (see Appendix Two).

1.14 In our experiments with internet users, where participants started with the Directgov website, they used the internal search function for 65 per cent of the questions they subsequently answered, evidence of how

vital it is for internal search engines to work well. In our focus groups, internal search engines also attracted criticisms. In interviews, Chief Information Officers (CIOs) and web managers acknowledged that internal search remains a difficult problem for departments and agencies.

Some government websites can be difficult to understand and navigate

1.15 The websites of central government organisations are mostly medium to large in size. **Figure 9** shows that the average (median) site has 17,000 pages¹¹, equivalent to say the site of a large department store like John Lewis. Government sites however hold a mixture of information ranging from understandably sizeable documents (often stored in PDF form) reflecting government’s wider responsibility for the stewardship and custody of public records through to information on citizen facing services.



¹¹ This is a conservative estimate because our search excluded data repositories accessible via the website. In addition we follow the conventional webcrawling analysis practice of counting each PDF document as a single page, which is rarely true for government.

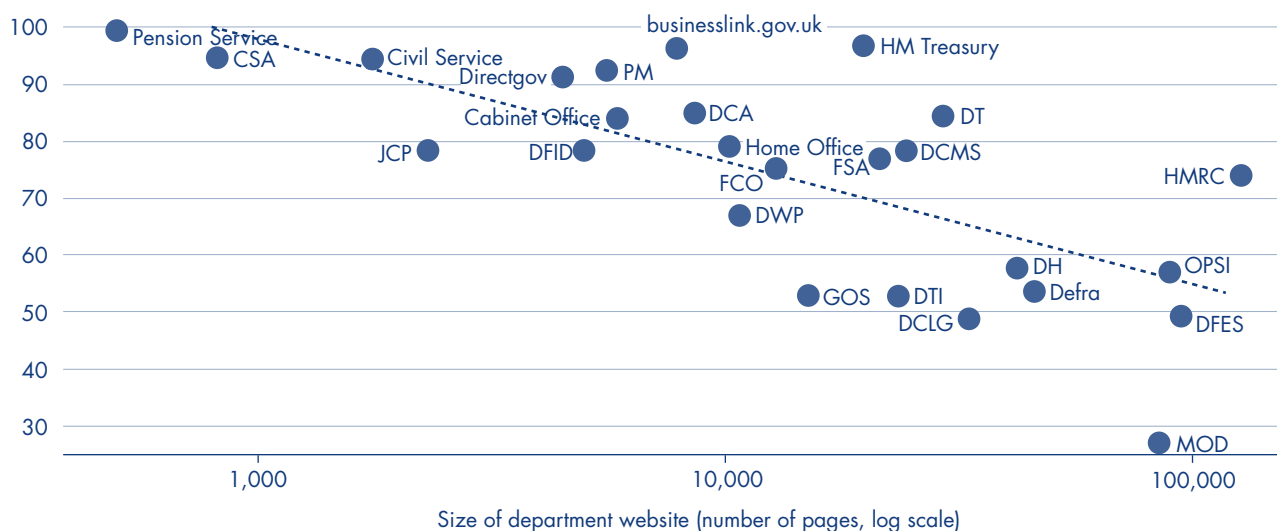
One of the key aims behind the transfer of materials to the Directgov and businesslink.gov.uk websites is to reduce the risk of users being referred to cluttered materials that have been designed for other purposes. Instead the new sites aim to produce information that is better tailored to the requirements of citizens or businesses.

1.16 The larger a department's site is the more challenging it becomes to make information easy to find. There are various methods of assessing the ease of navigating around websites. One way of doing so is measuring the number of clicks required to reach information. For this study, we used as a benchmark the proportion of pages that can be reached within six clicks of any other page on a site (see Figure 10). We recognise that there may be other ways to assess navigability as discussed in our Research Report. In general, as sites increase in size it becomes more difficult to maintain navigability. And in addition department and agency sites may have to cover a broader range of subjects than private sector sites, which can be a challenge for navigability. However even small/medium sites may be poorly navigable if they are badly designed and Figure 10 also shows that there are large differences between the navigability of similarly-sized sites.

1.17 Our census of government websites shows that many have yet to adopt approaches that are now commonplace amongst leading private sector sites. In the current period of website innovation in the private sector many sites allow users to generate content (such as posting video clips or photos) or playback to users what other users think (a central feature of Amazon and eBay, for instance). The facility of the 10 Downing Street site for users to sign online petitions has illustrated how popular more innovative features can be; it is also possible to access 10 Downing Street information via YouTube (www.youtube.com/downingst). The Department of Health has 'trailed' a feedback and testimonials site for NHS patients, but overall we found a very conservative view of the content and organisation of government sites. Fewer than four per cent of government sites tell users what are the most popular sections of their site or what are the most popular downloads or search terms and only one in 35 government sites recommends other relevant elements to users – for instance, telling them that people who downloaded this document on a particular issue also downloaded other relevant documents. In April 2007, the Cabinet Office commissioned a study by outside experts, entitled the Power of Information Review, on how far government websites need to adapt to these new

10 Navigability of government websites

From all distances between pages: percentage that is ≤ 6 clicks



Source: Web crawling search of .gov.uk domain

NOTES

- 1 The dotted line of best fit shows that there is a relationship between size of site and navigability; it is more difficult to improve the navigability of a large site. However, the wide variation from the line also shows that there are differences in navigability between similarly-sized sites.
- 2 The four DWP sites have been separated out (corporate DWP, Jobcentre Plus, The Pension Service and Child Support Agency) because they are available via different domain names and, for the user, constitute four distinct websites.

technologies. The Cabinet Office has responded to the Review by stating that the Government “should engage in partnership with online communities and advise civil servants on how best to participate in new media”.

There is a risk that some groups of citizens may be excluded from the benefits of online services

1.18 Accessing information online (for instance, about benefits rules, health matters, or searching for a job) can be helpful for people from socially disadvantaged groups or who currently lack the necessary ICT skills needed to use the internet effectively on their own. Research suggests that 79 per cent of people receiving means-tested benefits lack practical ICT skills¹² and 51 per cent of adults earning less than £10,400 a year have never used the internet.¹³ Also that 75 per cent of socially excluded people (suffering from three or more forms of deprivation) are non-users of the internet.¹⁴ The Government is committed to making online services accessible to all citizens by 2010¹⁵ and published, in 2005, *Connecting the UK: The Digital Inclusion Strategy* which sets out a high level framework for increasing digital inclusion. The strategy included a commitment to improve the accessibility to technology for the digitally excluded and ease of use for the disabled as well as the launch of the Digital Challenge, a competition to encourage local authorities and their partners from the public, private, academic and third sectors to identify how technology can be used to tackle social exclusion. (Sunderland was announced as the winner in March 2007.) This strategy is currently being reviewed. To support the wider digital inclusion agenda a Digital Inclusion Team was established in 2006. Funded by Communities and Local Government, the team focuses specifically on how new technology can be used to tackle social exclusion.

1.19 The Government subsidises some 6,000 UK online centres, run by libraries, community groups, colleges and local authorities to provide free or low cost internet access for people without a home PC, serving an estimated three million customers a year.¹⁶ Some UK online centres have staff or volunteers on hand to

help new or less confident users (and some also actively promote government online services). In our focus groups of internet users these facilities were well known and appreciated. However some centres are only able to provide minimal support.

1.20 Those who do not have internet access themselves will often use intermediaries (such as friends, family, care workers or advice centres) in their contact with government departments and agencies. For example, Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has found that 45 per cent of contacts with the Disability and Carers Service and 23 per cent of contacts with the Pensions Service come through intermediaries, while Jobcentre Plus has over 12 million intermediary contacts every year. DWP are now prioritising their strategy for interacting with intermediaries but overall government departments have found it difficult to formalise online communications with intermediaries, with perceived issues around identification often acting as a barrier (the Government Gateway, for example, has the available technology and business processes to enable departments to strengthen online communications with intermediaries). Government websites are naturally cautious about providing links to external, non governmental websites, whose information they cannot easily validate. This presents a lost opportunity to signpost citizens to where they can find useful, relevant information as many non government organisations offer advice and support that will be useful to visitors of government websites. The Cabinet Office has commissioned research (The Power of Information Review) in part to inform how to develop such links.

1.21 Some users of websites, such as visually disabled people, have distinct needs depending on their personal circumstances and abilities. Government sites are expected to meet a set of accessibility standards set by the Cabinet Office.¹⁷ However, research by Southampton University has found that the performance of departmental and agency sites in meeting these standards is patchy, with nearly a third failing to meet the required standard and most websites do not provide information in different languages that their users are likely to speak.¹⁸ The Directgov website is compliant to the desired standard.¹⁹

12 DfES, Skills for life Survey, A national needs and impact survey of literacy, numeracy and ICT skills (London, TSO, 2003).

13 National Statistics Omnibus Survey, National Statistics. August 2006.

14 ONS/Digital Inclusion Team (2006).

15 EU Commission Ministerial Declaration, Transforming Public Services. Ministerial e Government Conference 2005.

16 UK online centres: *Transformational Government for the Citizen, Research Report*. UK online centres 2006.

17 Specifically, websites should meet the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0, meeting all double-A checkpoints.

18 Adam Field, Southampton University, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/technology/4853000.stm>. (For more on this, see the Research Report, Figures 19 and 20.)

19 The standard is WCAG (Web Content Accessibility guidelines) at “priority 2” or “AA” standard.