UK government on the internet is still costly and of 'variable to poor' quality

*For most British citizens, the government web domain is their first point of contact with the state – and it can be confusing. The Labour government tried to update it by developing government 'supersites'. Yet **Jane Tinkler** finds that recent statistics show that the central government is spending around £130m per year to generate somewhat less than 550 million visits to its sites. And the quality of information facing citizens and business still varies a great deal.*

In May 2007 a report for the National Audit Office on *Government on the Internet* (completed by LSE Public Policy Group and the Oxford Internet Institute) found that UK provision of online services was extensive, but the ways in which they were delivered were often poor. As a result the usage of government web sites by UK citizens and businesses lagged far behind other European countries, such as Sweden. Government departments also often did not know what their web provision was costing.

A key consequence of this report was that the Central Office of Information agreed to collect systematic data for the first time on the costs, usage and quality of government websites and report it to the Public Accounts Committee of the House of Commons. Published earlier this year, we have analysed the data to determine the distribution of web traffic across central departments, with the results shown in my first table below.

Under current strategies two government supersites – direct.gov.uk and NHS choices – are supposed to take over all government-to-citizen communications by 2011, while businesslink.gov.uk takes over the government-to-business role. The first two sites have certainly grown their traffic fast, and the third less so, yet so far the three together still account for less than half of visits to government websites. All this means that departmental sites are still doing brisk business despite their information supposedly being available in more user friendly formats on Directgov. HRMC has 81 million visits, Defra 21 million and DWP nearly 17 million.

The largest central government websites

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Department	**Site**	**Annual visits (millions)**	**% of all government site visits**
Supersite for citizens	direct.gov.uk	143.4	25.4
NHS Supersite	nhs.uk	98.6	17.5
Revenue and Customs	hmrc.gov.uk	81.1	14.4
Office of Public Sector Information	opsi.gov.uk	28.8	5.1
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	defra.gov.uk	21.4	3.8
Transport	transportdirect.info	19.9	3.5
Work and Pensions	dwp.gov.uk	16.8	3
Supersite for business	businesslink.gov.uk	16.7	3
Health	dh.gov.uk	16.2	2.9
Downing Street	number10.gov.uk	11.9	2.1
Foreign Office	fco.gov.uk	11.7	2.1

Ofsted (schools standards)	ofsted.gov.uk	10.9	1.9
Total all central government websites		*564.4*	*564.4*
Top 13 sites		477.5	85.6
3 Government supersites		258.7	45.9

The previous Labour government also embarked on a web rationalisation process, declaring that it would cut the total number of central government websites from over 1,800 identified by departmental website reviews down to just 'corporate' sites for each department, plus the three supersites. This would bring the total of government websites to fewer than 50. The Central Office of Information found that by March 2010 over 1,000 small websites had closed, a further 422 were still due to be closed, but that 289 had been given approval to continue – well above the numbers previously proposed.

The slow progress also has extensive cost implications. The COI report looked across a range of costs including design and build, hosting, staffing etc. It seems that some departments are still not costing their web provision well. Across the 5 categories that the COI asked about only 13 out of 45 bodies could give complete information. The central sites costs listed in the COI report amount to nearly another £128m. The table below shows the top central sites in terms of total costs.

Central government websites with the largest costs

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Website	**Relevant Department**	**Annual Costs (000s)**
businesslink.gov.uk	HM Revenue and Customs	35,800
direct.gov.uk	Work and Pensions	26,000
nhs.uk	NHS Choices	21,300
hmrc.gov.uk	HM Revenue and Customs	8,700
transportdirect.info	Transport	6,500
dh.gov.uk	Health	2,900
fco.gov.uk	Foreign and Commonwealth Office	2,200
homeoffice.gov.uk	Home Office	2,100
dcsf.gov.uk	Education	1,900
dft.gov.uk	Transport	1,500

Comparing costs and visit numbers to give a rough 'costs per visit' measure also shows that there are some fairly expensive websites. UKtradeinvest.gov.uk, run by UK Trade and Investment, appears to cost £11.78 per visit. The non-sparkling performance of Businesslink.gov.uk means it costs £2.15 per visit. At the low end of the spectrum because of its high visitor numbers Directgov only costs 18p per visit. Most central government sites are in between these two poles – for instance the Department for International Development's site costs 71p per visit. The site for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) is at 55p, Transport Direct at 33p, food.gov.uk run by the Food Standards Agency is 28p, the COI site is 26p, and NHS Choices 22p a visit.

Nor is the proliferation of websites any better if we go outside central government. A leaked Department of Health communications review seen by the *Health Services Journal* found that the number of NHS sites was now over 4,100, although over 1,000 of these are not accessible. The DH report found that around £86m was spent on NHS websites, suggesting that perhaps £65 million is being spent at sub-central level. Patients and their families 'struggled to locate the NHS online with a Google search' and even when they did 'the scale and depth of information on offer was daunting to many' (quoted in the Guardian, 4 August 2010).

As a result the government web domain can still be a confusing place to find information, more than a decade after the first NAO report on the poor usability issues in 1999. Although Directgov is publicised as 'public services all in one place', most people seeking information about government services actually Google their questions, as they do for all other information-seeking. Directgov's category design means that arriving at pages other than the homepage can be confusing. Click-stream statistics from Alexa.com show that nearly 40 per cent of Directgov visitors leave the site to go to Google, suggesting that visitors had not found answers to their questions.

The COI report looks at two measures of user views on government sites. It surveyed visitors to the websites and asked how satisfied they were across various metrics and then took a net satisfaction value. Visitors were also asked whether their purpose for visiting the site had been achieved mostly, partially, somewhat or not at all. The table below looks across these two user results. (We have taken a ratio of the positive and negative 'scores for purpose achieved' in the second column.)

How users evaluated some main central government websites

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Whitehall Department involved	Website	Net Visitor Satisfaction (%)	Purpose Achieved Ratio
Transport (information site)	transportdirect.info	84	82
International Development	dfid.gov.uk	79	54
Cross-government supersite	direct.gov.uk	73	28
Defence	mod.uk	73	59
Children, Schools and Families	dcsf.gov.uk	63	6
International Development	research4development.info	63	-16
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs	defra.gov.uk	43	20
Food Standards Agency	food.gov.uk	38	6
Food Standards Agency	eatwell.gov.uk	36	8
Home Office	homeoffice.gov.uk	19	-8
Transport (Main department site)	dft.gov.uk	-1	-13
Work and Pensions	dwp.gov.uk	-8	-32

The best performer in both categories is the Transport Direct site run by the Department of Transport, and the websites of DfID and the MoD also achieved respectable 'purpose achieved' scores. The purpose achieved score for direct.gov is respectable but disappointingly similar to that for the lower performing Defra website.

Both the measures in our table here also made the worst performing government site that of the Department of Work and Pensions, where the net satisfaction score was negative. Two out of five visitors said that they had found none of the information they wanted, perhaps because much of it has semi-transferred onto Directgov.

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