

16. DEVELOPING AND MAINTAINING A GOVERNMENT WEBSITE

16.1. Introduction

Government has the responsibility to make government information and services available easily, widely and equitably. Websites are one of the initiatives that can be used by government departments for the electronic dissemination of information.

Websites should be comprehensive online depositories for government information, while government must be responsive to the needs of the citizens by providing most services online. Websites should also provide a medium for two-way communication between government and citizens.

While it is important for each government website to reflect the character of its department, users of government websites will benefit from a standardised approach. There is a need for some level of consistency and conformity between government websites to assist the user to find information easily.

The guidelines in this chapter aim to support government departments to achieve these objectives.

16.2. Steps in developing or revamping a website

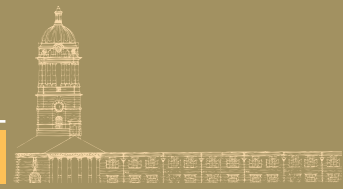
A departmental website provides a snapshot of the department and is an important marketing tool for the department. Any project to develop a new website or to revamp/redevelop an existing website should therefore be carefully planned and executed in a structured manner. The following broad phases normally form part of such an initiative:

Before a website can be developed, proper planning is vital.

16.2.1. Determine the purpose and aim of the website

A department should have a clear purpose for its website to ensure it is a success. The expected benefits of the website should be stated. For example, why should the department have a website, what will be its objectives, and what value will it add for the department? In general, the purpose of a government website should be to:

- provide its target audiences with easily accessible online information on the department's mandate, functions, services, programmes and activities
- provide a vehicle for interaction between the department and the audience
- promote the department's and government's image.



16.2.2. Identify the website audience

The department should determine who the target audiences for its website are. An understanding of the audience will influence how the website will be designed and developed, for example what should be available on the website (what should the department communicate to each of the target audiences) and what functionalities will be included.

16.2.3. Identify suitable content for the identified target audiences

A crucial element of an effective government website is good content. Suitable content should be identified and/or created before the website is developed.

A useful way to do this is to conduct an information audit within all units in the department to determine what information and communication products meant for public consumption are available in the department and where the main content sources are. This should result in a content plan, specifying what is available and where, and what content should be generated additionally for the website. An important principle is to plan for the ideal situation, even if you are not going to implement the full spectrum of content immediately.

16.2.4. Determine the type of website needed

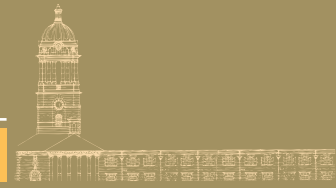
Until recently, most websites comprised “static” pages with an HTML structure. This type of website allows for little interactivity and can be time-consuming and expensive to update or revamp. This is particularly relevant for websites with large amounts of information or information that changes frequently.

A more flexible approach is the “dynamic” website where part or all of the content resides in a database. The website itself consists of one or more design templates that define the website’s look, along with some programming that describes what information from the database is to be included and where it will appear. When the website is browsed, the pages that appear in users’ browsers are assembled “on the fly” from the templates and relevant information from the database. The dynamic approach offers opportunities for filtering and decentralised maintenance. When considering this option, the following should, among other things, be kept in mind:

- All browsers should be able to read the dynamic pages.
- The system should be simple to manage.
- The syndication of information from specific owners in the department will probably be required. Content owners will have to become responsible for a particular page or group of pages.

16.2.5. Structure content

The content that has been identified has to be structured by planning the information architecture (site map, storyboard). Divide or chunk the information into logical categories and subcategories down to the content level itself. The hierarchy should be built from the most general concepts, down to the most specific topics. You can follow a top-bottom or a bottom-top approach.



Remember that users think differently, and therefore you have to consider categorising the same piece of information under more than one heading where relevant. Following the departmental structure might also not be the most logical from a user's point of view.

16.2.6. Label the categories and subcategories

It is important to label or name your categories before the development phase.

Keep the labeling as clear and concise as possible. Once you have decided on names for all categories and subcategories, it should be kept consistent throughout the website.

Note: it is important to get approval from top management for the content architecture and labeling of categories before you move to the next phase!

16.2.7. Decide on a navigation scheme

Determine a suitable navigation scheme to help users move easily around in the website. That will make it easier for them to find the information they need. Remember that as users do not think or behave similarly, provision should be made for different user behaviours.

16.2.8. Acquiring and writing content

No website should be launched without substantive content. The content identified for the website will need to be provided by the relevant content owners. Some of the existing content will have to be edited or rewritten for the web as medium, while new content will have to be written and signed off. This phase should take place consecutively with the planning phases as discussed in paragraphs 16.2.2 to 16.2.5 and the prototype development phase (paragraph 16.2.9). The content should be available before the templates are developed. If not, it may hold back the completion of the website's development.

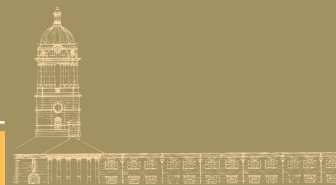
16.2.9. Developing the website

Develop different prototypes (two or three) for the website's home page and next level pages. When approved, the development of the individual pages can start.

- Create templates for the home page and different sections of the website.
- Create all pages using the templates.
- Obtain approval and launch the website.

16.2.10. Evaluating the website

It is necessary to evaluate the website before implementation and thereafter at regular intervals. Reasons for this include that websites are dynamic and constantly growing the department or user needs might change and because of continuous development in information technology.



Evaluation methodologies that may be considered include: analysing user feedback, monitoring and analysing website user statistics, usability testing, heuristic reviews (evaluation of website against quality criteria and principles), interviews with users, conducting an online survey, and/or focus-group testing.

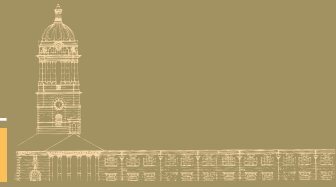
16.3. Best – practice guidelines for quality government websites

16.3.1. Scope of information posted on the website

The website's content should be relevant to its aim, purpose and audience. It should be broad enough and deep enough to meet the audience's needs.

Ideally, all government websites should contain the following minimum content:

- “About us”: This category should provide an overview or introduction to the department and should include the following information:
 - Minister and Deputy Minister responsible for the department, with his/her biography, responsibilities and contact information
 - vision, mission, goals and objectives
 - organisational structure and responsibilities of units (down to at least Director level)
 - leadership (DG, DDG, chief directors) and short biographies for each
 - vacancies (ideally with the application form Z83 available for downloading and recruitment policies and procedures)
 - bids advertised and awarded
 - information about advisory bodies and associated statutory bodies.
- “Contact us”: complete contact information for the department.
- “Services”: services rendered by the department to the public, business and organisations, foreign nationals and other government departments.
- “Programmes”: departmental programmes, projects and campaigns.
- “Legislation” (Acts, Bills, regulations) for which the department has the lead responsibility.
- “Resource centre”: documents, publications, policy documents, strategic documents, newsletters, audio and video resources. It is also good practice to post documents that invite the public to comment upon prominently on the website.
- “Newsroom”: speeches, media statements, announcements, events related to the department and ministry.
- “Links”: selection of links to relevant websites. A general principle is that a department should not duplicate information on other websites for which they do not have authoring responsibilities, as they may risk the simultaneous publication of conflicting versions of the same information.
- “Frequently asked questions” (FAQs): answers to enquiries from users that are asked frequently.



Other features that must be included as part of the website are:

- A link to the South Africa Government Online website, www.gov.za, should be available on the home page.
- “About the website”. This should include an orientation to the website, for example the purpose and aim of the website, the intended target audiences, an overview of the scope of information on the website and site-specific help information.
- “Terms and conditions of use”. This page must contain provisions with regard to issues such as copyright, intellectual property rights and security. It must also include a disclaimer to protect the owner department from any liability.
- “Feedback”. The website should have a facility that provides a means for users to give feedback or comments about the website.
- Site map.
- An area where new information posted on the website is announced. This can be the home page or a page specifically created for this purpose.
- Search functionality (for bigger websites).

16.3.2. Authority and accuracy of the website

Information on website must be accurate – the factual content must be correct and spelling and grammatical errors must be avoided.

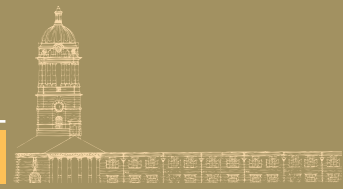
Where information originates from sources such as books, journals, articles, brochures or other types of publications, the source must be indicated. Include adequate citations to these sources to confirm the accuracy of information and for the user to determine the origin.

Speeches and media statements must contain adequate source indications (for example, speaker, government institution, contact information, date of delivery). This will strengthen the credibility of information.

Quality control of information should be done before posting thereof, regularly thereafter to prevent any compromise to the integrity of information on the website.

16.3.3. Information architecture/organisation of information

Structuring information is as important as the content itself. A website should have a logical organisational structure or architecture for presenting information. The purpose of this architecture is to help users apply the website by functioning as a “map”. A good architecture will provide order and help users to find information.



Principles in this regard include:

- Information must be divided into logical and digestible parts. However, subdividing information too much may fragment information and will frustrate users who wish to read or print the complete text.
- Information should be grouped into clearly defined areas. It is preferable to duplicate links to information rather than to confuse users with similar information in more than one area of the website.
- Decisions will have to be taken on the number of levels the website should have. The best practice is to provide information in the fewest possible steps. However, with larger sites more levels of navigation might be needed. A balance between two approaches will need to be found: a flat approach where many navigation choices provide access to information in a few steps (this provides quick access to content but may present a confusing number of choices), or a deep approach where fewer choices at the outset provide access to information in more steps with an increasingly narrowing focus (this requires more clicks and allows users to make more informed decisions).
- Use a consistent way of grouping, ordering, labelling and arranging information.

Government-services information forms an important part of a government website. Principles for presenting information about government services include:

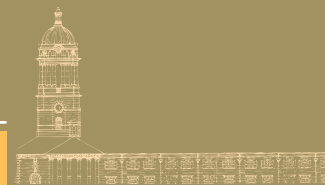
- where relevant, information should be provided for the different audiences (government to citizens, government to organisations/business, government to foreign nationals, government to government)
- services within each of these groups should be organised according to one or more logical categories (for example, life events, subjects/topics).

Each service should be presented in the following format:

- title of service
- description (definition, description, to whom applicable, requirements, conditions)
- steps to follow (the steps to be taken by the applicant to apply for the service)
- legal framework (the regulations governing the provision of the service, for example Act, policy, programme)
- service standard (the standards according to which a service has to be rendered by the department to the applicant, for example time frame, formalities departmental employees must follow in providing the service)
- cost (payment required from the applicant/client to acquire the service)
- forms to complete (all forms to be completed by the applicant/client to apply for the service)
- contact details (where the applicant/client can get further information).

16.3.4. Language and writing style

Website content should be presented in a way that can be understood by all users, regardless of their education, background or sophistication.



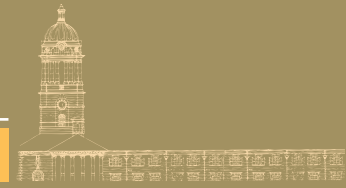
In general, the guidelines in the *Editorial Style Guide*, which forms part of this handbook, apply also for websites. However, the following guidelines are particularly important to keep in mind when preparing content for your website:

- Although English is currently the official language used for government websites, material prepared in any of the other official languages should also be posted. Consideration should also be given to translate information into the other official languages.
- Write for the Internet as medium – do not merely replicate printed brochures or other material developed for other mediums.
- Information to be read online must be concise and structured for fast scanning, for example with bulleted or numbered lists to represent a lot of information in a concise manner.
- Use “newspaper” style, starting from the most important information and then moving to the least important (inverted pyramid style).
- Plain language principles should be followed. The content and language must be user-friendly and understandable to all people.
- The website should be relatively formal and business-like, but not overly so. Avoid clichés, jargon and humour.
- Use short sentences and paragraphs.
- Avoid passive voice.
- Headings and subheadings must be descriptive, clearly phrased and understandable.
- Content must be free of typing, grammatical or language errors.
- Acronyms and abbreviations: write out the first time with abbreviation in brackets. Avoid the use thereof in navigation, but if used, include the full name as alternate text (ALT or TITLE attributes). Avoid using acronyms for main navigation options.
- Limit the use of capitalisation and underlining.

16.3.5. Navigation and search

A logical and consistent navigation scheme is key to improved access to information on the website. The navigation scheme of a website should give users a coherent means of finding information, reminding users where they are within the website’s structure, and helping users who arrive at the site without going through the home page.

Government websites should include common navigation options in the top and side navigation bars of each page. The top navigation options should include “Contact us”, “Help” and “Search”, and the side navigation “Home”, “About us”, “Services”, “Resource Centre”, “Newsroom” and “Links”, as well as the rest of the departmental-specific site navigation options. These navigation options should be available as text navigation, not images.



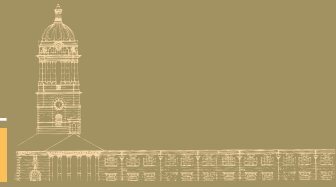
Main principles to consider when determining your site's navigation include the following:

- Every page on the website must have a link to the home page.
- A link to the disclaimer should be available on every page.
- Navigation must be consistent throughout the website.
- Navigation must be simple and intuitive.
- Navigation options should be clear and large enough to be easily read and selected.
- Provide different navigation routes for users to follow.
- The website should offer constant visual and functional confirmation of the user's whereabouts in the website.
- Always provide an opportunity for the user to move back in the hierarchy (not by using the "Back" option in the browser).
- Use a breadcrumb trail on all pages to help users to move to higher categories and to determine where they are.
- There must be no broken links on the website – check links continuously.
- Links must be made only to websites that are authoritative.
- Deep linking is preferred, i.e. where possible, link directly to the page where the relevant information can be found. Links names must be as close as possible to the page linked to. Links to other websites must be indicated and should open in a new window.
- Long documents should be avoided. They can be divided into smaller documents, which are then given an internal navigation structure. This normally involves creating a table of contents, linking to each main section heading. Each part of the document should be accessible from the other parts, and a link should be provided to take the user to the next or previous part of the document. It should always be possible to access the table of contents. A parallel link should be provided to a separate file that contains the full-length document.
- Avoid the excessive use of links embedded within body text, as it may distract and may affect readability of the document. Links in text should also not duplicate the function of the menu.
- Short, common terms should be used for navigation menus, and acronyms and abbreviations that may be unfamiliar to the user should be avoided.
- Include a site map on your website to help the user to determine the content architecture.

A search function should be part of bigger websites. It should be easy to use and provide accurate and concise results. Help should be provided on how to search for information on the website.

16.3.6. Design and layout

The visual elements of the website should assist users to understand the function and purpose of the website. Design should not be used to entertain, but to make the website more informative and professional. It should not distract users from the content.



All government websites must display the following elements on all pages:

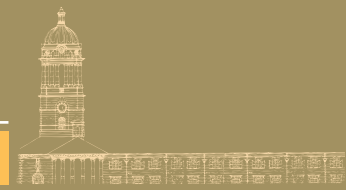
- The banner must include the Coat of Arms, accompanied by the name of the department on the left-hand side on a white background, according to the Government's corporate identity guidelines. The South African flag must be displayed on the right-hand side of the banner. The space between the Coat of Arms and flag can be used by the department to display an image that reflects the unique identity of the department.
- A link to the home page (except from the home page itself).
- Main navigation categories (preferably displayed in the left-hand navigation bar and at the bottom of pages – see Navigation and search).
- All pages should include the “contact us”, “help”, and “search links” (preferably at the top of the page in a navigation bar below the banner).

Main principles that should be considered include the following:

- Pages on the website should be consistent in layout and typographical style.
- It is recommended not to use frames.
- Develop for resizable screens, with a minimum of 800 X 600 pixels.
- The typography must contribute to the legibility of text.
- Text must be clearly visible and easy to read. Avoid using busy backgrounds. If backgrounds are used, ensure that text contrasts well with the background. Avoid flashing text.
- Implementation of graphics, images and animation should be carefully used so that they increase the effectiveness of the website and not hinder users' access to information. Graphics should be limited. Animation, scrolling and meaningless graphics should be avoided – they make websites busy and distract from the content. However, a big amount of text can be difficult to read. Strategically placed lines or graphic elements can be used to break a long document into manageable portions.
- Avoid using images to convey textual information.
- Any image conveying information or linking to information should have an alternate text description (ALT or TITLE attributes).
- The website should be usable with graphics turned off.
- The website should be designed to allow users to both read documents online and to print them.
- Support for downloading PDF documents should be provided. Documents in PDF format should be indicated as such and a link to instructions on how to download PDF documents should be provided.
- Site covers or splash pages should be avoided.

16.4. Managing the website

The website should ideally be managed by the Communication Unit of a department. The website manager should be responsible for planning, leading, organising activities, the overall information architecture and final quality assurance.



However, the information on your website should be the corporate responsibility of the whole of the department and form an integral part of the department's communication effort. All employees should realise that they must take ownership of the information on the website. It is recommended that content managers be appointed by different organisational units to take the responsibility for coordinating the relevant information for that unit. They should continuously identify new information for the website, validate the accuracy of the current information and provide updates to outdated content. The website manager, content managers or specialist writers should be responsible for writing new information or rewriting existing information for the website.

Other roles and responsibilities for the successful management and maintenance of a website include an information specialist (information architecture and optimal user interface), web author (uploading information on the website), web developer (developing dynamic components and applications), database developer (for developing database applications), graphic designer (responsible for visual impact and designing graphics) and webserver administrator. These roles could also be outsourced.

16.5. Maintaining the website

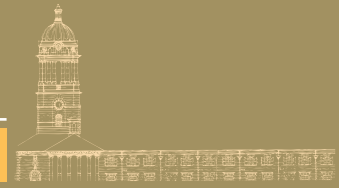
A common mistake is to focus on the development of a website and to overlook the ongoing maintenance of the website. Users expect government information to be available online on its release. They lose confidence in a website that is not properly maintained, when new information is not added, when old information is not removed, or when a website remains static. In general, government websites contain rapidly changing information. Therefore, information has to be checked, modified, added to, updated and removed on a regular basis.

It should be determined upfront what information needs to be updated and how often it should be updated. Measures and procedures to ensure regular updates and ongoing improvements should be implemented.

General guidelines to ensure and demonstrate that your website is current include:

- The information on the website should be current and up to date. The most current information must be available.
- Any information released to the public in printed form should also be available on the website at the same time.
- Obsolete information should be removed from the website. Only information that is useful should be kept on the website. This does not mean that older information should not be available. The criterion should be that the information should still be valid.
- Remove or update broken links.
- The "What's new" page/area on the website should be updated regularly, as many users may go to this section first and may not return to the website if this information is not updated. Each entry on this page should be dated to enable users to determine the currency thereof.

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- The site map should be updated when new sections are added to the website.
- All documents, publications, speeches and media statements posted on the website should include a publishing or delivery date.

An important part of website maintenance is to ensure that interactive services are managed properly. Website users expect quick responses to requests for information. It is also good practice to thank users who provide feedback. If your website provides for a discussion group, it must be moderated and managed well.