

# How government measures its impact

The Government's cross-government way of measuring the impact of a department's policies is a set of impact indicators, originally published as part of each Departmental Business Plan.

The number of impact indicators per department varies – from a high of 28 for DfE to a low of six for MoD. Our previous work suggests that some departments take them more seriously than others. Eight departments prefer to use their own measurements, which at best supplement the Business Plans.

The way each department publishes its impact indicators also varies widely. By following the links from the Number 10 Transparency website, we found that some departments (such as DCLG, DfT and DWP) presented their impact indicators in an open format (for others to use) and in a form easily understandable by members of the public, while the links for others went to indicators not updated since 2012. Many also failed to make clear what impact they wanted to see – was the department's desired outcome a decrease or increase?

## About the data

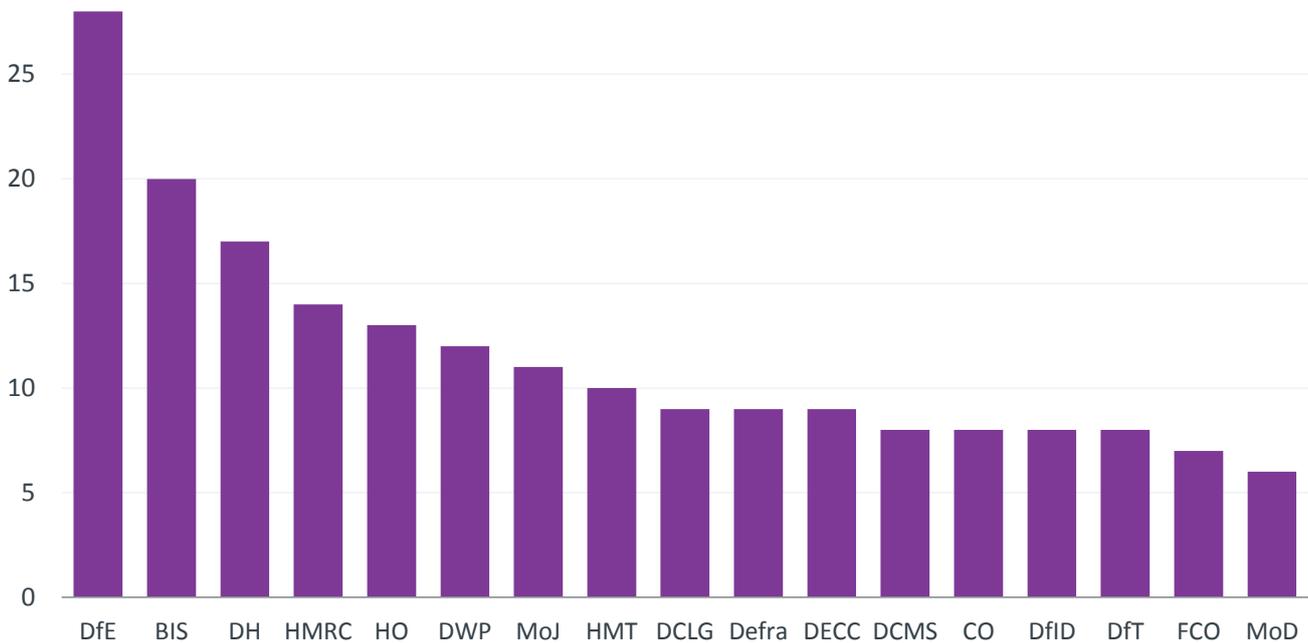
Government departments published a list of **impact indicators** as part of their Business Plans in November 2010, although the actual data was not published alongside them. Since then, the indicators have been refined, and [transparency.number10.gov.uk](http://transparency.number10.gov.uk) provides a single portal for accessing the indicators for each department. The site says that 'input and impact indicators ... help the public assess the effects of policies and reforms on the cost and impact of public services'. We used these links to assess how the impact indicators were presented; our methodology concentrates on how transparent and easy to use the indicators are from the central Number 10 site.

In analysing how many impact indicators each department has, we have for the most part accepted their own classifications. However, where departments have nested indicators – a series of bullets within each indicator – we have counted these as separate indicators.<sup>1</sup>

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## Impact indicators: questions as to how useful, usable and up-to-date they are

Figure 13.1: Number of impact indicators by department, 2014



Source: Institute for Government analysis of impact indicators, [transparency.number10.gov.uk](http://transparency.number10.gov.uk), 7-11 August 2014.

DfE has the most impact indicators – 28, eight more than the next highest (BIS) – many of them nested under overarching headings (e.g. 'Attainment Gap at ages 11, 16 and 19' lists five separate measures). MoD has the lowest number, with six.

More pressing is the issue of how seriously government and government departments take the indicators. In *Whitehall Monitor 2013* we found that nearly half of all departments relied on bespoke measurement frameworks rather than the cross-government Business Plans of which impact indicators are a part. But yet another consideration is how they are published, and whether they are of any use to the public as well as to the department.

In *Performance Art* (2008), the Institute for Government analysed the cross-government performance measures then in place: Public Service Agreements and Local Area Agreements. We recommended that:

- Performance data should be published in a format that is easy for citizens to understand.
- As part of this, all the data should be published on a single website in an accessible manner.
- All performance data should be subject to independent validation, perhaps by the NAO (which the NAO now does), and the Government should update Parliament on progress through an annual report.

Building on this, we assessed the impact indicators for each department against the following criteria:

- Following the link from the central Number 10 Transparency site, can you:
  - find the score for each indicator, as listed on the site?
  - find the data in an open format for each indicator?
  - see the data for each indicator explained in an understandable way?
- From the department's annual report, can you:
  - find the score for each indicator?

**Figure 13.2: Usability of departments’ impact indicators**

Department	Current Score	Open Data	Presentation	Annual Report	Overall
DCLG	Green	Green	Green	Green	1=
DfT	Green	Green	Green	Green	1=
DWP	Green	Green	Green	Green	1=
CO	Orange	Yellow	Yellow	Orange	4=
DCMS	Green	Green	Green	Red	4=
HMRC	Green	Green	Yellow	Green	6
DfE	Orange	Orange	Green	Green	7
BIS	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	8
DfID	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	9
DECC	Green	Orange	Yellow	Green	10=
DH	Green	Green	Yellow	Red	10=
FCO	Orange	Orange	Yellow	Orange	12
MoJ	Red	Orange	Yellow	Red	13
Defra	Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	14=
MoD	Red	Orange	Yellow	Green	14=
HO	Red	Orange	Yellow	Orange	16
HMT	Red	Orange	Yellow	Red	17

Source: Institute for Government analysis of impact indicators and annual reports.  
 Note: Annual reports for 2013-14 were used where published (DCMS, DfE and MoD use 2012-13).

Only three departments – DCLG, DfT and DWP – allow members of the public to access all of their indicator scores, in an open format, in a way that is clearly explained and in the department’s annual report. DCLG has a beta dashboard with graphs and full explanations; DfT a page for each indicator with the data and an explanation; and DWP a single page with data, explanations and links. These departments are rare in signposting what the indicator scores actually mean – for example, whether an increase in a particular metric is what the Government was aiming for. Many departments do not.

Some departments that have scored badly in our survey were penalised for dead links from the Number 10 Transparency site, while others do not appear to have published updates for well over a year. Some departments published indicator data elsewhere and, since we contacted them prior to publication, many have asked for the links from the Number 10 Transparency site to be updated.

Our methodology is not comprehensive. Nevertheless, it casts doubt on how easy it is for members of the public to find and understand impact indicators.