

11. Digital

'Digital' was one of the defining words of the last parliament. In its simplest sense, it refers to activity online: content that government publishes on websites, and services that are provided on the internet. An important part of digital is the user experience: how simple is it, and how does it feel to interact with government? In a broader sense, 'digital transformation' is about changing the way government operates – from the design of policies, to their implementation, to the look and feel of the services themselves.

The 2012 *Civil Service Reform Plan* committed the Government to taking a 'digital by default' approach to the delivery of information and services – making online channels so good that users prefer them over paper, telephone or face-to-face alternatives.¹

The delivery of information has been transformed over the last parliament by the creation of a new single government website, GOV.UK. Since launching in 2012, it has absorbed more than 250 different sites – including those belonging to individual government departments and ALBs. It currently receives about 12 million visitors a week.

The digital transformation of transactional services under the Coalition began with 25 digital 'exemplars', 13 of which went live before the end of the parliament.² These include patent renewals, and an online front end for voter registration. This is just the beginning of digital service transformation – government currently provides at least 800 transactional services, many of which are not available online.

Much of this work has been carried out or supported by the Government Digital Service (GDS). Launched in 2011 as a centre of digital expertise within the Cabinet Office, GDS has built GOV.UK, set new standards for the provision of digital services in government, and spearheaded new ways of working. Its budget increased every year over the course of the last parliament, reaching £23m by 2013/14.

About the data

Openness and transparency have been a key part of the digital agenda, as evidenced by the development of the **Performance Platform**.³ This is a set of online 'dashboards', which contain a varying set of performance indicators including user and visitor numbers, satisfaction and completion ratings, and cost. There are currently 864 performance dashboards, most of them for transactional services (800), or for areas within GOV.UK (48). The data is published in html and in .json formats, which allow users (who know how) to download and analyse the information. A lot of the data is updated regularly (weekly or monthly) – particularly that relating to user or visitor numbers – but cost data is often missing.

There are two sets of regular publications on government websites: the quarterly **lists of open central government websites**, and the annual **central government websites reports**.⁴ We have used the former.

The **Cabinet Office Annual Reports** gave us data on costs, and the **Efficiency and Reform Group annual publications (along with the NAO reports on them)** gave us the figures on savings.⁵ The **NAO's Digital Britain One** gave us information on Directgov and Business Link – the forerunners to GOV.UK.⁶ We have also used the **Cabinet Office organograms** to indicate the size of GDS.⁷

Get the latest data www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/digital

Since 2012, GOV.UK has been the platform for citizens to interact with government; it receives 12 million visitors a week.

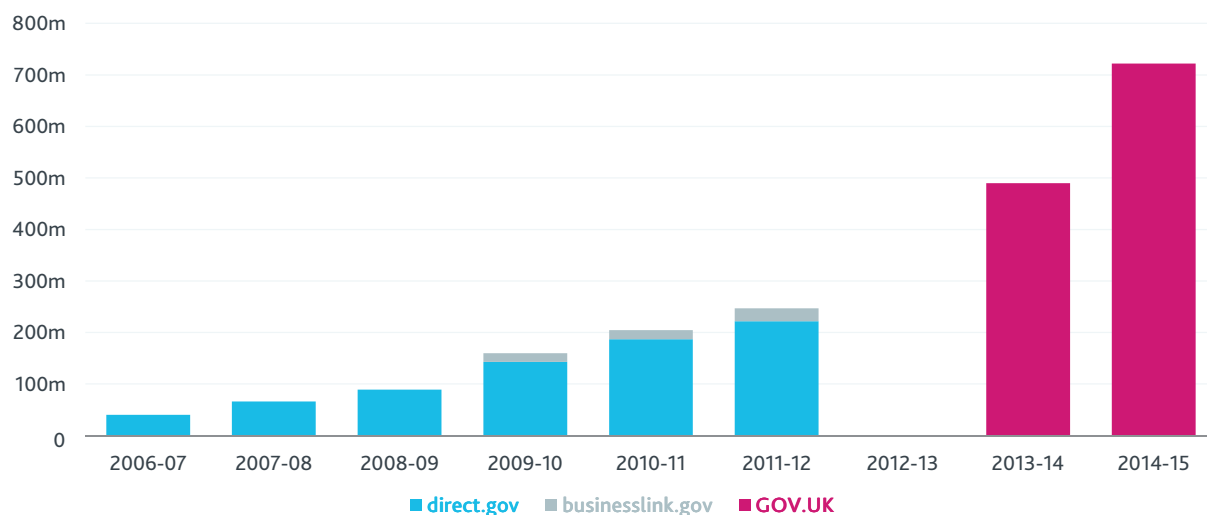
Weekly unique visitors to GOV.UK, 2012-15



Source: Institute for Government analysis of GOV.UK, Performance Platform – Activity web traffic dashboard. Accessed 10 August 2015.

The widest-reaching digital transformation project of the last parliament was the creation of GOV.UK: a single government website for hosting transactional services and providing information to citizens. It currently receives about 12 million visitors a week – four times as many as when it launched in October 2012.

Annual visits to Directgov, Business Link and GOV.UK, 2006-15



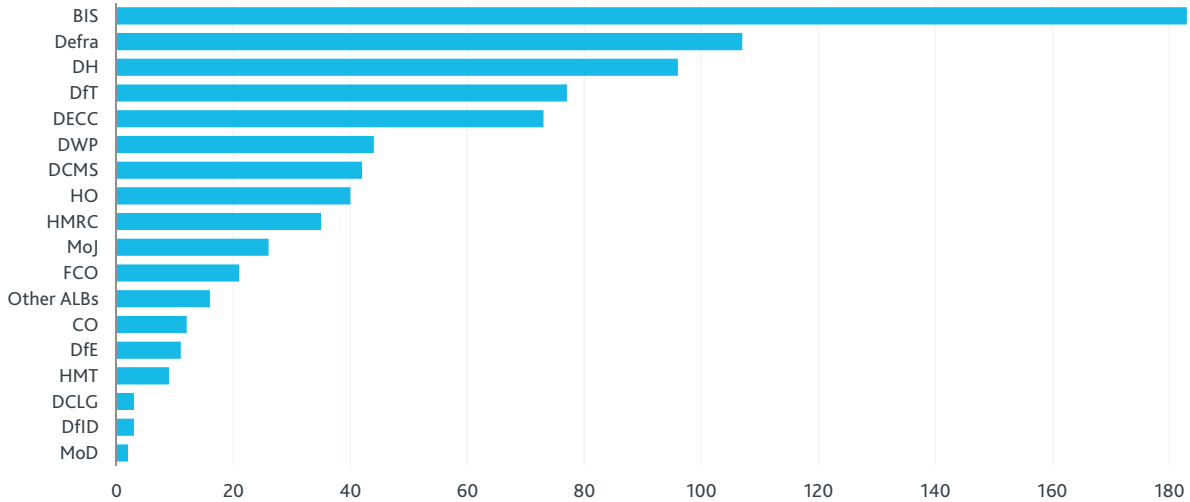
Source: IfG analysis of NAO, *Digital Britain One* (2011) and Cabinet Office, 'Annual Report on Open Central Government Websites' (2013-15).

GOV.UK marked a step-change in the consolidation of central government websites that has been ongoing since the early 2000s. In its final full year of existence, Directgov – GOV.UK's immediate predecessor – received a total of 222 million visits. In its first full year of existence, GOV.UK received 490 million visits.

This 120% difference cannot be fully explained by growing use of the internet – the number of people in the UK using the internet rose by just 12% between 2011 and 2013. These numbers partially reflect a growing expectation among the public that they should be able to conduct transactions and access information online – an expectation that GOV.UK was designed to respond to. GOV.UK is also more comprehensive than Directgov. It incorporates content that used to sit on separate department and ALB websites, and acts as a starting page for the digital transactional services.

There are at least 800 transactional services in government – some online, some not.

Number of digital services with a performance dashboard, as of 10 August 2015



Source: Institute for Government analysis of Performance Platform – Services data, <https://www.gov.uk/performance/services>. Accessed 10 August 2015.

There are 800 transactional services listed on GOV.UK: interactions between government and individuals or businesses, involving applications, registrations and payments. Digitising these transactional services can make them cheaper, by adding elements of automation, and easier to use. Currently, not all of the services on this list are digital; some can be completed online – such as searching for a job using DWP’s Universal Jobmatch tool – but others involve acquiring forms, filling them in and emailing or posting them to the service provider to be processed. This list, then, indicates the landscape of possibility for the digital delivery of transactional services.

BIS provides the largest number of transactional services listed on the performance platform: from applying for an apprenticeship, to registering trademarks, to applying for sponsorship from the UK Space Agency. However, hosting a large number of services is not the same as handling a large number of transactions. The government digital strategy singled out seven departments that handle the ‘majority’ of transactions: HMRC, DfT, DWP, MoJ, BIS, Defra and HO.⁸ HMRC is an almost entirely transactional department, but currently only has 35 distinct services listed.

This list of transactional services was originally published by GDS in July 2012 with the ‘ultimate aim of identify[ing] opportunities to make more services digital by default’ – making an online version of the service so convenient and user-friendly that most people would choose to use it.⁹ Rather than tackle all 800 at once, GDS designated 25 of these services ‘digital exemplars’ to demonstrate the benefits of digital transformation.

Of 25 digital exemplars, 13 went live before the end of the parliament (and two just after).

GDS Digital Exemplars – Stages of development, February 2012 to May 2015

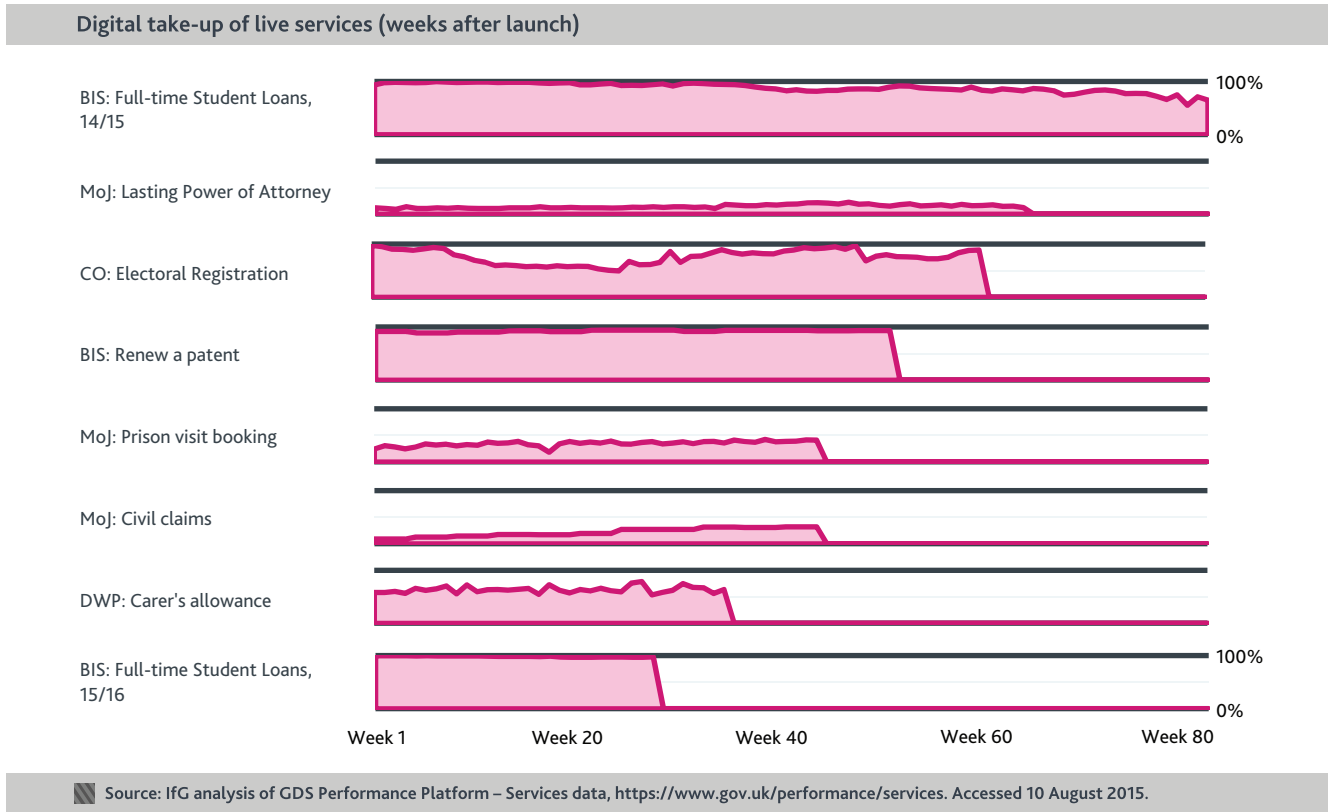


Source: IfG analysis of GDS Performance Platform – Services data, <https://www.gov.uk/performance/services>. Accessed 10 August 2015.

The 25 digital exemplars were to be transformed by teams within the departments and agencies that owned them – with the support of GDS – as showcases of good digital service design. They were intended to be accessible to the public by the end of the parliament. When Parliament dissolved in March:

- All of the services had completed their 'discovery' phase (when the initial user research is done).
- Five were still in 'alpha' (a prototyping phase).
- Five were in 'public beta' (accessible to the public, but still in a testing phase).
- Thirteen were 'live' (released for general use by the public although they will still be updated in response to feedback). Two, student finance (the full-time student loan applications part) and finding an apprenticeship, went live just after.

There are some high-profile successes and failures behind these numbers. More than a million people used the online electoral registration service in the week before the deadline, which allowed them to send their registration details to their local council via a central online form. Meanwhile, Defra's rural payments service – designed to process farmers' applications for subsidies – was much more complex, and proved unusable. The old system of email and paper forms was reverted to soon after it launched in beta, to ensure that farmers met their application deadlines.¹⁰

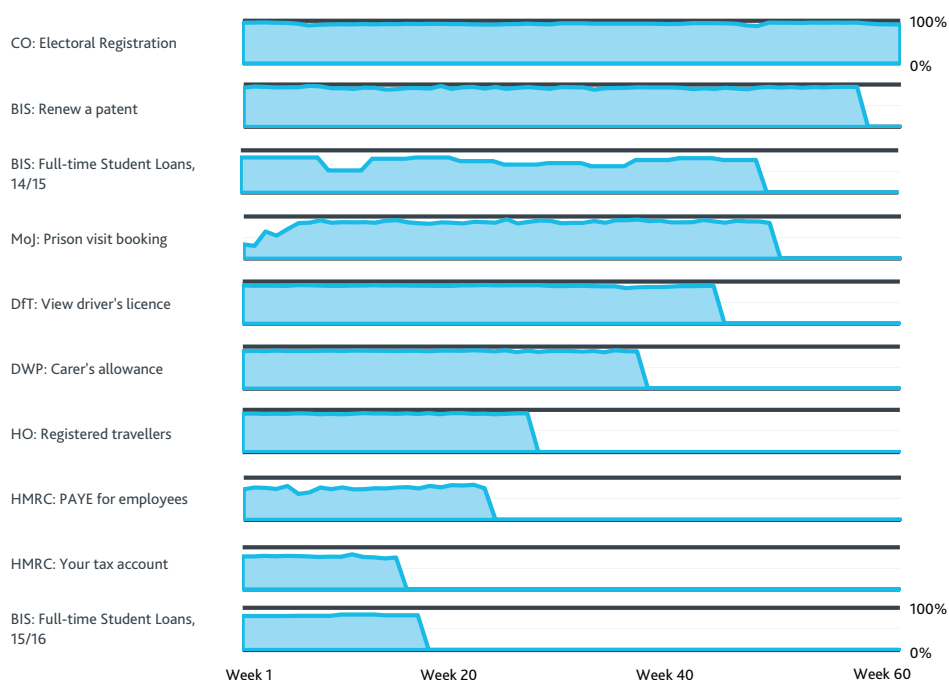


One way of measuring the success of a digital service is to see how many people choose to use it. Different services have different-sized user bases (many more people will register to vote than renew a patent) but we can compare how popular they are by looking at the take-up of the service: the proportion of transactions within that service that are completed online, rather than by phone, post or in person. Of the six services that went live in 2014 (not including 'view a driving licence', an online-only service), two currently have a digital take-up of more than 50%: patent renewals, and voter registration. Applications for full-time student loans for 2015-16 have been live only since May, but digital take-up for the 2014-15 application round was high even when the service was in beta.

Civil claims and prison visit bookings still have a take-up of less than 50%, but the proportion of people using the online service has been increasing steadily since they launched. By contrast, the proportion of people completing their application for lasting power of attorney online reached a peak of 23%, 47 weeks after launching, but has since hovered between 10% and 20%.

The 2014 Autumn Statement contained a pledge to 'increas[e] the digital uptake of public services among those online by 10 percentage points in 2016'.¹¹ GDS claims that this will take digital take-up to 90%, although it is unclear where the current figure of 80% comes from.¹²

Customer satisfaction with live services (weeks from launch)



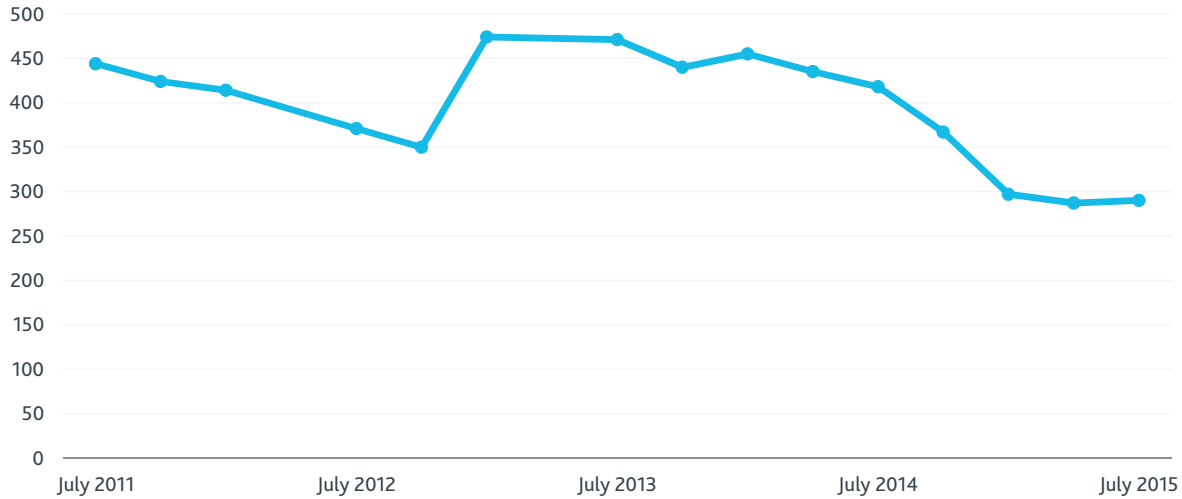
Source: IfG analysis of GDS Performance Platform – Services data, <https://www.gov.uk/performance/services>. Accessed 10 August 2015.

While the take-up of different digital services is mixed, the reported satisfaction levels of the people who do use them is mostly high. Of the ten services with published satisfaction ratings based on 200 or more respondents, seven have recent ratings satisfaction ratings of around 90%, and none have dipped below 75% after three months.

Although the take-up of the prison visit booking system has been low compared with the other exemplars – hovering between 30% and 40% over the past five months – customer satisfaction has risen to 80-90% (after a difficult first few weeks). HMRC’s exemplar services show consistently lower satisfaction ratings: around 70-80%.

GOV.UK has absorbed more than 250 websites since 2012. Departments still have their own pages on the platform – DfE’s are the most visited.

Number of Open Central Government Websites, 2011-15

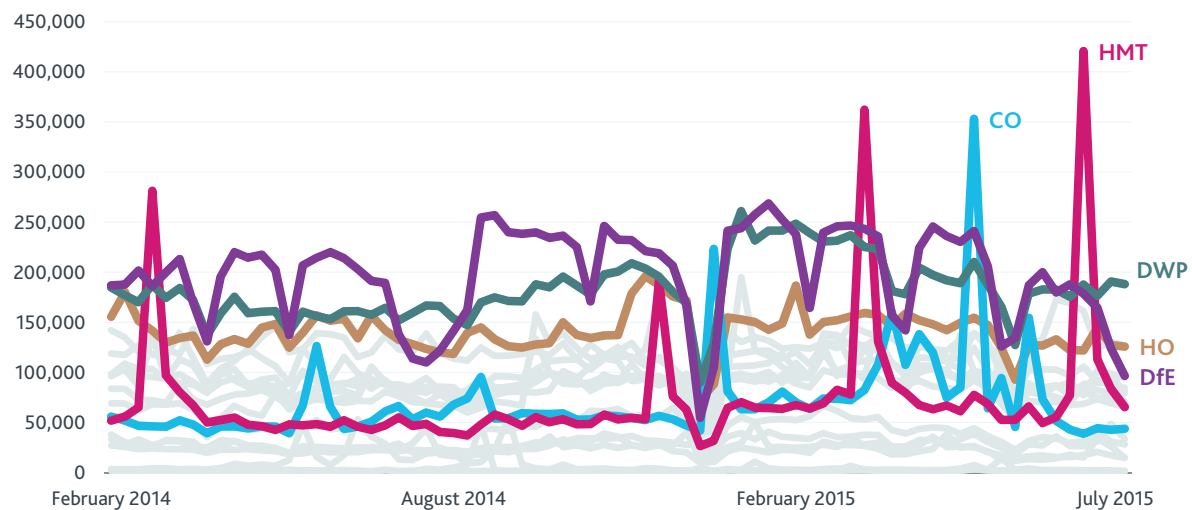


Source: Institute for Government analysis of List of Open Central Government Websites quarterly publications, October 2011 – July 2015.

A cornerstone of digital transformation is to make access to information easier for the user. A key part of this in the last parliament was the merging of separate government websites into GOV.UK. This began in 2011, when GDS compiled a list of 444 central government websites to be reviewed and possibly absorbed.

In 2013, the scope of that list was expanded, taking the number of websites up to 471. GDS has made rapid progress in absorbing these into GOV.UK, and there are now only 290. Of these, 223 websites – including the BBC, English Heritage and the Met Office – have been granted a special exemption to retain their separate identity.¹³ For many of these organisations, such as the Electoral Commission, independence from government is a crucial part of their work. Incorporation into GOV.UK, even if all of the content was produced independently, might jeopardise the perception of independence.

Visitors to department websites, February 2014 to July 2015



Source: IfG analysis of GDS Performance Platform – Web Traffic data, <https://www.gov.uk/performance/web-traffic>. Accessed 10 August 2015.

Once a department or agency's website has been merged into GOV.UK, its separate identity is not entirely lost. Much of the content on GOV.UK – called 'services and information' – is structured by topic rather than content, and produced by GDS itself. However, Whitehall departments and many agencies retain control of their own pages within GOV.UK, hosting policy documentation and guidance, and announcements that the department wishes to make.¹⁴

The most consistently visited departmental pages are DfE, DWP and HO.

- In 68 out of 75 weeks, DfE had the most visited pages, with dips during the school holidays. Its web traffic dashboard shows that the most-viewed pages contained information critical to people who work in schools, such as curriculum guidelines. There was also a spike in January when the annual school performance data is published – which is of interest to parents as much as teachers.
- The DWP pages host the claim forms for many different types of state benefit and support, such as budgeting loans, maternity allowance and housing benefit.
- The most visited HO pages are on topics of public interest (specifically immigration) and guidance related to HO's policy areas (such as alcohol licensing and police pensions).

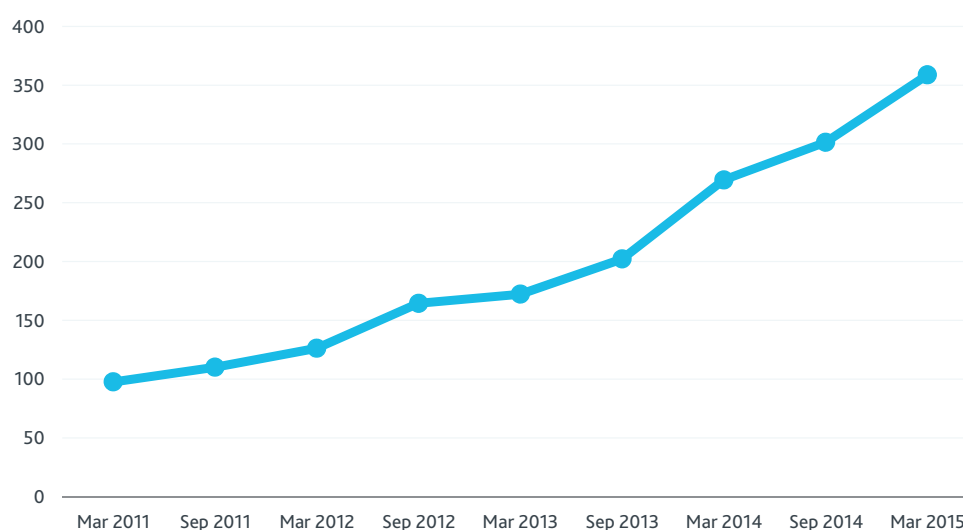
Spikes occur at particular times on other departments' pages:

- CO saw an increase in visitors around the general election, with a spike in the week afterwards when new ministers were announced.
- Visitors to the Treasury website spiked around the Budget and the Autumn Statement.

Altogether, these represent only a small proportion of visitors to GOV.UK. We do not know precisely the relative size of the different areas of the site.¹⁵ However, it seems that most traffic is not going to central government departments' websites. At the end of July, websites belonging to the 19 ministerial departments attracted only 11% (1.3 million) of the visitors to GOV.UK (12 million). The rest of the visitors went to pages in the services and information section, or to sites controlled by ALBs.

The Government Digital Service grew rapidly over the course of the last parliament.

Number of people employed by Government Digital Service, 2011-15

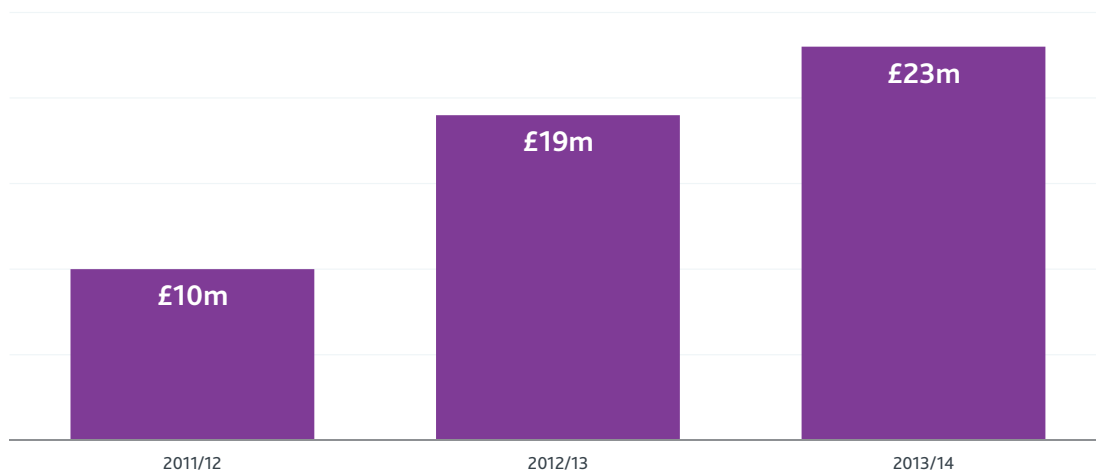


Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office organograms.

Digital transformation in the last parliament was catalysed and driven from the centre by GDS. This Cabinet Office 'hothouse' is part centre of expertise, part service delivery organisation, and a setter of standards for government digital; its workforce and budget grew following its launch in 2011. According to the Cabinet Office's published organograms, GDS currently employs 360 people, up from 100 when it was first established. This makes it an important contributor to the overall expansion of the Cabinet Office, which has grown by 580 FTE in the same period (162 FTE when reclassifications are taken into account).

The actual number of people employed by GDS may be higher than this organogram data suggests – GDS's own website claims that they employ more than 500 staff all over the UK, and a recent third party report on GDS reports that there were 566.5 FTE at GDS in 2014/15. This discrepancy may be due to gaps in the organogram data, discussed in chapter 6. It may also be due to the high number of interim staff – GDS' corporate report for 2014/15 asked for 635 staff, a third of whom would be interim.¹⁶

Cabinet Office Programme Cost: Government Digital Service



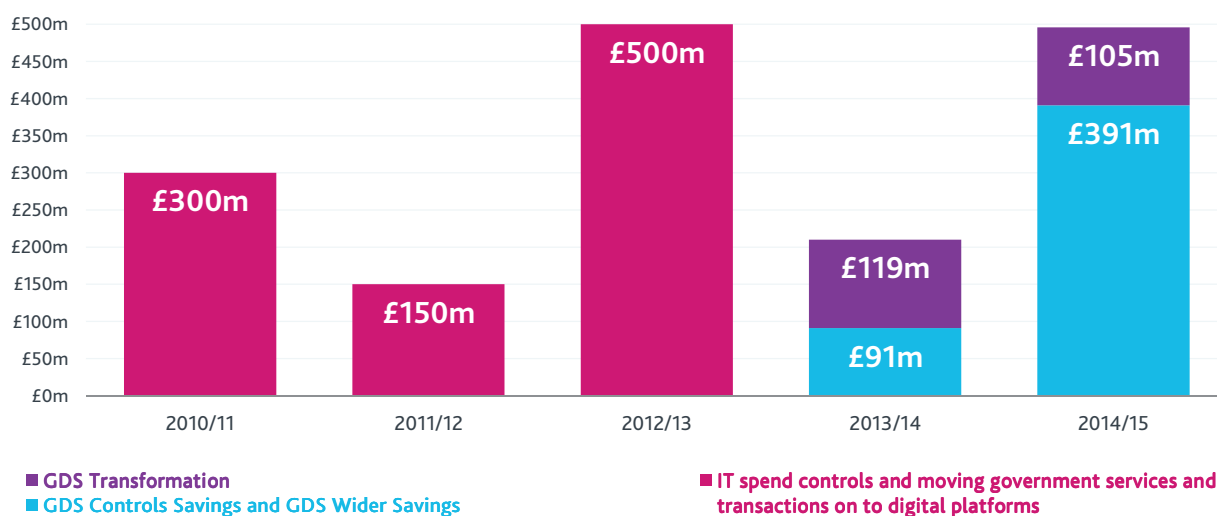
Source: Institute for Government analysis of Cabinet Office Annual Report and Accounts, 2011-14.

While most of Whitehall experienced budget cuts during the last parliament, the cost of GDS's programme of work more than doubled: from £10m in 2011/12 to £23m in 2013/14. It therefore accounts for 10% of the Cabinet Office's programme spending. Under government financial guidelines, programme costs include 'certain staff costs where they relate directly to service delivery' – so there may be some more staff costs that are not counted under this number.

According to the Cabinet Office, the increase came from 'additional activities', including the continued expansion and development of GOV.UK, building departmental capability, and the work to digitise transactional services. The Cabinet Office also cites 'increasing the uptake of digital services' as a reason for budget increases – although it is unclear precisely what this means.¹⁷

Large savings from digital transformation are yet to be realised.

Efficiency and Reform savings from IT spend controls and digital transformation, 2010-15



Source: IFG analysis of NAO, 'The savings reported by the Efficiency and Reform Group' (2010/11 to 2012/13), Cabinet Office, 'Saving delivered in the financial year 2014-15 in government departments, technical note' (2013-14, 2014-15). NAO figures may not be comparable.

Since 2010, the Efficiency and Reform Group has been publishing the efficiency savings it claims have been made each year (see page 50), including the transformation of digital services. The Government claimed £119m of savings from digital transformation in 2013/14, and £105m in 2014/15. Before this, digital transformation savings were counted together with savings from IT spending controls – the difference between IT spending proposals put forward by departments and the spending allowed by the central Office of the Chief Technology Officer. These changes make it hard to tell exactly where savings have come from.

Most of the claimed GDS digital transformation savings in 2013/14 have come from the closing of government websites – £61m against a 2009/10 benchmark in 2014/15. In that year, a further £36m of savings reportedly came from a single transformation project – identity assurance in DWP – with the remaining £7m coming from the digitisation of transactional services in other departments.

The closure of central government websites is almost complete, but the digitisation of transactional services has only just begun. So far, the Government cannot claim great savings from this activity. However, there are hundreds of transactional services yet to be brought online. This large-scale digital transformation remains one of the few ERG areas where there is still the potential for significant savings in the next parliament.¹⁸