

Guidance on digital spend advice and controls for DFID partners and suppliers

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Contents

1. Introduction
2. What is “digital spend”?
3. Getting advice and approval
4. Meeting the Digital Service Standard
5. Adhering to the Principles for Digital Development
6. Completing a digital spend proposition form
7. Restrictions on mobile apps and web domains
8. Timing for seeking spend approval

1. Introduction

This guidance explains to our partners and suppliers what the UK Government’s and DFID’s standards are for the use of digital in international development programmes. It sets out DFID’s expectations when submitting digital proposals and explains how to engage with the Digital Service Team through the procurement process.

2. What is “digital spend”?

The UK government defines digital spend as “any *external-facing* service provided through the internet to citizens, businesses, civil society or non-government organisations.” In DFID, this applies to any spend on web-based or mobile information services, websites, knowledge or open data portals, transactional services such as cash transfers, web applications and mobile phone apps.

DFID’s partners and suppliers **must** get digital spend approval for the following activities (note this list is not exhaustive as digital technologies are proliferating rapidly) so that DFID achieves good value for money:

- websites and knowledge hubs (the digital elements include user research, design, build, hosting, licences, maintenance and support)
- transactional services (including interfaces for applying online for services such as grants)
- open data platforms, collection tools, monitoring, analytics
- mapping tools – mapping, geocoding (which could be no cost)
- mobile delivery systems – SMS, mobile money, cash transfers
- mobile apps (special conditions apply – see point 7 below)
- online databases and management information systems, if they are external facing
- external facing e-learning tools or resources.

What digital or technology spend does not require approval?

Technology is defined as any internal facing service delivered by government for government and there are separate spend rules for it that are managed within DFID. The following costs do not require digital spend approval:

- any systems or online tools that are internally facing to DFID

- IT hardware and software
- recruitment and training costs for digital/web contractors and associated expenses
- social media activities (which we would expect to be free)
- content production for websites or knowledge hubs.

Funding arrangements where funding is pooled alongside that of other donors, making it difficult or impossible to attribute the extent of DFID funding allocated to specific digital projects do not require Digital Spend approval.

Instead, we ask that you notify [DFID's Digital Service Team](#) of your proposed digital development but you not be required to seek explicit approval.

Trust funds where DFID is the only donor still require approval as costs can be determined.

If you are unsure as to whether digital spend via your specific funding arrangement requires approval, please contact [DFID's Digital Service Team](#).

3. Why suppliers need to go through the review and approval process

In DFID, we want to learn from what has worked in other programmes **before** we commission or procure any new digital systems, so we don't waste valuable resources duplicating something that's already working elsewhere.

Suppliers should set out in their proposals for new work how they will meet the standards below, while maintaining value for money and designing services that meet user needs.

If you are developing ideas for extension of existing programmes with digital elements, you should consider how you can apply the Digital for Development Principles (see point 5 below).

When a Prior Information Notice (PIN) is released, it will state whether there is a digital element to the programme. There may be an early market engagement session to which suppliers are invited, in which further details will be set out at the event. The terms of reference (TOR) in the Invitation to Tender (ITT) pack will contain a digital description and advice tailored to the programme for suppliers to follow.

How to get advice and approval

DFID's Digital Service team and the DFID programme team will help you through the digital spend process, before work proceeds.

The Government Digital Service (GDS), on behalf of Cabinet Office, monitors all digital spend across government. DFID is required to report all spend and show that what we have approved meets with the [GDS Service Standard](#).

We have a process where we ask DFID programme teams to complete a **digital proposition form** setting out their planned digital activity, explaining:

- who their partners and suppliers are
- how they will design around users' needs
- what delivery approach they will take

- what it will cost
(see section 6 below).

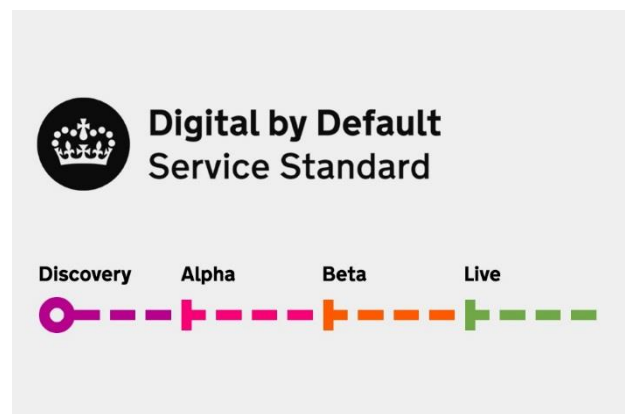
Digital spend propositions must be approved by our internal Digital Spend Panel before work can proceed.

Almost all digital spend propositions are for less than £100,000 in a single programme. However, any spend proposition for **over £100,000** needs to go to the GDS Approvals Board, as well as gaining DFID spend approval. The Digital Service Team facilitates this process.

4. Meeting the UK Government's Digital Standard

All new government-funded digital services must be designed in accordance with the [Service Design Manual](#) and delivered in phases. The phases are known as:

1. **Discovery** - the crucial first phase, in which you identify the problem to be solved and start researching the needs of your users, encapsulated in user stories.
2. **Alpha** - a short phase in which you prototype solutions for your users' needs and get early feedback about the design of the service.
3. **Beta** - releasing a version to test in public or private before it goes live, seeking further feedback in order to improve it.
4. **Live** – after which user feedback is sought and the system iterated and improved on an ongoing basis.



Any online transactional services provided to citizens or businesses are also required to undergo a Service Assessment as they progress through each of the stages above. DFID staff can provide advice and more information can be found here [Service Standard](#).

5. Adhering to the Principles for Digital Development

The [9 Digital Principles](#) are a set of guidelines that have been agreed as a result of consultation with donors and NGOs globally. The Principles are endorsed by many development organisations including USAID, World Food Programme, UNDP, Unicef, Gates Foundation and World Bank.

Principles for Digital Development



They are based on and closely match the UK Government's design principles. In any new procurement, **DFID requires our partners and suppliers to set out how they will adhere to the relevant principles.** This will be clearly stated in the Invitation to Tender.

There is practical information and advice on the [Digital Principles website](#). The Principles are guidelines, not rules, and DFID requires any spend propositions to show evidence on how each of the Principles has been considered.

6. Completing a digital spend proposition form

DFID's programme staff are required to complete a digital proposition form with their partners/suppliers to get approval before the work starts. The form (attached) asks for details on how the user need for the digital element of the programme will be met, how it will be designed and delivered, and the costs. It also requires a statement on who will own the digital output at the end of programme, including intellectual property.

Propositions are reviewed by an internal Digital Spend Approval Panel. The Panel provides comments and feedback which are sent to proposers along with the approval decision.

Teams that have been through the digital approval process have given feedback to say that they found the advice very valuable and it helped them to agree with partners and suppliers on what digital tools to choose and how to evaluate their effectiveness.

7. Restrictions on mobile apps and web domains

i) Mobile apps

The UK Government has restrictions on spending on mobile applications (apps). This means that unless there is a very clear business reason for a mobile app, they should be avoided. There is an exemption route available to gain approval from GDS.

Apps are not usually considered value for money, as they need to be developed for several different platforms (Android, iOS and Windows at least) and then updated on a regular basis – as well as being optimised for several different handsets and/or tablets. A mobile-friendly responsive website is usually a much cheaper and more inclusive alternative.

There are many "free" data collection tools (available through open source apps) that require some expenditure for customisation, training, and maintenance – Google's Open Data Kit is one that has been used very successfully in DFID programmes. Suppliers should consult their DFID adviser if they propose using one of them.

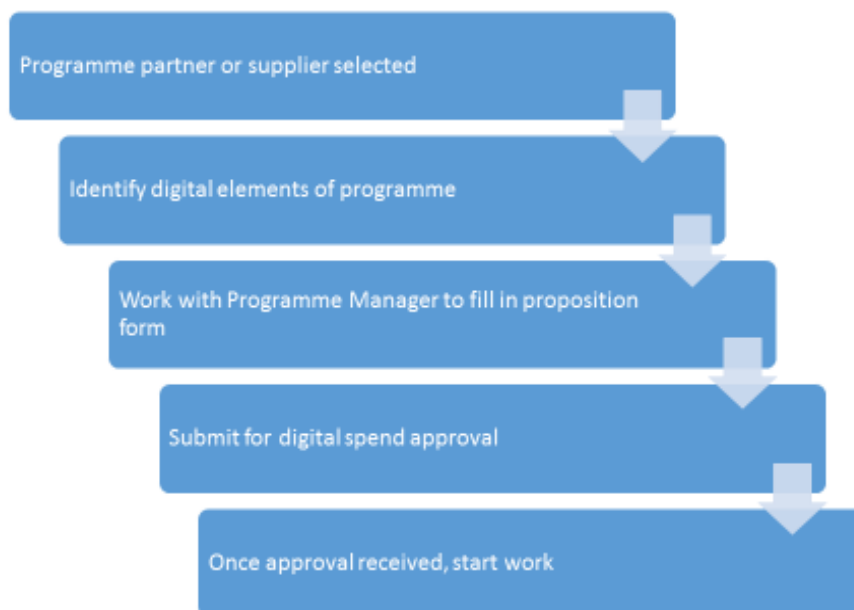
ii) URLs/domains

UK Government spending rules mean that no money can be spent on purchasing UK citizen-facing website domains. Content should be placed on GOV.UK or existing websites wherever possible. If you think you need a separate domain/URL for a programme, you should seek advice first from DFID's [Digital Service Team](#).

Websites for programmes overseas are permissible in certain cases if a clear user need is demonstrated, but they require internal DFID approval before any work starts. DFID provides guidance on how to decide if a website is required and how to achieve value for money.

8. Timing for seeking spend approval

Once DFID has selected a partner or supplier, the digital proposition form should be completed with actual costs over the lifetime of the programme and submitted for approval to the Digital Service Team. The programme manager will initiate this process and let you know the timing.



We recommend you engage early with DFID's Digital Service Team to benefit from their expert advice and guidance.

Further information

Digital Spending Proposition

Guidance for DFID Staff

The purpose of this form is to seek approval for the development and delivery of digital elements of externally facing admin and programme work. Before completing it, read the full guidance on the [digital spending controls on inSight](#) (DFID's intranet).

Once the proposal has been submitted, the Digital Spend Approval Team will review and advise whether any changes need to be made within **3 working days**.

What do we mean by digital?

Have a look at our [Digital inSight page](#) that contains the latest information and advice.

As we regularly respond to feedback on the Digital Spend Approval Process, please make sure you are using the latest version of the proposition form by [downloading the latest version](#)

Remember

All our digital developments should:

- put the needs of users first
- learn from what has been proven to work well elsewhere on the web and in DFID by checking the [Digital Grid](#) for lessons from other programmes
- be freely available for other DFID programmes to use

Digital Spend Checklist

The checklist below should be used as a reference point throughout the Digital Spend process.

Before seeking Digital Spend approval

- ✓ Become familiar with [Smart Rule 14](#) – Digital Spend falls under this rule.
- ✓ Carry out user research to identify the needs of your user base, and determine if your digital tool will meet these needs.
- ✓ If you are proposing a new website or knowledge portal, [read this guidance first](#) (only available to DFID staff).
- ✓ Reach out to the [Digital Service Team within BSD](#) with a short description of the need for a digital element and what that element may be. This allows us to give you advice and guidance at the earliest possible opportunity.
- ✓ Check the [Digital Grid](#) to identify best practice and see what digital tools have been used by other programme teams.
- ✓ Share our [Guidance for Suppliers and Partners](#) and ensure that your partners are following it throughout the lifetime of the programme.
- ✓ Familiarise yourself with the [Principles for Digital Development](#), which are a global standard for doing development which DFID expects its partners and suppliers to adhere to.

Getting Digital Spend approval

- ✓ Complete a [Digital Spend proposition form](#)
- ✓ Send the completed form to the [Digital Service Team](#) where a member of the team will review it and get back to you with any queries or questions.
- ✓ Review and take action on any comments or questions that we have asked, and send the revised form back to us.
- ✓ A member of the [Digital Service Team](#) will present your proposition to the Digital Spend Panel.
- ✓ The Panel will review and make any recommendations.

After Digital Spend approval

- ✓ Consider adding an entry for your programme in to the [Digital Grid](#).
- ✓ If you have created a website, when the website is live the URL should be sent to the Digital Service Team, who will arrange for it to be added to [DevTracker](#).
- ✓ When your digital tool or service is live you should continue to review and improve your digital element based on user feedback, analytics and further user research. The [Agile delivery guide](#) from GDS and [Principle 5](#) (“Be data driven”) of the Principles for Digital Development endorse this way of working.

The Proposition

Section A

Requestor details (DFID staff member)	
Your name	
Your job title	
Your team / office	
Date first submitted	

Partner contact (if known)	
Name	
Organisation	
Email address	

Section B

Programme details	
Programme title	
Component ID	
Total programme value	
Is this a procurement, an accountable grant or an MOU?	
Does the project involve payment by results?	
Title of business case and Vault ID	
PO number (if known)	
Aims of the programme (250 words max)	

Section C

Proposition details	
1	Name and short description of digital element

2	<p>What is the user need for the digital element?</p> <p><i>(There should be at least three user stories in the following format:</i></p> <p><i>“I am a...”</i></p> <p><i>“I need to...”</i></p> <p><i>“So that...”</i>)</p>
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3	<p>What is the anticipated cost of the digital proposition? (table format preferred)</p> <p><i>This includes:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>User research</i> <i>Design</i> <i>Development</i> <i>Hosting</i> <i>Maintenance</i> <i>Software License</i> <p><i>This does not include:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>Hardware costs</i> <i>Production of content</i> 	Example:				
		Activity	Day Rate	Number of Days	Total	Grand Total