POLICY GUIDELINES FOR SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

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POLICY GUIDELINES FOR SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

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POLICY GUIDELINES
FOR SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

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SECTION 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. THE INTERNET IS A COMMUNICATION TOOL

In line with the Batho Pele principles and the Constitution of the Republic, the South African government has the responsibility to make government information and services available easily, widely and equitably.

The Internet continues to grow as a key way to provide access to government information and services. Government departments and agencies realise that the Internet is one of the strategic communication tools to advance the communication objectives of government. They are increasingly using websites to communicate information about their functions, programmes, activities, services and products and to provide a platform for users to interact with them. This is in line with the global trend by governments to implement e-government strategies, using information and communication technologies (ICTs) to give audiences over the world access to their information and services.

The rapid growth in online communication by the South African government provides both opportunities and challenges to those managing the online presence of government. Government must ensure that its websites are comprehensive online depositories for government information, while also being responsive to the needs of the citizens by providing as many services as possible online. Websites should also provide a medium for two-way interaction between government and citizens.

2. WHY GOVERNMENT WEBSITE POLICY GUIDELINES?

Over the last few years, the quality of websites maintained by national government departments improved. However, there are inconsistencies between the websites. The look and feel of the websites and the quality, scope of content, terminology used for navigation, writing style and the way information is structured and displayed all differ.

When users visit South African government websites, they should have a seamless or unified experience. Users expect consistency throughout the online experience with government – they are not concerned with departments and would not be aware of, or care that, websites are run by different government departments or people. From a user's point of view a single, thorough, well designed experience will always be better than a fragmented one.

While there is a need for some level of conformity between government websites to assist the user to find information easily, it is still important for each government website to reflect the character of its department. Government departments are encouraged to demonstrate creativity in the process of developing and improving websites.

Giving users the best possible experience as they explore government information online is a significant opportunity to build public confidence in government's policies, the work that government do, and the services it delivers.

The Government Communication and Information System (GCIS) has therefore developed these content guidelines in consultation with government web managers to assist departments in achieving and maintaining best practice in the online presentation of government information.

3. PURPOSE AND SCOPE OF THE GUIDELINES

This document provides guidelines for national government departments to develop, manage and maintain websites that are standard across all departments. The document should be read, interpreted and applied in context with the following legislation:

- The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996
- Promotion of Access to Information Act, 2000
- Electronic Communications and Transactions Act, 2002.

These guidelines are intended to improve the quality, currency and accessibility of online information about the South African government and to ensure a consistent experience for users of South African government websites. The objective is to ensure that:

- departments meet the broader communication objectives of government
- government websites are comprehensive, accurate and authoritative
- the information on government websites is properly updated and maintained
- government websites are usable and accessible
- government websites look uniform
- government website managers follow best practices for quality websites.

The document focuses on recommendations relating to the user interface (what users see and experience on the website). It excludes issues such as technology, infrastructure, interoperability, security and technical standards.

Best practice guidelines and recommendations are provided in the following areas:

- what information should be published on the website
- structuring of information on the website
- supporting users to move easily within the website
- writing information for the website
- common look and feel for government websites
- presenting information on the website
- how to develop or revamp a website
- managing and maintaining information on the website
- roles and responsibilities of role-players involved in updating information on the website
- driving visitors to the website
- selecting a content management system for a website.

The policy guidelines are relevant for national government departments. However, best practice guidelines included in this document are also relevant for provincial and local government websites.

These policy guidelines will serve as reference point for GCIS in the monitoring and evaluation of the functioning of the government communication system.

4. PURPOSE AND AUDIENCE OF A GOVERNMENT WEBSITE

4.1   Purpose of a government website

A departmental website is the online communication tool for a department and should therefore form part of the department's communication and marketing strategies. It should tell the user everything about the department and what the department does and enable users to talk to the department.

Broadly, the purpose of a government website is to:

- deliver current, factual and official information about the department and its functions, programmes, campaigns, services and products
- provide the latest news about the department's activities, events and programmes
- publish information about the department to support its strategic goals and meet legislative requirements
- provide a vehicle for interaction between the department and the public
- create visibility for the department and promote the department's image
- market the department to internal and external stakeholders.

4.2   Target audience

The main target audiences for government websites are:

- the broad public
- the media
- national, provincial and local government
- researchers/libraries
- international audiences
- specific stakeholders relevant to the department.

SECTION 2: SCOPE OF INFORMATION ON THE WEBSITE

1. INTRODUCTION

A departmental website is an important tool that citizens and other audiences can use to learn about the department – its leadership, work, programmes and projects, the services it delivers, the documents it publishes and other information resources it provides.

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

Only information that is suitable for the public domain should be posted to the website – classified information or information meant for departmental officials should not be posted.

2. MINIMUM CONTENT FOR ALL DEPARTMENTAL WEBSITES

Users expect to find the same minimum content on all government websites under the same links.

All government websites must therefore contain the following minimum content, using standard terminology as depicted in **bold italic** type below.

1.1   ***About us.*** This section of the website gives an overview of the composition and functions of the department and its relevant advisory/statutory bodies. "About us" must include:

- ***Vision & mission.*** The vision, mission, goals and objectives of the department. It might be presented as an introduction to this section of the website.

- ***Ministry***. Information about the Minister and Deputy Minister to which the department reports, i.e. contact details, photos, short profiles and a link to their speeches and statements. Also include their main responsibilities.

- ***Structure and functions.*** Information on the composition/structure and functions of the department:

- o   An organogram or organisational chart.
- o   Information about business units. Give a description of functions and responsibilities of each business unit (branches, chief directorates, directorates).
- o   Contact information for the DG and managers of business units (DDGs, CDs, Directors), and for officials responsible for specific functions. Provide telephone and fax numbers and e-mail addresses.
- o   Short profiles with photos of the leadership of the department (DG, DDGs).

- *Jobs*. The minimum requirement for this category is to advertise vacancies in the department:
  - o   Give details of how to apply, and make the Z83 application form available for downloading.
  - o   Explain recruitment policies and procedures.
  - o   Add "vacancies" in the description to ensure that users searching for this term will find this page.
  - o   Use this page also for career guidance and to provide more information on job creation, rather than just listing vacancies.

- *Tenders*. Publish bids that are advertised (with documents related to the bids, i.e. forms to be completed and specifications), bids awarded, bid procedures and the process to register as service provider for the department. Remember to remove it following the submission date.

- *Statutory bodies.* Information about relevant advisory or statutory bodies associated with the department:
  - o   information that explains the oversight role of the department
  - o   introduction to each of the advisory or statutory bodies
  - o   prominent links to the websites of these bodies.

- *Access to information.* Details on how to access information in the department, accompanied with the department's Promotion of Access to Information Act (PAIA) manual.

- **Strategic documents.** Link to strategic documents that relate to the work of the department, such as strategic plans and annual reports (published in the *Resource centre*).

- *Legislation.* Link to legislation administered by the department (published in the *Resource centre*).

1.2 **Resource centre.** This section of the website includes information resources that the department developed. Where relevant, include:

- **Legislation** for which the department has the lead responsibility. Include:
  - Draft Bills
  - Bills
  - Acts
  - Regulations
  - Notices
- Magazines and other publications
- Newsletters
- Fact sheets, brochures and leaflets
- Policy documents (Green Papers, White Papers, other)
- Strategic plans, annual reports, other reports
- Forms
- Guideline documents
- Multimedia products produced by the department, including audio files, videos, photo, etc.
- Other documents.

It is good practice to display documents that call for public comment prominently on the website. Remember to remove it when the "comment by" date has been reached.

1.3 **Newsroom.** This section provides news and information of interest particularly to the media, e.g.:

- media statements, announcements, media advisories
- speeches delivered by the Minister, Deputy Minister or leadership of the department (DG, DDGs)
- events related to the department or Ministry – schedule of activities and events occurring today and planned for the future
- news stories
- links to photos than can be used by the media (**Photos you can use**)
- parliamentary questions and answers
- information on media accreditation
- media contacts
- links to audio clips and videos
- link(s) to campaigns available under Programmes.

1.4 **Programmes** (if relevant). Provide information about the department's programmes, projects and campaigns, e.g. EPWP.

1.5 ***Services*** (relevant for service-delivery departments). If a department renders any service to the public or other government departments, the departmental website must provide information for each service.

2.5.1 A service is defined as a two-way interactive transaction (manual or online) with the South African government.

2.5.2 The following minimum content must be available for each service:

- Title. It must be clear and easy to understand (e.g. *Apply for an identity document).*
- Description/ explanation of what the service entails:
  o You should give answers to questions such as: Who qualify for the service? For what can I apply? Why should I apply?
  o Where relevant, you can also indicate requirements for getting the service and under which conditions the department will provide the service.
- All the steps that the applicant has to follow to apply for the service:
  o You should give answers to the question such as: How must I apply? Where must I go to apply?).
  o You must also include information about how the applicant must hand in the application (i.e. whether the applicant must post it or give it personally to the relevant office), how the applicant should pay, what the applicant can expect after handing in the application, procedures the applicant have to follow if the application is unsuccessful.
  o Number the steps and display them in a logical order.
- Application forms. Where relevant, provide forms on the website for applicants to request services from the department (either for downloading or printing, or for online application):
  o List only the application forms that will be completed by the applicant, not by the officials of the department.
  o Make sure that the form will be accepted at the service delivery offices or centres.
- How much will the applicant have to pay for the service? The cost could be a set price (R890), price range (R520 – R800) or displayed in a table in the case of different pricing structures.
- The time it will take for your department to provide the service after the application has been submitted.
- Contact details where applicants can get further information or assistance to apply for the service.
- Any additional information that the applicant will need about the service.

- Links to:
  - o relevant Acts, Regulations
  - o other relevant websites.

2.5.3 Where relevant, services must be grouped according to the following audiences:
- Services to residents
- Services to organisations
- Services to foreign nationals
- Services to government.

If a department have many services, you should also group the services according to topics/subjects.

2.5.4 In addition to information about services as defined in par. 2.5.1, you can also:
- provide information that explains the process your department follows when providing services to citizens where there is no application process (e.g. housing, primary healthcare or doing business in South Africa)
- provide useful information about how citizens can access e.g. consumer information or debt counselling.

2.5.5 You must ensure that changes to existing services (also cost and contact details) are updated immediately. However, make sure that the changes are implemented at coal-face level before you change the information on your website.

1.6 **FAQs** (Frequently asked questions). This section should contain real questions with detailed answers. Do not add every question received from users – focus on those most frequently asked. To assist users to find information, you can group the FAQs in categories.

1.7 **Links.** There must be links to relevant and authoritative external websites. All departmental websites must provide links to:
- South Africa Government Online (www.gov.za)
- relevant advisory or statutory bodies associated with the department
- relevant government websites on national and provincial level.

Departmental websites should also link to relevant non-departmental websites. When you select websites to link to, take note of the following principles:

- Link to registered non-government organisations/Section 21 companies or professional organisations that add value to or complement the department's programmes, and to business organisations that partner with the department.
- As a general rule, government websites should not link to commercial websites.
- Only link to websites that:
  o contain authoritative and accurate information about relevant subject areas (e.g. health; employment)
  o complement existing information on your website – the website should provide more information than is available on your website
  o add value to or complement government programmes and activities
  o do not promote illegal activities (e.g. taking drugs, theft, copyright violation), promote pornography and violence or indulge in hate speech and racism.
- Only link to public websites. Do not link to a website that is not accessible to the broad public (e.g. your departmental Intranet).

Best practice principles when selecting links to external websites (departmental or other) include the following:

- Link to a website rather than duplicate information that is published on another website.
- Do not link to websites or pages that are under construction.
- Links used in text should go to specific pages on other websites (deep links), not just to the home page.
- The disclaimer on your website should include a notice that the department:
  o does not guarantee or makes no representations or warranties as to the accuracy, relevance, timeliness, completeness or any aspect relating to websites maintained by third parties over whom your department has no control
  o does not endorse the websites or views expressed or the products/services they offer.
- To avoid potential legal repercussions, it is advisable to obtain advance permission from the owner of the website to which you want to link.

It is good practice to allow inbound links to your departmental website. The departmental website is a public domain website. This means that external websites

should be allowed to link to your website at no cost or without seeking special permission.

1.8 ***About the website.*** This page should include an orientation to the website, e.g.:
- the purpose and aim of the website
- the intended target audiences of the website
- an overview of the scope of content on the website
- other information that may assist the user to use the website, e.g. document formats, tips on searching for information, list of acronyms used on the website, etc.

1.9 ***Terms and conditions of use.*** This page must contain provisions with regard to issues such as usage and copyright, intellectual property rights, security and privacy. It must also contain a content disclaimer to protect the owner department from any liability.

- Usage and copyright: Users should be allowed to copy or download content for non-commercial purposes. However, if users wish to use content from the website for commercial purposes, they should first get permission from the department. Prohibit other websites from framing any page on your website.

- Intellectual property rights: State that all content, data and trademarks, including software, technology, databases, know-how, text, graphics, icons, hyperlinks, private information, designs, programmes, publications, products, processes, or ideas described in the website may be the subject of other rights, including other intellectual property rights, which are the property of or licensed to the department or a legal entity, and as such are protected from infringement by South African legislation and international treaties and conventions. Also state that, subject to the specific rights afforded to the user in the terms and conditions, all other rights to all intellectual property on the website are expressly reserved.

- Content disclaimer: The department should protect itself from any liability. The disclaimer should state the following:
  o The information on the website is not necessarily exhaustive in its treatment of the subject matter.
  o The use of the information on the website is at the user's own risk and the department will not be liable for any damages, loss or liability arising from the use or inability to use information on the website.

- o The department cannot guarantee the accuracy of information that is maintained by third parties (e.g. information that originated outside of government and. Or is linked to from the website).
- o The inclusion of links to other websites does not imply the department's endorsement of such sites. The department is not responsible for the use, or inability to use or access any linked websites or any links contained in a linked website.

- Privacy: You must allow users to access departmental websites without providing any personal information. Make users aware that the department may track information to identify categories of users, by items such as IP addresses, domains, browser types and pages visited and that the web manager uses this information to ensure that the website serves as a useful and effective information resource. However, assure users that personal information such as the user's name or e-mail address will not be collected.

  If the website registers users for a specific purpose (e.g. to request future information, register online for an event, etc.) the user must be assured that personal information will only be used for limited purposes, e.g. to create a personal profile to customise its response to further requests, to improve the website or to respond to the user.

  Make users aware that the department may provide users' information to service providers that handle information on behalf of the department. However, users' information should not be shared with third parties for secondary or unrelated purposes.

- Security: Assure users that the department has in place reasonable commercial standards of security to protect information provided by users from loss, misuse, alteration or destruction and that all reasonable steps are taken to secure a user's information.

  You can find an example of terms and conditions at www.gov.za/main/terms.htm.

3. DEPARTMENT-SPECIFIC CONTENT

Over and above the minimum content, departments may have content that is unique to the functions of that department. This content must also be published on the departmental website.

The nature of content belonging to a particular government department will determine the number of navigation items and choice of terminology. Use terminology that reflects the department's specific programmes and services and that will be clear to users who may not be familiar with the terms used internally in government.

4. USE OF OFFICIAL LANGUAGES

All potential users, irrespective of their educational background, must be able to use the information on the website. The content and language should be user-friendly and understandable for all people.

If information is available in languages other than English, it should be published on the website.

5. ADVERTISING ON GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

There should not be endorsement or advertising of commercial products on South African government websites.

Paid advertising is not allowed on any departmental website.

When government departments have a significant input to an event such as a conference organised by a commercial event management company, this event may be promoted and a link provided to a website where the user can get more information or register. Organisations sponsoring departmental activities may only be acknowledged in text on the relevant page.

You may only add logos of organisations sponsoring departmental events to the departmental website if approved by the Head of Communications (HoC) or a designate. Approval will be granted only in exceptional cases.

6. COMMUNICATION BETWEEN DEPARTMENTAL OFFICIALS AND CITIZENS OR WEBSITE USERS

Feedback is vital to ensure that websites are responsive to user needs. In addition, interactive communication with citizens and other audiences through the Internet is becoming increasingly important and valuable for governments. Citizens expect to be able to communicate with government and to receive some form of acknowledgement or reply.

Provide the following links on all pages of the website:

- ***Feedback.*** Give an e-mail address or link to a page that allows users to give feedback or comments about the website to the website manager, ask questions about the website or request help to access information on the website. Website managers should respond to questions or acknowledge comments within eight working hours.

- ***Contact us.*** This section must include comprehensive contact information for the department:
  - General contact information for the head office and regional offices. Provide directions to the offices. Alternatively, you can use Google maps for this purpose.
  - Contact information for the Information Officer (in terms of PAIA).
  - Contact information for the Head of Communications.
  - Contact information for the website manager.
  - Helplines / call centre / emergency numbers related to the department.

Social media such as Facebook and Twitter are growing in importance. The use of social media in government is discussed in the *Social Media Guidelines* (http://www.gcis.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs//resourcecentre/guidelines/social_media_guidelines_final_20_april2011.pdf).

You will have to test and implement new methods for citizen-government interaction as the technologies develop and as they prove useful to government officials.

SECTION 3: INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE – STRUCTURE INFORMATION LOGICALLY

1. INTRODUCTION

The way content is structured on the website is as important as the content itself. A logical website structure (information architecture) provides order, helps users to find information more easily, allows users to successfully predict where to find information and gives users an intuitive way to browse the website.

2. HOME PAGE

The home page of a website provides an entry point into the website and therefore must:

- Create a positive first impression.
- Look like a home page. It should be easy to differentiate it from the other pages in the website. You can use a slightly different page layout than the other pages in the website.
- Be well organised and give a clear overview of what information is on the website.
- Be updated frequently to ensure that it remains current. This can include photos of news events and the listing of new items on the website.
- Display all major options/links.
- Display a simple search box.

Do not use head and shoulders photos of political and other principals as part of the design or in a navigation bar, as such images are not consistent with the "people-centred" proposition that government wishes to convey in its communication. Rather use images that reflect services in action or the vision of a people-centred government working towards the upliftment of all.

The home page helps the user to find information in the deeper levels of the website. You can display deeper level links that are often used as quick links on the home page.

3. BEST PRACTICE PRINCIPLES FOR WEBSITE INFORMATION ARCHITECTURE

Take note of the following principles when you plan your website's content architecture:

- The website must have a logical information hierarchy. Hierarchies are built from the most important or general concepts, down to the most specific or optional topics.
- The nature of the content should suggest the best way to sub-divide and organise the content. Group information into clearly defined and logical categories and sub-categories. However, do not fragment information too much. It will frustrate users who wish to read or print the complete text.
- Keep in mind that the information structure should be user-focused. The subjects that you have identified should not necessarily dictate the hierarchy. Consider ways to make the most useful information easily and quickly accessible. For example, if users are more interested in particular information that logically fits within the information hierarchy a few steps below the home page, the hierarchy can be flattened to ensure that this information is available at a higher level.
- Give various options to access information. For example, offer a path for both those familiar with government structures (e.g. A – Z) and those not familiar with them (user-focused).
- Label categories clearly and logically.
- Decide on the number of levels the website should have. The best practice is to provide information in the fewest possible steps. However, larger websites might need more levels of navigation. You will need to find a balance between the following to approaches:
  o A flat approach where many navigation items provide access to information in few steps. This provides quick access to content but may present a confusing number of choices for the user.
  o A deep approach where fewer choices at the outset provide access to information in more steps with an increasingly narrower focus. This requires more clicks.
- Post an information item only in one main category and then link from various areas in the website to that content. This will prevent users from being confused by similar information in various areas of the website. It will also be easier to maintain your website.
- Group, order, label and arrange content in a consistent way.

SECTION 4: NAVIGATION – ENABLE USERS TO MOVE EASILY THROUGH THE WEBSITE TO FIND INFORMATION

1. INTRODUCTION

A clear, logical and consistent navigation scheme is essential to optimise access to information on the website. The navigation scheme of a website should give users a coherent means of finding information, remind users where they are within the website's structure, and help orientate users who arrive at the website without going through the home page.

To ensure a seamless experience for users, government websites must be consistent in the way in which the same or similar navigation items are displayed. Refer to Section 6, par. 3 for the policy on the display of navigation items.

2. BEST PRACTICES FOR WEBSITE NAVIGATION

The following are best practices for website navigation:

2.1 General linking principles

- Ensure that links have a consistent visual style.
- Navigation must be simple, easy to use and intuitive.
- There must be no broken links on the website. Check links continuously.
- Use text for links, not images.

2.2 Display of navigation items

- Display the main navigation items on all pages.
- Display a home page link on all pages of the website, except on the home page itself.
- Display the search option on each page.
- Differentiate and group navigation items. Similar navigation items must be grouped together.
- Ensure that navigation items are clear and large enough to be easily read and selected.
- Use meaningful text for links.
- Ensure that a link name is as close as possible to the heading of the page linked to.

2.3 Assist the user to move easily within the website

- Provide different navigation routes to content on your website.
- Always link the Coat of Arms to the home page.
- Always provide an opportunity for the user to move back in the hierarchy (not using the "Back" option in the browser). You can do this by:
  o highlighting the relevant menu items
  o using a breadcrumb trail on all pages.
- Indicate to users where they are in the website. You can use the same techniques mentioned above.
- Do not open HTML pages on the same website in a new window or tab.

2.4 Long HTML pages

- Avoid long HTML pages.
- Provide indexes/tables of contents for longer pages and link from these entries to the main sections of content. There must be a "back to top" link at regular intervals.
- You can also divide long documents into shorter pages with an internal navigation structure. This normally involves creating a table of contents, with each entry linking to the main section heading. Each page must be accessible from the other pages, and a link must be provided to take the user to the next or previous page. It should always be possible to access the table of contents and the other pages (parts of the document) from each page. Provide a parallel link to the complete document (PDF).

2.5 Linked text

- Avoid the excessive use of links within body text. It may distract the user and may affect readability of the document.
- Links in text should not duplicate the function of the menu.

2.6 Graphic navigation

- Do not use images for links.
- Avoid linking from an image only – always include a text link as well.
- Do not use images for bullet points. Rather use the bullet styles that are available in HTML.

2.7   Linking to external websites

- Before you link to an external website, verify if the terms and conditions of that website allow for it and under which conditions.
- Do not link to websites or pages that are under construction.
- Indicate when a link will take users to external websites.
- Links to external websites must always open in a new window.
- Do not open another website within your website, as it may constitute an infringement of intellectual property rights.
- Where relevant, use deep links. Link directly to the page where the relevant information is, not only to the home page of the website.

3. ADDITIONAL TOOLS TO FIND, RECEIVE AND PRESENT INFORMATION

Various tools can support users to find information on the website, or to automatically receive information from the website:

3.1   Search

Bigger websites should provide a tool to search for specific information (versus browsing the website to find information).

The main criteria for an effective search tool is that it must be easy to use, provide accurate and concise results and clearly explain the search parameters used by the search engine. The search tool should give at least the following functionality:

- A single search box in which users can type the word or words that they are searching for. Users should be able to refine a search after the initial results have been viewed.
- Users must be able to search for words in the text of all information and documents on the website.

When your department has a big or complicated website, consider advanced search tools to help users find specific information. An advanced search tool will allow users to define search criteria, normally including metadata fields (e.g. keywords; subjects; etc.) It should allow for Boolean searching and for users to further refine the search after they have seen the results.

Provide help on how to search information on the website with examples of how to conduct a simple and advanced search. Display the search help link on all results pages.

Good practices for the display of results include the following:

- Provide information about the total number of results.
- Display 20 results per page as a default, but also provide the option to view more or fewer results above and below each result set. Provide an easy option to move between any groups of results, e.g." 1 2 3 4 5 Next" on the first results page, "Previous 1 2 3 4 5" on the last results page and "Previous 1 2 3 4 5 Next" on the other pages.
- Display enough descriptive information for the user to understand if the result is worth pursuing. This could include the URL, title, short summary, format (e.g. HTML or PDF) and size of the document, as well as other relevant metadata fields that will provide context. The summary must give a clear indication of the contents of the document.
- Display the relevant search parameters.
- Provide the option to refine the search results by running an additional search on the results of the first.
- Indicate the relevance of the document in relation to the search terms used.
- Indicate when no results have been found and provide further options to pursue.
- Display a link to the advanced search option on all results pages.
- Allow the user to do another search (simple or advanced) from the results page.

3.2 Site map

A site map is a list of pages of a website. Provide an HTML site map organised in hierarchical fashion. This will help users to understand the content structure and hierarchy of the website.

When you present the site map graphically, you must also provide a text option with links to the pages.

3.3 Alerting services

Services, such as e-mail, RSS (Really Simple Syndication) or other appropriate technologies will enable the department to feed users with information that is frequently updated, e.g. advisories, speeches and statements, vacancies in the department, new bids, legislation, etc. The feeds should include the title and summary of the documents, as well as metadata such as the release date.

SECTION 5: WRITING FOR THE WEBSITE – WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

1. INTRODUCTION

Government communications must be clear and concise. Guidelines on how to write for the website aim to ensure a standardised and consistent approach on government websites.

2. GUIDELINES AND BEST PRACTICES

Consider the following guidelines when you prepare, modify or edit information for the website.

2.1 Use plain language

Traditional government language is often unfriendly and difficult to understand. Always write with the audience in mind. Prepare content in such a way that all potential users, irrespective of their education, background and sophistication can understand it. The basic requirements are:

2.1.1 Page level

- Write for the Internet as a medium. Do not merely replicate printed products.
- Write clearly and concisely.
- Each page should be able to stand on its own, as users may view it without reference to relevant pages.
- Each page must have a clear main point. Limit each page to one topic.
- Use a professional tone – avoid clichés, jargon and humour. The style must be relatively formal and business-like, but not overly so.
- Use newspaper style, starting from the most important information and then moving to the least important information (inverted pyramid style).
- Limit the length of paragraphs.
- In tables, use descriptive row and column headings.
- Use sentence case for headings and menu items.

2.1.2 Sentence level

- Avoid unnecessary words and phrases.
- Use short, single-idea sentences. Limit the number of words.
- Limit the use of passive voice. Rather use the active voice (e.g. use "Dog bites man" not "Man was bitten by dog").
- Where possible, address the user personally, e.g. words like "you" and "us".

2.1.3 Word level

- Use familiar words.
- Use plain and simple words that are familiar to the user. Limit complex words and avoid technical terms.
- Do not use unnecessary words.
- Limit government jargon. Rewrite jargon and "legalese" in simple terms.
- Avoid words that are unnecessarily long or have double meanings.
- Avoid unnecessary words of degree or too many adjectives and adverbs (e.g. "very", "quite", "somewhat".
- Write out words in full (e.g. use "was not" instead of "wasn't").
- Use terms consistently across the content when referring to the same thing.

2.2 Structure information logically on pages

Website users often scan pages before reading the detail, to check if information is relevant. A logical structure for text and concise writing will assist the user in this. General guidelines are as follows:

- Use bulleted lists to list relevant information or to provide a lot of information in a concise manner.
- List items in order of relevance to the user – it must be logic to the user, not the department. Place important items at the top of lists.
- Use short sentences. It is usually better to break long sentences into a series of shorter sentences.
- Use short paragraphs. Use one idea per paragraph.
- Keep content relevant to the respective headings.
- Structure headings and sub-headings logically.
- Use page navigation items for long pages, e.g. a list of contents.

2.3   Bulleted lists

Take note of the following guidelines:

- Every item in the list should follow logically and grammatically from the lead sentence. Every list should follow the same grammatical structure.
- Capitalise the first letter of each bullet if it contains separate sentences, and end each sentence with a full stop.
- Do not capitalise when bullets are not full sentences. However, when the list contains a mixture of fragments and full sentences or paragraphs, start all items with a capital letter and end with a full stop.
- Do not use semi-colons, commas or full stops at the end of each bullet sentence. Do not insert "and" after the second-last bullet sentence.
- The last bullet gets a full stop.

2.4   Headings and subheadings

Headings and subheadings give users a quick overview of the content on a page. Each page should have a main heading at the top. This should then be followed by subheadings of different sizes and weights to help users to understand the structure of the page at a glance.

Headings and sub-headings should be:

- informative
- descriptive and clearly phrased
- in lower case, except for the capitalisation of the first letter (sentence case).

2.5   Captions

Captions used for photos or images in the content must be short, but descriptive of the specific photo or image – not of the broader theme or event. Captions for images in a gallery should contain more information, unless you provide it in an introductory paragraph.

2.6   Acronyms

When you use an acronym, write the full term out the first time it appears on a page, followed by the abbreviation in brackets (e.g. Government Communication and Information System (GCIS)). Thereafter, only use the acronym on that page. Limit the use of acronyms in menus and headings.

Provide a glossary of acronyms used on the website, e.g. as part of *About the website* (Section 2, par. 2.8).

2.7 Hyperlinks

The following guidelines apply:

- Use clear, known, plain, short and unambiguous terms for menus.
- Avoid acronyms in menus. The user may not know the acronym.
- Keep link text as close as possible to the name or the heading of the page you link to.
- Keep link text in the language of the website you link to.
- When you use links within text, hyperlink the words describing the website you link to. Do not use "click here" or the URL of that website.
- A link to an external website must always open in a new window. Indicate the link as follows: title="Outside link – opens in new window".

2.8 Capital letters

Capitalise only when necessary:

- For headings, sub-headings, menu entries and paths, capitalise the first letter only (sentence case), except when names (e.g. names of people, days, places, etc.) or titles are used.
- Use regular sentence case and not all capitals. This does not apply if it is part of an existing name or title, or for abbreviations.

2.9 Underlining

Do not underline text or headings, as it could be mistaken for a hyperlink. Rather use bold or italics.

2.10 Punctuation

Best practices for easier on-screen reading include:

- Do not use full stops after headings.
- Limit punctuation and avoid using colons and semi-colons.

2.11   UK English

In South Africa, the UK version of English is used, and not the American version, e.g.

- organisation (not organization)
- honour (not honor)
- programme (not program, except for a computer program)
- catalogue (not catalog)
- centre (not center)
- realise (not realize)
- specialise (not specialize).

2.12   Gender-specific language

Write content to be gender-neutral. Tips in this regard are:

- Use "you" instead of "the applicant". By addressing the user directly, there will not be a need for he/she.
- Rephrase to remove pronouns, e.g.: "If the secretary is unavailable, please send an e-mail" (and not "If the secretary is unavailable, please e-mail her"). Don't use she/he or his/her.
- Use gender-neutral equivalents for gender-specific words, e.g. chairperson (not chairman), work hours or person hours (not man-hours), spokesperson (not spokesman).

2.13   Print publications on the website

Websites differ from print, and thus print material should be adapted to the format and style of the web. Ways to do this include:

- Review the accuracy and relevance of information for the website audience.
- Reposition documents for online reading by editing and rewriting it.
- Restructure information.
- Add hyperlinks to relevant information.
- Prepare an index or a summary and include a link to the relevant parts of the document. Also add a link to the printable version of the document.

SECTION 6: COMMON LOOK AND FEEL FOR SOUTH AFRICAN GOVERNMENT WEBSITES

1. INTRODUCTION

South African government websites must have a common identity. The use of consistent branding, navigation items and a common approach to the location of these elements within a page will begin to create a consistent user interface. This will help users to identify any page of any website as belonging to the South African government, and giving users a consistent experience of South African government websites.

The guidelines in this section are relevant for national government departments. Provincial government should develop their own corporate branding guidelines in line with the guidelines for national departments.

2. DESIGN OF THE BANNER AREA

Banners must be designed as stipulated below, and must be displayed as such on all website pages.

2.1   National Coat of Arms and departmental logo unit

The Coat of Arms Corporate Identity and Branding Guidelines regulate the use of the Coat of Arms as branding for government. The guidelines limit the use of the Coat of Arms to protect it from commercial exploitation and use.

The Coat of Arms and departmental logo unit must be incorporated in the banner in the following way:

- The Coat of Arms and departmental logo unit should be used in line with Section 3.3 of the Coat of Arms Corporate Identity and Branding Guidelines (http://www.gcis.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/resourcecentre/guidelines/corpid/3_3.pdf).
- The Coat of Arms and departmental logo unit must be displayed at the top left corner of each page of the website.
- The Coat of Arms must be displayed on a white background.
- There must be a clear space around the Coat of Arms and departmental logo unit.
- In a screen resolution of 1024 pixels the proportions must be as follows: the width of the Coat of Arms with surrounding white space must be 97 pixels and the height 120 pixels. This would mean that the size of the Coat of Arms itself should be 77x100 pixels (width x height) and margins should be 10 pixels. The Coat of Arms box (Coat of Arms and margins) will therefore be 97x120 pixels (width x height).
- The width of the departmental logo will depend on the name of the department. The height of the logo in a screen resolution of 1024 pixels must be 96 pixels.
- The Coat of Arms and departmental logo must be resized for use in the banner in other screen resolutions. The Coat of Arms must be displayed in its correct proportions to ensure that there is no distortion or misrepresentation.
- The colours that are used for the Coat of Arms on the website must be as specified in Section 3.4 on Implementation of the Coat of Arms Corporate Identity Guidelines (http://www.gcis.gov.za/sites/default/files/docs/resourcecentre/guidelines/corpid/3_4.pdf).

The Coat of Arms may not be repeated elsewhere on the page in any form, unless it is part of a publication.

2.2   South African flag

The South African flag must be displayed in the banner at the top right corner of each page on the website:

- In a screen resolution of 1024 pixels the size must be 102x68 pixels (width x height). White margins surrounding the flag must be 26 pixels. The flag box (flag and margins) must be 154x120 pixels (width x height).
- The flag must be resized for use in the banner in other screen resolutions. The flag must be displayed in its correct proportions to ensure there is no distortion or misrepresentation.
- The flag must be displayed against a white background.
- The flag must be 'flat'. Waving, cut-out or other distortions may not be used.

2.3   Government departments' corporate branding

In the area in the middle departments are free to implement their own branding. The width of the departmental logo unit will determine the width of this area.

The current trend is to have open and clean banners, which will mean that this area may be kept clear or display a minimalistic image. An area below the banner may then be used to display departmental branding or slogans.

Creativity is encouraged, within the parameters of this website guideline document.

3.   DISPLAY OF NAVIGATION ITEMS

To ensure a seamless experience for users, government websites must display the same or similar navigation items consistently.

Display the standard navigation items on each page in the following manner:

3.1   Above the corporate identity banner, right aligned: *Links*, *FAQs*, *Contact us.*

3.2   Directly below the corporate identity banner: *About us, Resource centre, Newsroom, Tenders, Jobs, Programmes* (if relevant)*, Services* (if relevant). Display the simple search box on the same level at the right hand side of the page.

3.3   Link to the www.gov.za website: This link must be displayed prominently on the home page.

3.4   New information posted on the website: The home pages of government websites must display a list of new information posted on the website, preferably with a summary of what the page contains.

3.5 **Department-specific navigation items:** Besides the minimum content, departments may have content that is unique to the functions of that department. The navigation items for this information must be in the main navigation bar to the right of the mandatory items (e.g. *Courts* for the Department of Justice and Constitutional Development) and in the footer.

3.6 **Right hand side of the home page**. Departmental helplines / call centre / emergency numbers must be displayed on the right hand side of the home page. Also the Presidential hotline, anti-corruption hotline and a link to the hotline page on www.gov.za.

3.7 **Footer:** The footer must contain the following:
- The main navigation (*About us, Resource centre, Newsroom, Tenders, Jobs, Programmes, Services)* must be repeated*.*
- *About the website.*
- *Terms and conditions*.
- *Site map.*
- *Feedback* (link to e-mail or online form).
- A copyright statement – *Maintained by [Name of department]©[the current year] e.g. Government Communications (GCIS)©2011.* The date must reflect the current year.
- Address and contact details of department.
- Link to directions to the department*.*
- Link to the *Access to information* page.

Separate the footer information from other information by displaying it in a box, or below a line that separates it from the text area.

4. COLOURS USED ON THE WEBSITE

According to the Corporate Identity and Branding Guidelines, national departments may distinguish themselves from one another using colour as a primary differentiator. There are four primary colour options that make up the national Coat of Arms from which departments can choose to differentiate themselves: orange, brown, black or green.

Departments should use these colours, together with white, in the design of their websites. You may use tints and shades of the primary hues.

The same colours must be used consistently on all the pages of the website.

5. DOMAIN NAME SYNTAX

South African government websites must have a consistent domain name syntax (URL) to establish a similar identifier for the South African government on the Internet.

The following conventions must be followed:

- The country-code top-level domain must always be .**za.**
- The top-level domain must always be .**gov.**
- The second level domain names should consist of a name or acronym that represents the department's primary purpose, e.g. **gcis**.

Use one of the following approaches:

- www.departmentname.gov.za (where departmentname is the full name of department), e.g. www.health.gov.za, www.energy.gov.za
- www.abbreviation.gov.za (where abbreviation is the official abbreviation of the department), e.g. www.daff.gov.za, www.cogta.gov.za.
- www.part-of-long-departmentname.gov.za, e.g. www.ruraldevelopment.gov.za.

For subsites, use [main domain name]/subsite name, e.g. www.dwa.gov.za/DSO/. The State Information Technology Agency (SITA) is responsible for the registration of South African government domain names. Online registration can be done on the website http://dnsadmin.gov.za.

The URL of the deeper level pages must:

- visualise the site structure, e.g. www.gcis.gov.za/speeches/budget/index.html
- use important keywords
- be easy to remember and spell
- be easy to type
- be short
- be in lower case
- not use punctuation
- rather use a hyphen than an underscore.

6. PAGE TITLES

HTML title tags enable users to see the title or name of a page. They are valuable for internal management, user navigation and search engine positioning. It will also be the page identifier used when a page is bookmarked by a user.

Page titles should be optimised for quick scanning, but should still be long enough to convey meaning. Page titles should be a concise, plainly worded summary of the page contents. Use important keywords in page titles.

HTML title tags must contain the name or acronym of the government department or website and must be included on every page. A set syntax describing the government department and the page content must be used, e.g. [Name of department] – [descriptive name for current page], e.g. the page heading.

7. FONT

Use Verdana as the main font. It is easy to read, even with smaller text. However, define other fonts (Helvetica and Sans-Serif) to accommodate users that do not have the same set of fonts on their computers.

SECTION 7: DESIGN AND LAYOUT – A PROFESSIONAL LOOKING WEBSITE

1. INTRODUCTION

The visual elements of the website should assist users to understand the content, structure and navigation. Design should not be used to entertain, but to make the website informative and professional. Design elements must add meaning, clarification or context and should not distract from the content.

2. MAIN PRINCIPLES WHEN DESIGNING A WEBSITE

2.1 Organise information effectively on pages

- Display similar or related elements together and ensure that they have a similar look.
- Display important items at the top of pages.
- Highlight important information or concepts.
- Do not clutter pages.
- Eliminate horizontal scrolling.
- There must be visual contrast between different fonts, text blocks and the surrounding empty space.
- White space is an important part of web design and should be used to create a professional website, without lengthening pages without any benefit.
- Ensure visual consistency, including visual themes, layout, graphic elements, colours, backgrounds and typography.
- Use CSS (Cascading Style Sheets) to achieve consistency. With CSS, you can. Control the style and layout of multiple web pages.
- The simplest way to create layouts is by using tables in HTML. Tables allow for flexibility when you design the website's screen layout. Tables give you control over the layout of pages and make it possible to define the areas of pages, align and position elements on a web page, create margins, or format text and images. Tables used for page design should not have table borders. Rather use spacing, alignment and indents to delimit tabular information.

- Do not use frames:
  - o Frames split a page into two or more sections that are identified separately by the browser.
  - o Users will not be able to bookmark framed pages, as all pages display the same URL.
  - o Search engines have trouble with frames. When the page is picked up, it will display without the frames, meaning the user has no reference to where the page came from.
  - o Many browsers cannot print framed pages properly.
  - o Some browsers will recognise the frames itself but will not display the content from all sections of the page.
  - o There may be copyright implications for websites that open external links in a frame. It may be construed that such a website displays the linked content as its own.

2.2   Graphics, images and animation

- Graphic design elements should be limited and used carefully. It must increase the effectiveness of the website and help users to focus on the content.
- Images, video, audio and animation must have a specific purpose.
- Limit animation, flashing or scrolling text and meaningless graphics, logos, symbols and icons – they may make websites busy and will draw the user's eye away from the content. When used, it should not distract from the content of the page. Scrolling text should not loop indefinitely and the file size should be as small as possible.
- Big blocks of text will be difficult for users to read. Use visual elements to help users to read and navigate the site. Use strategically placed lines or graphic elements to break a long page into manageable portions.
- Limit the use of images to convey textual information. However, if you use text as part of an image, make sure that it is clear (not blurred) and that the colour contrasts well with the background.
- Images must have an alternate text description (alt or title attributes):

- o The alt attribute is a required element for images and can only be used for image tags because its specific purpose is to describe images. The alt attribute is designed to be an alternative text description for images. Alt text displays before the image is loaded in the major browsers and instead of the image in text-based browsers like Lynx. For large, complex images that cannot be represented by an alt attribute, include a link to another HTML page with the relevant data.
  - o In contrast, you can use the title attribute for almost any page element, but it is not required. Use it to describe links, tables, individual table rows and other structural HTML elements. The title attribute is more versatile than the alt attribute and many search engine ranking algorithms read the text in title attributes as regular page content.
- Image formats: use gif or png for images and jpeg for photos.
- Optimise images to ensure that pages load as fast as possible:
  - o Keep images as small as possible to reduce download times. A good rule of thumb is to try to keep individual images no larger than 250kb.
  - o Where relevant, represent big images by thumbnails that link to the larger image. The thumbnails must communicate some information to the user and be clear.
- Do not resize images in HTML or CSS. Resize images in an image editor and use the smaller image.
- Do not use too many small images on a page.
- The website should be usable with graphics turned off.
- Do not use graphics for bullets.

2.3   Visibility and readability of text

- Text must be clearly visible and easy to read.
- The typography must contribute to the legibility of the text.
- Do not use busy backgrounds.
- Do not put important information in a background.
- There must be a contrast between the text and the background. Black text on a white background will give high contrast, but may be too harsh. Rather consider light greys or muted pastel shades for backgrounds or minor elements. You could use style sheets to provide a high contrast option to the regular colours for the user with poor eyesight to choose.
- Do not use bright and highly saturated colours for backgrounds.

2.4   Fonts and case

- Do not use too many typefaces. This will destroy the homogeneous character of the website.
- Use standard sentence case for text. Upper case is difficult to read. Only use upper case to attract attention.
- Use sentence case for headings and menu entries, with only the first word and proper nouns capitalised.
- Use different font sizes for different levels of headings.
- Use the same font and font size for similar aspects on the website, e.g. all page headings must be the same size (h1 in the style sheet).

2.5   Alignment, spacing and length of text lines

- Left aligned text will support reading speed.
- Spacing between lines should be equal to or slightly greater than the height of the characters themselves. Use "line-height normal".
- Text lines should be shorter than the full width of the screen. It should be no wider than the user's comfortable eye span.

2.6   Colour

- Use colour conservatively, as too many colours clutter the screen. Limit the design to a small number of consistently applied colours.
- Use the colours chosen for text links and visited links consistently throughout the website.
- Do not use warm colours for backgrounds.
- Make sure that there is a big contrast between background and foreground colours. This will increase readability.

2.7   Document formats

- The primary file format on the website should be HTML. PDF can be used for very long documents or documents where it is important to retain the layout.
- Provide support for downloading PDF documents. Indicate when a document is in PDF format, provide the file size (e.g. 700kb) and a link to instructions on how to download PDF documents.
- Inform the user of long download times (e.g. big PDF documents).
- Public websites should not contain e.g. Word, Excel or PowerPoint documents, as only the users who have these programs on their computers will be able to open them.

2.8   Browsers and screen resolution

- Design for browsers that are used most often. These include Internet Explorer, Firefox, Chrome, Safari and Opera. Design for at least five versions back, as many users will still use the older versions.
- Currently, a screen resolution of 1024 pixels is recommended and mostly used.

2.9   Page length

- Avoid web pages that appear complete on a small screen while important links are hidden below the fold.
- Avoid long pages meant to be read online.
- Avoid long menu pages that require the user to scroll.

2.10   Design for print

- Design the website to allow users to both read documents online and to print them. Design pages so that they can be legibly printed out on standard printers. Long documents that had been divided for online reading must also be available as one document (e.g. in PDF format) for printing purposes.
- Do not use site covers or splash pages. It creates difficulties for search engines and waste users' time, as they have to make an additional click to be able to view the content options available to them.

2.11   Tables

To ensure that pages with tables are usable, the following are recommended:

- Display tables consistently throughout the website.
- Clearly label information in tables. Distinguish table headings from table content, e.g. by colour or shading.
- Keep the number of columns to a minimum.
- Do not use background images in tables – it may decrease text visibility.
- Include summary information for all tables.

2.12   Optimise web pages

Optimise your pages to ensure they load as fast as possible. There are a number of things that can be done, many of which falls within the spectrum of the web administrator's responsibilities. However, a few can be done by the content manager or during development:

- Rather combine scripts and style sheets than use a lot of different ones.
- Use image sprites. Image sprites are a collection of images that can be combined into one that is used with CSS.
- Avoid redirects.
- Avoid frames. If you use frames, the browser has to request at least three HTML pages instead of just one.
- If you use tables, avoid nested tables or tables within tables.

2.13   Optimise your HTML

Although the HTML forms a small part of the page, you can optimise it by removing all unnecessary tags and comments. The more HTML tags on a page, the more complicated it will be and the slower it will load. HTML tables used for layout add many more tags than a comparable CSS layout.

Other tips:

- Link to pages and images within the website using a relative path (/images/events/sona/son.jpg) instead of an absolute path (http://www.gov.za/images/events/sona/son.jpg). The link using the absolute path adds additional characters that are not required for links to images and pages on the same web server.
- Avoid an empty image src (img src=" ") – this causes the browser to make another request that will result in no real content.
- Limit meta tags to the ones critical for the page.
- Limit content for meta tags (e.g. description and keywords) to 200 characters or less.

2.14   Speed up your CSS

- Put CSS in the document head and use the link tag to point to an external CSS style sheet.
- Combine external CSSs so that you link to only one external CSS style sheet.
- Remove unused CSS styles.

2.15   Speed up your JavaScript

JavaScript and Ajax can make pages slower, especially if you let them load right away. Most scripts are not used until the entire page is loaded, and if they load first it will makes the page appear slower. It is therefore best to put scripts last on the web page to prevent them from blocking other elements.

You can also:

- Combine external JavaScript so that you have just one external script file that contains all your scripts.
- Remove all extra spaces to minimise your JavaScript.
- Make Ajax cacheable. Add an expires or cache-control header to your Ajax content.

SECTION 8: DEVELOPING OR REVAMPING A WEBSITE

Before a website can be developed, proper planning is vital

1. INTRODUCTION

A departmental website provides a snapshot of the department and is an important marketing and communication 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.

Departments must allow enough time to plan and conceptualise the website, as this is the most important step in the development of a website. It is easier to plan the website properly from the beginning than to make changes later.

The conceptualisation of the website is a creative and consultative process where all relevant stakeholders must contribute. It is crucial to involve managers of all business units in the conceptualisation process, to ensure that all their requirements are considered from the start of the project. Other important role-players are e.g. Communications, Marketing, Information Technology (IT) and Knowledge Management.

The following broad steps normally form part of a website development project:

2. DETERMINE THE PURPOSE AND AIM OF THE WEBSITE

A department should have a clear purpose for its online initiative to ensure it is a success. The expected benefits of the website should be determined, for example why the department should have a website, what will be its objectives, and what value will it add for the department.

The department must have a clear understanding of how this initiative will fit into the priorities of the South African government. The website should also be in line with the department's communication, marketing and other relevant strategies.

Broadly, the purpose of a government website is to:

- deliver current, factual and official information about the department and its functions, programmes, campaigns, services and products
- provide the latest news about the department's activities, events and programmes

- publish information about the department to support its strategic goals and meet legislative requirements
- provide a vehicle for interaction between the department and the public
- create visibility for the department and promote the department's image
- market the department to internal and external stakeholders.

3. IDENTIFY THE WEBSITE'S AUDIENCE

The department should determine who the target audiences for its website are. An understanding of the audience may 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), what functionalities will be included, and how information will be structured.

4. DEVELOP A CONTENT PLAN

A crucial element of an effective government website is good content. You should identify and/or create suitable content **before** the website is developed.

A useful way to do this is to conduct an information audit/inventory within all the business 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. Select information that supports the purpose of the website and that will satisfy the requirements of all intended audience groups.

This should result in a content plan, specifying what is available and where, what content should be generated additionally for the website, and how often each type of content will have to be updated.

An important principle is to do short and long term planning – plan for the ideal situation, even if you are not going to implement the full spectrum of content immediately.

NB! When you develop the website's content plan, you must adhere to the requirements for minimum content that should be available on the website as specified in Section 2 par. 2 of this document.

5. A STATIC OR DYNAMIC WEBSITE?

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 users browse the website, the pages that appear in their 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. You can update such a website yourself using a content management system (CMS).

When you consider this option, you should keep the following in mind:

- All browsers should be able to read the dynamic pages.
- The system should be simple to manage.
- 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.

Refer to Section 11 for guidelines on developing or selecting a content management system for your website.

6. STRUCTURE INFORMATION

The first step after identifying information that should be published on the website is to break the information down into logical and digestible units.

Prioritise the potential content by identifying what information the public will request most often, what information supports the government department's programmes and what information is largely static and archival.

Once you have determined a logical set of priorities, identify the main information categories, and thereafter the subcategories for each of these. Build the hierarchies from the most important or general concepts down to the most specific or optional topics. Refer to Section 2 par. 2 for categories and subcategories that must be available on all departmental websites.

Refer to Section 3 for best practice principles to structure content logically for your website.

7. MONITORING AND EVALUATION

It is necessary to evaluate the website before implementation and thereafter at regular intervals. Reasons for this include:

- websites are dynamic and constantly growing
- the department's strategy/business or user needs might change
- information and communication (ICT) technologies continuously develop and improve.

Evaluation methodologies that may be considered include one or a combination of:

- analysing and managing user feedback
- monitoring and analysing website user statistics – e.g. look at the most accessed pages to determine what content is used most often
- usability testing
- heuristic review (evaluation of website against quality criteria and principles)
- interviews with users
- conducting online surveys
- focus-group testing.

SECTION 9: MANAGING AND MAINTAINING WEBSITE CONTENT

1. INTRODUCTION

After a website has been published (once a website is live), it must be properly maintained and updated. Users expect government information to be comprehensive, accurate and available online as soon as it is released in the public domain. They lose confidence in a website when it is not properly maintained, when new information is not added quickly, when obsolete information is not removed, when there are grammatical errors, or when the website remains static.

The content management process aims to ensure that information on the website is accurate and posted without delay.

2. A SUCCESSFUL WEBSITE REQUIRES A TEAM EFFORT

The departmental website forms an integral part of the department's communication and marketing effort.

A successful website is the result of a team effort. Different role-players should be involved in developing and maintaining the website. This includes all business units, with the communications unit and the IT unit the lead players.

2.1 The role of all business units

The information on the website is the corporate responsibility of the whole department. All business units must take ownership of the information on the website and give active input.

It is recommended that different units appoint content coordinators 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 coordinators and/or specialist writers should be responsible to write new information or rewrite existing information for the website.

2.2   The role of the communications unit

The departmental website should ideally be managed by a website content manager in the communication unit of a department. The website manager should be responsible for overall planning, leading and coordinating website content activities, the overall information architecture and final quality assurance of the website.

The website content manager should:

- be responsible for the overall management and coordination of the website
- plan and manage the content plan
- plan and manage the content architecture, navigation framework and look and feel of the website
- ensure that usability principles are followed
- liaise with line function units to ensure that the website is updated with accurate and current information
- write content for the website
- edit website content
- maintain the website
- do quality assurance of the website
- market and promote the website
- monitor traffic on the website (refer to Section 9, par, 8)
- respond to queries about the website.
- post and upload information to the website.

Ideally, these functions could be the responsibility of different people, e.g.

- An information specialist (information architecture).
- Usability specialist (optimal user interface).
- A web author (compiling and uploading information on the website).
- Web graphic designer (responsible for visual impact and designing graphics). Please note that the designer should understand the specific requirements of design for the web, which differs from print design).

However, when departments have resource constraints, different roles could reside in the same person.

2.3   The role of the IT unit

The IT unit should be responsible to:

- ensure that there is a stable IT infrastructure
- manage the hosting and housing of the website, monitor the website and ensure that is always available (webserver administrator)
- provide technical support to the communications unit
- do web development (develop dynamic components and applications)
- do database development (develop database applications).

The webmaster is the person who looks after the website and among others:

- maintain the correct functioning of the website
- monitor the website's security
- make any technical changes required
- manage the e-mail accounts
- manage the gathering of website statistics
- do regular backups of the website
- occasionally solve the technical problems that every website has.

3. COMPREHENSIVENESS OF CONTENT

Information on the website must be comprehensive – all information about the department must be available on the website. Section 2 of this document specifies the scope of content that is required. Information about each of these topics must be comprehensive so that users will be able to get a comprehensive picture of the department and its functions, programmes, campaigns, activities, services and products.

4. ACCURACY AND AUTHORITY

Information on the website must be factually correct. It must be without grammatical, language and spelling mistakes.

To strengthen the credibility of information, add source indications:

- Where information originates from sources such as books, journal articles or other types of publications, include adequate citations to these sources to confirm the accuracy and origin of the information.

- Speeches and interviews must display the name and portfolio of the speaker or person interviewed, the name of the relevant government department, and the date when the speech was delivered or interview held.
- Statements and advisories must display the name of the relevant government department, the date of release and contact details for more information. If the statement is issued in the name of a person, e.g. the director-general of a department, that person's name and portfolio should be added.
- Information about events must indicate the date, time, venue and contacts where more information can be obtained. Any additional information (e.g. a relevant website, press release or other information) will add value.

Do quality control of information before it is posted, as well as on a regular basis thereafter to prevent any compromise to the integrity of information on the website. In particular, check that all links added are still relevant.

5. CURRENCY AND TIMELINESS

5.1 The website must be current

To ensure that users view the website as an authoritative and reliable source of information about the department, the website must always be current and up to date. The latest information must be available, while old and irrelevant information must be removed.

Therefore, information has to be checked and updated on a regular basis.

The website manager should determine upfront what information needs to be updated and how often it should be updated. Implement ongoing improvements and measures and procedures to ensure regular updates.

5.2 Follow best practices

Follow these practices to demonstrate that your website is current:

- Make time-sensitive information (e.g. advisories, statements, vacancies, bids, announcements of events,) available in real-time. These should all contain a date of issue or of expiry.
- Ensure that the most current information is available on the website (e.g. contact information, organisational structure, functions, cost of services, latest editions of products).

- Make information released to the public in printed form available online at the same time it is released in the public domain.
- Each meaningful information item must display the date when it was compiled (above the footer).
- Remove obsolete information from the website. Only keep information that is useful and relevant on the website. This does not mean that older information should not be available. The criterion is that the information should still be valid.
- Remove or update broken links continuously. There are tools available to assist you to check the links on your website, e.g. the W3C link checker (http://validator.w3.org/checklink). If you have a static website, you can check links with an HTML editor such as Dreamweaver.
- Update the "What's new" page/area on the website regularly. Many users may go to this section first and may not return to the website if this information is not updated. Date each entry on this page with the date of release (not date of uploading) to enable users to determine the currency.
- Update the site map when you add new sections to the website or when you change the information architecture.
- Include a publishing or delivery date for all documents, publications, speeches and media statements posted on the website.

5.3   Manage interactivity

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 or other social media, it must be moderated and managed well.

6. MONITORING TRAFFIC FLOW

Departments must monitor traffic flow and areas of interest to the users of their websites and of user feedback, and then use this information to improve the information on the website.

The following statistics are useful for this purpose:

- number of users (visitors)
- number of visits (unique visits)
- number of page impressions/views
- most frequently used pages
- least frequently used pages
- top entry pages
- top referring pages
- successful requests
- unsuccessful requests.

You can use tools such as Google analytics, Awstats and Statcounter.

SECTION 10: SEARCH ENGINE OPTIMISATION (SEO) – DRIVE VISITORS TO YOUR WEB PAGES

1. INTRODUCTION

Search engine optimisation (SEO) is the process of improving the visibility of a website page to search engines through natural (unpaid) search results. In general, the higher a website is ranked on the search results page, and more frequently a website appears in the search results list, the more visitors it will receive through the search engines.

2. GOOD CONTENT

When search engines determine a website's ranking, they focus on the actual content they find on a website. You must have high-quality content that is usable:

- The website must have unique text content on every page. Duplicate content can result in a penalty.
- Stick with one clear idea for each web page. People like communication that is clear and single-minded; so do search engines, who find it easier to rank a webpage that focuses on a particular theme than one that covers many themes.
- Content should be informative but to the point.
- Content should be frequently updated.
- Use different types of content, not only text e.g. audio, video, image, PDF, pictures with the same message. You can repurpose the same content in different ways.
- All pages are important, not only the home page.
- The most important information must be in:
  - the first two words in each sentence
  - the first two sentences in each paragraph
  - the first two paragraphs on each page.
- The following types of content will attract search engines (and users):
  - Blogs
  - Polls, interactive votes or surveys
  - RSS feed
  - Expert interviews
  - Case studies
  - Q&A or FAQ
  - How to's
  - Checklists.

- Write according to plain language principles. Search engines prefer content with a Flesch-Kincaid level 8 readability score (equivalent of an 8th grader). You can test your website's level at http:www.online.utility.org/english/readability_test_and_improve.jsp (see also section 5, of this document for plain writing guidelines.
- Do not make spelling mistakes.
- Web pages should be accessible to all search bots. SEO can be compromised when you use frames and images instead of text and JavaScript.
- Use a well thought out internal link architecture that promotes strategic pages. Fewer levels are better for search engines – the nearer the file is to the root directory, the better.
- Encourage links from authoritative websites to the main pages of your website.
- Link to authoritative websites from main pages in your website.
- Use the correct server response codes (such as 301 permanent redirects) to indicate that content has moved).
- Use descriptive names when naming pages or images. A page named tb-day.htm will make more sense than event12.htm. In the same way, an image named tb-day-poster.gif makes more sense than poster3.gif. Directories should always have descriptive names such as" jobs" or "events".

3. KEYWORDS

Although keywords as part of the meta information are no longer used by all search engines, keywords remain important. The website must have a select group of keywords used often and in contexts that will benefit SEO.

Search engines essentially focus on the words that people search for. If you want your website to be successful at being found by users who search, you must use their keywords, not the department's.

The following practices will ensure better search engine rankings:

- Use the keyword in the title tag. Each page on your website must have a unique title tag.

- Use SEO-friendly URLs whenever possible:
  - Include the keyword (e.g. http://www.info.gov.za/aboutgovt/budget.htm works better than dynamic URLs such as http://www.info.gov.za/speech/DynamicAction?pageid=461&sid=23768&tid=51111).
  - Hyphenated words in a URL are read as two words, but words separated by underscore may be read as one word. If you are creating new pages, use hyphens rather than underscore.
- Use keywords in heading tags, especially <h1>.
- Use only one h1 heading tag on a page.
- Each page must have a unique <h1> heading tag. However, you can use several levels of heading tags (h2, h3, etc.).
- Use keywords in the description tag.
- The description tag must be unique for each page of your website.
- Use keywords in the alt tag description.
- File names should contain a keyword-rich description of the element (image, video, PDF, etc.).
- Write out the keywords rather than using acronyms.
- Lead with your top keywords. Search engines give words closer to the beginning of the sentence a higher importance. Start sentences with your users' most important words.
- Use phrases and word combinations rather than single words. People are increasingly searching with two to three words because that is returning better results.
- Repeat your top keywords. As a general rule, you should repeat your most important keywords in both your heading and summary, and roughly three times every hundred words thereafter.
- Use bold to highlight text. Search engines give content that is bolded an extra value. **BUT** don't use bold throughout your content.
- Write quality links. Do not use low value (and inaccessible) link phrases such as "click here", or "read more". You can use "read more" if the link was used higher up in the text using keywords.
- Get your keywords and keyword phrases into your links.

However, always remember that you write for your user, not for the search engine. The content must engage the reader. It must be compelling and clear.

4. METADATA

All data on the website requires metadata in order to be searched effectively and aggregated by categories:

```
<head>
<title>South Africa Government Online</title>
<meta name="author" content="South Africa Government">
<meta name="description" content="This is the web portal for
the South African government. It provides information on
government activities.">
<meta name="keywords" content="South Africa government,
government leaders, speeches, legal documents">
</head>
```

SECTION 11: DEVELOPING OR SELECTING A CONTENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM FOR YOUR WEBSITE

1. INTRODUCTION

A web content management system is a software system that provides website authoring, collaboration, and administration tools designed to allow users with little knowledge of web programming or mark-up languages to create and manage website content with relative ease.

When looking for a CMS, list all your requirements. These may not be the same for every website.

2. CORE FUNCTIONALITY

A CMS is used to create, delete, edit and organise pages. Changes to the website (content or look and feel) are made once and then displays on all the relevant pages. A CMS also makes it easier to interlink pages on your website.

3. REQUIREMENTS FOR A CMS

3.1   WYSIWIG editor

If you add text to a website, a WYSIWYG editor is essential. The editor should also be able to handle images and downloadable files (such as PDFs) and provide extras such as forcing the user to add an alt tag to the image. Users should not have to use HTML to edit content. Users must be able to create links from within the text to internal or external website pages and add anchors within the content.

Useful features are a spellchecker and the ability to edit tables.

The WYSIWYG editor must not allow the CMS user to change colours or font style, as these should be determined by style sheets.

3.2   Search

Especially for a bigger website, at least a simple search built into the CMS is useful.

3.3   Customisation

The content management system should allow flexibility in the way content is retrieved and presented. For example, can you retrieve news stories in reverse chronological order? Can you display events in a calendar? Is it possible to extract the most recently added content items and display them on the home page?

3.4   User interaction

The CMS should allow posting forms and collecting responses. The CMS user should be able to customise fields without technical expertise and specify an e-mail address for the results.

The CMS should allow for sending e-mail newsletters listing e.g. the latest additions to the website. It should include news feeds and RSS, as well as social media integration.

3.5   Roles and permissions

Even if the website has only one person who uploads content now, it may change in future and then you need control over who can change what. HR may need to be able to post job advertisements but not add content to the home page. This requires a content management system that supports permissions.

The CMS should allow for authenticated security and access rights for different types of users and user roles based on responsibilities and business rules governing each role. Access should be via authenticated user names and passwords. The content manager should be able to specify whether users can edit certain pages or even entire sections of the website.

Default roles are: author (capturer), editor and approver. Describe what each role's functions must be. More than one user should not be able to work on the same content simultaneously (use check in/check out).

3.6   Workflow management

Workflow is the process of creating cycles of sequential and parallel tasks that must be undertaken in the CMS. For example, one or many content creators or authors can submit a story, but it is not published until the editor cleans it up and the approver approves it.

3.7   Versioning

Being able to revert to a previous version of a page allows you to quickly recover if something is posted by accident.

3.8   Multilingual support

Departments could in future be required to post information on the website in more than one official language. The CMS should therefore provide multilingual support. It should cater for special characters/diacritics in languages such as Afrikaans, Venda, Sesotho sa Leboa and Setswana (e.g. ṱ, ḓ, ê, ë, š).

3.9   IT architecture

Consult you IT section to make sure that the CMS you choose fit into you IT architecture.

3.10   User statistics and generation of reports

A CMS should be able to generate reports on its use such as audit trails: recording a sequence of actions that occur to any given body of content within the CMS (author; editor; approver; publisher; deletions; editing; declining content; date published; date modified).

3.11   Design/presentation/layout

The content generated by the CMS must be displayed within the current look and feel of the website, controlled by style sheets.

It is important that content should be separated from presentation to enable easy changes to the look and feel.

3.12   SEO built in

Fields in the CMS should support search engine optimisation,

Seven metadata fields most often used in a CMS are:

- title
- keywords
- description
- publish date
- review date
- expiry date
- author.

Some of the information such as author could be created on log-in, and would not necessarily be a field when adding content.

Information in databases should be accessible to external search engines such as Google.

3.13   Extras

Also note the following:

- The CMS should create a site map automatically and update it whenever a page is added.
- The CMS should be able to display one content item on different pages.
- The CMS user should be able to edit content without it disappearing from the live website.
- It should be possible to change one specific URL/link over the entire or part of the website.
- Scheduling of publish date and time (start publish date and time; end publish date and time) for each content item is very useful.
- It must be possible for the CMS user to maintain every page – dynamic and static – without having to go back to the developer.

SECTION 12: CONCLUSION

1. This document guides all national government departments to develop, manage and maintain their websites and to assist them to have websites that are standard across government. All government departments must use this document as reference when developing and maintaining their websites.

2. The document may be amended by GCIS when deemed necessary. Departments will be informed about amendments.

3. For more information, please contact:

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