

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

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1. Introduction

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

2. What is “digital spend”?

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

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

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

What digital or technology spend does not require approval?

Technology is defined as any internal facing service delivered by government for government and there are separate spend rules for it that are managed within FCDO.

The following costs do not require digital spend approval:

- any systems or online tools that are internally facing to FCDO
- IT hardware and software
- recruitment and training costs for digital/web contractors and associated expenses
- social media activities (which we would expect to be free)
- content production for websites or knowledge hubs.

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

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

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

If your total digital development costs are below £10,000 please send an email to the [Digital Service Team](#) providing a brief overview of what the digital element is, the cost and the partner or supplier, in lieu of completing a full proposition form.

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

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

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

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

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

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

How to get advice and approval

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

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

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

- who their partners and suppliers are
- how they will design around users' needs
- what delivery approach they will take
- what it will cost (see section 6 below).

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

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

4. Meeting the UK Government's Digital Standard

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

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



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

5. Adhering to the Principles for Digital Development

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



They are based on and closely match the UK Government's design principles.

In any new procurement, **FCDO requires our partners and suppliers to set out how they will adhere to the relevant principles.** This will be clearly stated in the Invitation to Tender. There is practical information and advice on the [Digital Principles website](#).

The Principles are guidelines, not rules, and FCDO requires any spend propositions to show evidence on how each of the Principles has been considered.

6. Completing a digital spend proposition form

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

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

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

7. Restrictions on mobile apps and web domains

i) Mobile apps

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

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

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

ii) URLs/domains

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

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

8. Timing for seeking spend approval

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

We recommend you engage early with FCDO's [Digital Service Team](#) to benefit from their expert advice and guidance.



Digital Spending Proposition

Guidance for FCDO Staff

The purpose of this form is to seek approval for the development and delivery of digital elements of externally facing admin and programme work.

Once the proposal has been submitted, the Digital Spend Team will review and respond within **3 working days**.

Digital Spend Checklist

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

Before seeking Digital Spend approval

- Review the Government [Digital Service Technology Code of Practice \(TCoP\)](#)
- Become familiar with the [Programme Operating Framework Digital Guide](#)
- Carry out user research to identify the needs of your user base, and determine if your digital tool will meet these needs.
- Reach out to the [Digital Service Team](#) with a short description of the need for a digital element and what that element may be. This allows us to give you advice and guidance at the earliest possible opportunity.
- Share our [Guidance for Suppliers and Partners](#) and ensure that your partners and suppliers are following it throughout the lifetime of the programme.
- Familiarise yourself with the [Principles for Digital Development](#), which are a global standard for doing development which FCDO expects its partners and suppliers to adhere to.

Getting Digital Spend approval

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

After Digital Spend approval

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

The Proposition

Section A

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

| Partner contact (if known) | |
|----------------------------|--|
| Name | |
| Organisation | |
| Email address | |

Section B

| Programme details | |
|--|--|
| Programme title | |
| Component ID | |
| Total programme value | |
| Is this a procurement, an accountable grant or an MOU? | |
| Title of business case and Vault ID | |
| Aims of the programme (250 words max) | |

Section C

| | Proposition details | | | | | |
|---|--|----------|----------|----------------|-------|--------------------|
| 1 | Name and short description of digital element | | | | | |
| 2 | What is the user need for the digital element? <i>(There should be at least three user stories in the following format:</i> “I am a...” “I need to...” “So that...” <i>)</i> | | | | | |
| 3 | What is the anticipated cost of the digital proposition? (table format preferred) <i>This includes:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>User research</i> • <i>Design</i> • <i>Development</i> • <i>Hosting</i> • <i>Maintenance</i> • <i>Software License</i> <i>This does not include:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Hardware costs</i> • <i>Production of content</i> | Example: | | | | |
| | | Activity | Day Rate | Number of Days | Total | Grand Total |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |
| | | | | | | |

| | | |
|---|---|--|
| 4 | <p>How will this be designed and implemented?</p> <p><i>You should be implementing in phases – discovery, alpha, beta and live – as this allows you to get feedback at each stage and make any required changes.</i></p> <p>(300 words max)</p> | |
| 5 | <p>Describe how you will adhere to each of the nine Principles for Digital Development.</p> | |
| 6 | <p>What have you done to ensure value for money on this digital spend?</p> | |
| 7 | <p>What is the proposed URL of your website (if known)?</p> <p><i>HTTPS should be used for all new websites. HTTPS encrypts any communications sent between your browser and the website for heightened security.</i></p> | |

| | | |
|----|---|--|
| 8 | <p>How will you ensure that your website meets WCAG 2.1 AA accessibility standards?</p> | |
| 9 | <p>Specify the key milestones associated with the proposition, such as target start and end dates.</p> | |
| 10 | <p>How will the digital output be monitored and evaluated through the life of the project so it remains fit for purpose, relevant and demonstrates value for money?</p> <p><i>You should consider how you will include this as part of your annual reviews.</i></p> | |
| 11 | <p>a) Who will own the digital output at the end of programme, including intellectual property?</p> <p>b) Who will ensure the digital continuity of any website URLs or platforms?</p> | |

| | | |
|----|---|--|
| 12 | <p>a) If your programme is producing data how will you make it open?</p> <p><i>Open data is data that anyone can access, use or share.</i></p> <p>b) If your programme is producing resources, where will you make them freely available?</p> | |
|----|---|--|

Please return the completed form to the Digital Spend team at [Digital Service Team](#).