

The background of the top half of the page is a dark, textured grid pattern. A large, light-colored arrow points from the bottom left towards the top right, following the diagonal lines of the grid.

Five Ways to Improve Web Forms in the Public Sector

Providing you with:

- ✓ Recommendations to increase conversions and more
- ✓ Examples of cross-industry best practice
- ✓ References for further reading



Introduction

The importance of the web form as an online communication tool cannot be overstated. It turns a one-way flow of information on your website into a two-way dialogue with your end-users and enables them to complete tasks which are more often than not inextricably tied to the success of your organisation (including registering as a user, reporting problems, or downloading important information such as calendars and guides). However, it's rare that a visitor is going come to your site specifically to complete one of your forms - instead they likely view it as a barrier that must be overcome in order to achieve their desired goal(s) so making the process as easy as possible is imperative.

An effective web form is made up of lots of different elements, most of which vary according to the nature of the form and the type of device being used to access it. However, no matter what your form's purpose or context it's critically important they're optimised for maximum usability and accessibility, particularly as audiences come to expect all their interactions to be as seamless as the examples set by leading organisations in the public sector and beyond.

This white paper therefore looks at examples from both inside and outside the sector to identify what makes a great web form. We share five pieces of best practice advice with which you can start to improve the User Experience (UX) of your own forms; helping ensure you effectively serve the needs of your users and so drive a reduction in helpdesk calls, increase public perception, and much more.



Justify the inclusion of each form field

One of the most important things to bear in mind when designing a form is length. Keep your forms as short as possible by only including input fields that are absolutely necessary and remember that for every form you include on your site your users have to: (1) read and understand what is required from them; (2) decide on a response; and (3) input that response. Regarding these considerations and the potential cognitive burden of each additional field Luke Wroblewski notes: “the best way to speed up that process is not to ask the question at all [if it is not of immediate relevance]”. Studies have confirmed a strong correlation too between fewer questions and higher form completion rates (see Brian Moloney, [“Further Reading”](#)); a pattern supported by our own experience of testing at Box UK.

This factor is especially important for public sector organisations, who today often have to provide help and advice on a wide range of subjects, allow users to manage bills and payments online, and provide a means for users to give timely feedback. Increasing the usability - and accessibility - of your forms makes it much easier to encourage more users (many of which may be unfamiliar with using online tools) to turn to your website to complete these tasks, rather than picking up the phone.

As an example, the signup form on Basingstoke Council’s website contains many mandatory contact information fields as well as requiring the user to enter their email address twice. There is also a CAPTCHA test, further adding to the clutter of the form and the annoyance of the user. While capturing all these fields may deliver greater value to the council’s marketing and analytics teams, being asked for so much information may be considered unnecessary or, even worse, invasive and overly personal by some end-users.

Figure 1: Basingstoke Council's joining form, featuring a lot of fields and CAPTCHA functionality

Your email address will be used to sign in to My Basingstoke. Please ensure that you enter it correctly.

If you already have a My Basingstoke account, please [sign in](#) instead.

Sign up
* = Required field

Title*

First name*

Last name*

Search for address*
Enter a postcode, street name or house name etc.

Telephone numbers* *At least one daytime contact number is required.*

Home

Work

Mobile

Email address*

Confirm email address*


Password*

Confirm password*
Your password must be between 6 and 20 characters long. It must not be "password" or your email address.

Secret question*

Secret answer*

Please enter the number* shown in the image below *To protect our system from automated abuse we ask that you please enter the number shown in the image below. If the image is unreadable please click 'Change image' to generate another.*



This is by no means an uncommon mistake to make and often a better approach is to try and capture this data at a different point in the user's journey (if it's actually required). For example, in a registration form we tested for a client (working outside the public sector), some fields were moved to the confirmation page and others to the 'My Account' profile settings. This new strategy not only increased the form's conversion rate, but also provided the client with more (and better quality) marketing data - with users now in a positive frame of

mind (rather than frustrated by what they perceived as 'unnecessary' questions) they were more inclined to tell us about how they found the site, etc.

Figure 2: example newsletter registration form, complete with unnecessary fields

Personal details

Title: * House number / name: *

First name: * Address line 1: *

Surname: * Address line 2

Date of birth: * City: *

Sex: * Postcode: *

Marital status: * Country: *

Occupation: How did you find us?

Landline number: * Email address: *

Mobile number: Confirm email address: *

Figure 3: the previous form, now redesigned to include only those fields absolutely necessary in this instance

Your free monthly newsletter

All fields are optional unless stated otherwise.

Would you like a paper or electronic version?

We are happy to send you a paper newsletter by post or electronic copy via email.

Electronic Paper

Email address:

You will be able to unsubscribe at any time.

Tell us about yourself

Title: First name: Surname:

Contact number:

Allows us to report a problem with your order. [Add new number](#)

Remember

Your objective should be getting users through the form in as quick and pain-free a way as possible. If some fields are business-critical, but the reasons for this are unlikely to be immediately apparent, then be sure to explain to them why you need the information and how it will be used.

2

Tailor your forms with progressive disclosure

A second tip is to tailor your forms by hiding potentially unnecessary questions at the start of the user journey, instead revealing them through progressive disclosure only if and when needed. For example, if users are looking for a particular feedback form, visual clutter could be reduced by initially presenting a list of feedback types, then displaying only the relevant fields once a particular option is selected.

Progressive disclosure can also be used with reference to logged-in users who likely shouldn't have to answer the same questions as new users. In these cases form length should be kept to an absolute minimum by displaying details as static text and not including fields unlikely to need updating such as 'Date of birth' and 'Gender' (as in the following example).

Traditional approach

Figure 4: a traditional returning user form with pre-populated fields

Personal details

Title: Mr

Name: John Smith

Date of birth: 27 03 1982

Sex: Male Female

Marital status: Married

Preferred contact number: 01234 567891
[Add another number](#)

House name / number: 2

Street / road: Spring Lane

Town / city: Riverdale

Postcode: AB1 2CD

Account details

Email address: john@johnsmith.com Confirm email address: john@johnsmith.com

Password: ***** Confirm password: *****

Progressive disclosure

Figure 5: a progressive disclosure returning user form with hidden fields (clicking 'edit' would revert to the traditional display)

Personal details [edit](#)

Name: John Smith

Address: 2 Spring Lane, Riverdale AB1 2CD

Marital status: Married

Preferred contact number: 01234 567891

Account details [edit](#)

Email address: john@johnsmith.com

Password: *****

Remember

When using progressive disclosure, the idea is to reduce visual clutter, focus the user, and reduce the cognitive load, so start by looking for sections that require the user to select from a large list or questions that might be irrelevant due to previous answers. It's also a good idea to use brief transition animations when changing any part of the form in order to show the user that something has changed on the screen (e.g. a short 'slide out' animation).



Consider default form selections

A key ingredient of good usability is efficiency; making your form as streamlined as possible should therefore be a top priority. Setting form defaults can help, and there are typically two types: Member and Smart.

Member defaults

Already-registered visitors - for example those users that have already subscribed to a service - have usually already supplied their personal details, and in these cases most fields should be set by default based on this information.

Smart defaults

Smart defaults are based on the preferences of the majority of users. For example, using research and web analytics you can identify:

- Popular subjects for reporting (such as potholes, missed refuse collections, etc.)
- Communication preferences
- Common payment methods

Aligning your default selections with these findings should result in the majority of users having to make fewer clicks.

Users should of course be able override default selections, but attempting a 'best guess' about what they are likely to pick based on the choices of other users can help make the form easier to complete.

Here are some other examples:

Insight	Form default
85% of visitors to a form reported a noise complaint	Reason for complaint = 'Noise Pollution'
80% of user selected an annual payment	Payment option = 'annual'
95% of logged in users selected the school closest to their home address	First choice of school = closest to home address

Remember

Attempting a 'best guess' about what users are likely to pick can help make forms easier to complete but you must provide the ability to easily override default selections too.

4

Support your users

To enable users to complete your form quickly you should support them throughout the entire user journey. However, it's important to strike the right balance between excessive instruction that is likely to frustrate and insufficient support which can negatively affect completion rates.

An example of this is Vale of Glamorgan Council's reporting forms, which include a section at the top prompting the user to choose their desired option. Once selected, the form is tailored to display the necessary form elements for that particular option.

Figure 6: The Vale of Glamorgan Council's reporting forms have an opening question that helps tailor the form to the user and avoids using extra, unnecessary form elements



WM60 Missed Collection

Step 1 of 3 - Problem Description

Please select the appropriate category ?

Step 2 of 3 - Request Details

Was the waste/recycling out by 7am? ? *

Was the waste/recycling in the correct containers? ? *

Was the waste/recycling placed at the kerbside? ? *

Material type? ? *

Do you have an assisted collection? ? *

On Behalf Of?

Is this service for someone else? ? *

Similarly, membership institutions should consider how they present supporting information to make the corresponding form simpler. Both checklists and questionnaires can be used to achieve this; for example, listing the features and benefits of different membership levels will help ensure applicants choose the right option for their needs before they provide further details, while asking for some personal information (such as location, interests) upfront might help tailor the services and offers displayed.

Another obvious way to support your users is to make it easier for them to complete the required form fields. For example, Baymard Institute has developed a great ‘country selector’ tool that suggests countries based on real-time typing (see Baymard Institute, [“Further Reading”](#)). This is particularly useful for those in the United Kingdom given that ‘UK’, ‘Great Britain’, ‘Britain’, ‘Wales’, ‘Scotland’, ‘England’ and ‘Northern Ireland’ are all frequently searched for but often covered by a single selection in the form drop-down list.

Figure 7: Baymard Institute’s country selector

I live in

USA
United States

Remember

To comply with best practice, always look to include the following information alongside your form:

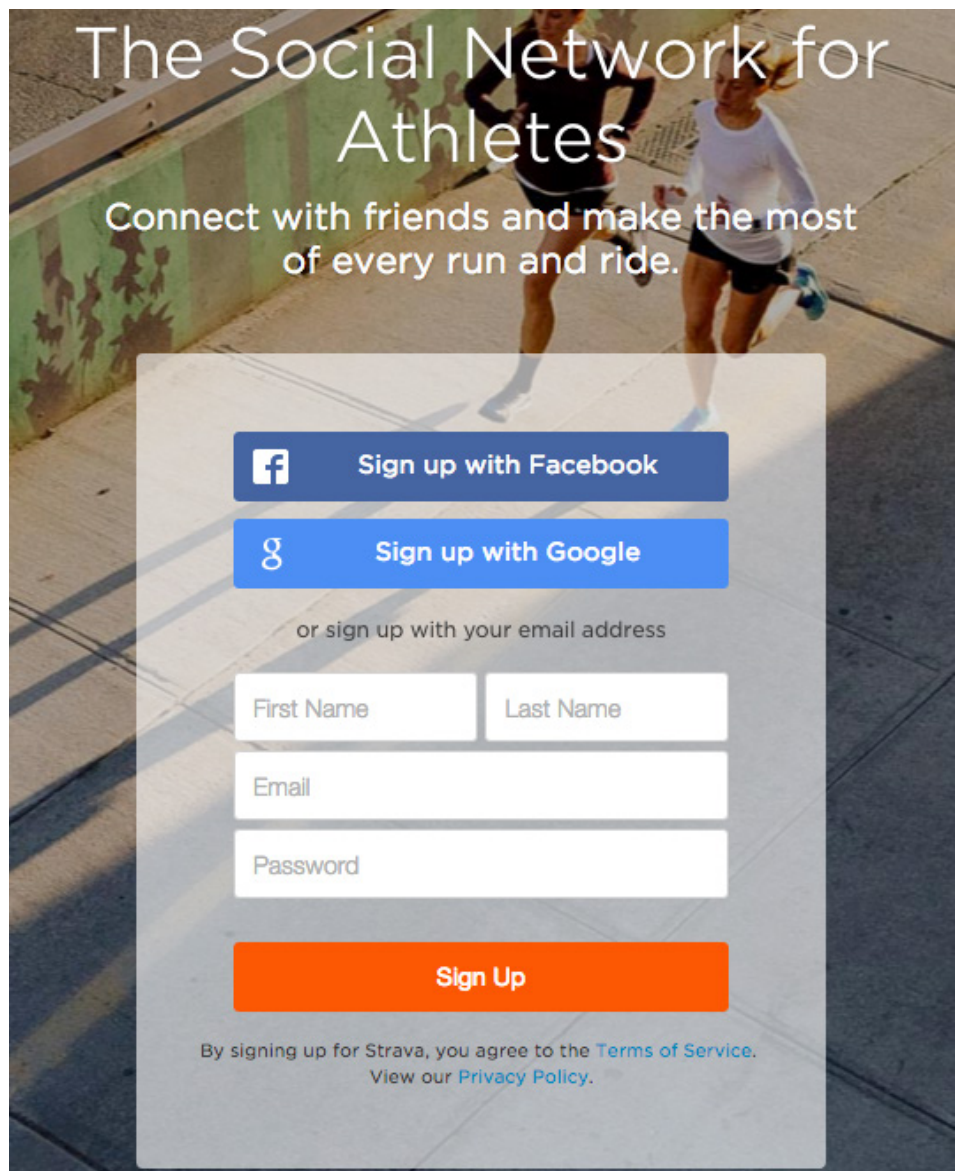
- Your contact/support details in case the user has a question
- Information on how long the form will take to complete and what details will be required
- Security and data protection policies
- A summary of previous selections if using a multi-step form

5

Enhance your forms with great visual design

While good visual design is important for your whole site, it's especially important when it comes to web forms. Psychologically-speaking, the better your forms look, the more forgiving the user will be of any minor inconveniences. In some cases, good visual design can even inject a small amount of joy into the form, endearing your users to it and increasing conversions.

Figure 8: Strava's sign-up form is a great example of visual design; visually pleasing with good usability and clear calls to action



The Social Network for Athletes

Connect with friends and make the most of every run and ride.

or sign up with your email address

By signing up for Strava, you agree to the [Terms of Service](#).
View our [Privacy Policy](#).

By following the tips already mentioned you should have a tighter, less intrusive form, but there is more that can be done. Contrast and readability, for example, are incredibly important - and both are affected by the aesthetic choices you make in your web design and branding. The contrast between text and the background is particularly pertinent for public sector websites, which will likely have to adhere to strict accessibility guidelines (although we would argue that contrast and readability is important to all users, not just those with conditions such as colour blindness). By optimising these elements to ensure your form is easy to scan by eye, you'll reduce cognitive-load on the user, helping decrease drop-off.

Ensure, too, that your labels are clear and bold so that the user's eye is able to easily scan the form. The label and the field should always be clearly associated with one another, using proximity to show association. There have been many studies, using eye-tracking and other methods, to try and determine the best way to present labels and fields to allow the user to work through a form as quickly as possible. In reality though, the way you should use labels will also depend on other factors, such as brand guidelines, the amount of horizontal space available, and the device you're targeting. The question of devices is particularly important as more and more millennials come of age and start using the online services you provide; this group is typically highly comfortable with using mobile devices to complete tasks online, to the extent that one in five millennials exclusively use these channels to access the internet (see Adam Lella, ["Further Reading"](#)).

Generally speaking, right-aligned labels are easy to parse, while top-aligned labels are easier again and will be more suitable for mobile devices. However, there may be times you would need to slow the user down so that they pay more attention to some fields (such as long reference numbers on tax forms, or card details when processing payment). Infield labels, while readable and space-efficient, disappear when the user types into the field, which is not ideal.

Figure 9: it's clear from this example from the DVLA, that the form is visually difficult to scan. Multiple border-lines, little white-space between elements, and help text placed below the labels all contribute to a cluttered form.

Driver & Vehicle Licensing Agency

Apply for a provisional licence

Step by step

Follow our easy step by step process to help you fill this form in quickly and accurately.

1. Registration
 - Register/Log on
 - Security of your data
 - Your details**
 - Your addresses
 - Security details
 - National Insurance number
 - UK passport number
 - Password reminders
2. Application
3. Card details
4. Submit
5. Confirmation

Your details

Please complete your personal details.

Please note: * indicates that an answer is required.

Title *
If you have a title that does not appear in the list, select 'Other'.

▼

...or other title
(only if you selected 'Other' above)

▼

Forename(s) *
Enter your first name, and any middle names.

▼

Surname *

▼

Gender *

▼

Date of birth *
Day: ▼ Month: ▼ Year: ▼

Country of birth *
United Kingdom ▼

If all the details are correct please click 'Next'.

Do not click the previous/next button more than once.

◀ Previous Cancel ✕ Next ▶

Need more help?

▶ Using your personal details

Figure 10: in this example, from Oxfordshire County Council, the fields are top-aligned, but unlike the previous example, this form is free of unnecessary clutter and distractions. This produces a simple-looking form that can be quickly read by the user; the downside, however, is that it uses more vertical space.

Start 2 3 Complete

1. Your details

Title *

▼

First name *

▼

Last name *

▼

Address

▼

Postcode *

▼

Daytime telephone number *

▼

Email address

▼

Re-enter email

▼

Vehicle registration number *

▼

Make and model of vehicle *
e.g. Vauxhall, Corsa

▼

Next Page >

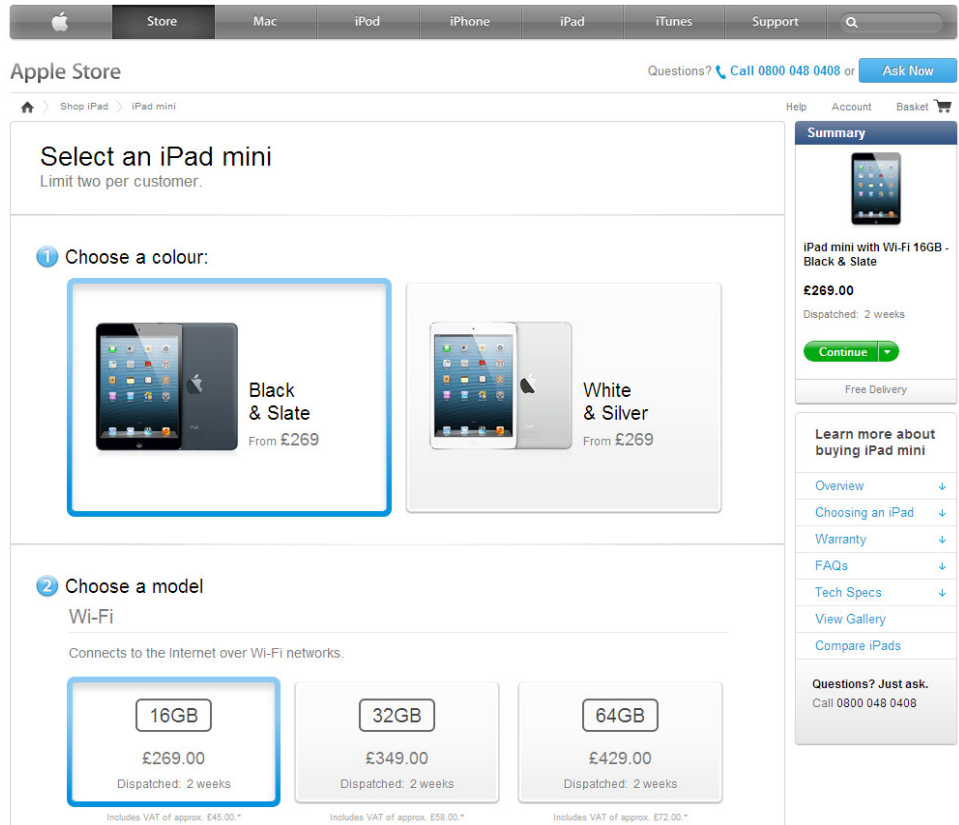
The case used on your labels can also have a small but measurable effect on the speed of completion. Sentence case is the easiest to read, while all-caps should be avoided to make the forms as legible as possible.

The length of your input fields can be used to subtly inform the user of the expected length of the required information. While this might not look as neat as a column of uniform input fields, it will make it easier for the user to complete. A great example of this is the postcode field on addresses - the length of the input is known and so the input field can be reduced. This subtly communicates what is expected of the user, helping decrease completion time.

Clear calls to action and progress bars (on multi-page forms) help guide and inform the user as they work towards completion. Ensure that the form's 'Submit' button stands out clearly from the page so that the user doesn't have to search for it, even for a second, and always clearly signal to the user where the primary next step is. In the same vein, avoid presenting too many options which may confuse the user.

Apple famously provides a great example of clear signalling, with progressive primary call to action buttons that are consistently formatted in green to help inform the user of their next step.

Figure 11: Apple clearly signposts its call to action



Remember

Good aesthetics (along with a knowledge of best practice) can take a good form and make it better. While you'd be hard-pressed to find a user that enjoys the act of filling out a form, that doesn't mean you shouldn't try to make the experience a better one. Even small improvements can have a cumulative effect on usability, accessibility, and the wider user experience.

Conclusion

The motivations behind incorporating a form into your site or app will be numerous and require that, first and foremost, you consider the purpose of your form - this could be anything from increasing the number of people paying bills online to streamlining the process of accessing valuable information and resources. All subsequent decisions should then be based on the specific needs of your users and business, while remembering to make every effort to keep the user journey lean and informative.

At Box UK we've helped organisations from across the public sector - including Careers Wales, Chartered Trading Standards Institute, Transport for London, National Childbirth Trust and Severn Trent Water - improve the user experience of their websites and applications. To find out more about our expertise and approach, visit the [UX section](#) of our site or [get in touch](#) with one of our expert consultants to see how we could help you improve conversion rate, user satisfaction, interactions and engagement.

Further Reading

[Redesigning the Country Selector](#)

Baymard Institute

[In Search Of The Perfect CAPTCHA](#)

David Bushell

[Expedia on how one extra data field can cost \\$12m](#)

Nick Heath

[Why Are Millennials So Mobile?](#)

Adam Lella

[Fewer fields in a contact form sharply increases conversions](#)

Brian Moloney

[Meet the Obama campaign's \\$250 million fundraising platform](#)

Kyle Rush

[The \\$300 Million Button](#)

Jared M. Spool

[12 ways to improve sign up conversion](#)

UX for the Masses

[8 Reasons Users Don't Fill Out Sign Up Forms](#)

UX Movement

[Web Form Design - Filling in the blanks](#)

Luke Wroblewski

[Which Types of Form Fields Lower Landing Page Conversions?](#)

Dan Zarrella



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