

Political Party Websites:

Poor communication with users

A usability study of UK party websites



www.webcredible.co.uk

Report written and researched by Webcredible © 2010.
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Introduction

The opportunity

Voter turnout has dropped considerably since 1992 from 77.7% to 61.4% of the electorate¹. Voter apathy is often blamed on a lack of engagement with the political parties and their representatives. However, with access to unprecedented means of communicating online with the electorate, the main political parties have greater power than ever before to engage with and gain voters.

About this report

In March 2010, Webcredible investigated the usability of the websites of all 10 UK political parties with parliamentary representation in the House of Commons in advance of the 2010 general election.

The usability criteria chosen were a mixture of essential usability criteria that apply to any website (e.g. relating to navigation and orientation) and criteria that are relevant to the persuasion of site visitors to a point of view (e.g. engaging delivery of content).

Increasing the usability of any political party website will increase the success users have in finding the information they need and achieving their goals. The main goal of many users visiting a party political website in the run-up to a general election is likely to be to make a decision about whether to vote for that party. It's therefore essential that the primary purpose of a political party website should change during the run-up to an election to match this overriding goal, rather than serving the needs of party members and workers.

Who is this report for?

The report is aimed at anyone involved with political party websites, including politicians, party activists and organisers, communication managers and web developers. Although our analysis is focused on political parties, the guidelines are highly transferable to other information websites, especially those that attempt to persuade site visitors to adopt a point of view. The report assumes no prior usability or technical knowledge.

Methodology

Webcredible analysed the websites of the 10 political parties with House of Commons representation in March 2010. The report does not include the Co-operative Party which is a sister party of the Labour Party. The guidelines that relate to key user tasks were identified from a recent poll Webcredible ran to identify the main reasons why people would visit a political party website.

Each website was evaluated against 20 best practice guidelines and assigned a score of 0 to 5 for each guideline, with 5 being the maximum. With 20 guidelines in total, websites were assigned a total Usability Index rating out of 100.

The guidelines against which we benchmarked the 10 political parties were:

Site and homepage priorities

1. Prominent 'Contact us' link with useful details
2. Clear text resizing controls at top of the page
3. Clearly marked home link on every page
4. Homepage lists key tasks that are easy to locate and understand

Site supports key user tasks

5. It's easy to find out about policies
6. It's easy to find out why to vote for the party
7. It's easy to find out about key party figures
8. It's easy to get party news
9. It's easy to find out about campaigning/fundraising/volunteering
10. It's easy to find out how to join the party

Engagement

11. Engaging delivery of content
12. Opportunities to contribute content

Transactional capabilities

13. Forms clearly labelled and laid out
14. Error handling on forms is useful and clear

Navigation and orientation

15. Site offers a simple site map that's easy to find and use
16. It's easy to know where you are within a given section
17. It's easy to get back to where you were
18. Navigation style is consistently applied and simple to understand
19. Search is easy to use
20. Search results are simple to interpret and useful

The forms used for evaluating the transactional capabilities (guidelines 13 and 14) were 'join party online' and 'donate money online'.

Results

Executive summary

The 10 political party websites received the following scores in total, out of 100:

Political party	Website	Total score
Liberal Democrats	www.libdems.org.uk	80
Conservatives	www.conservatives.com	67
Scottish National Party	www.snp.org	56
Sinn Fein	www.sinnfein.ie	55
Labour	www.labour.org.uk	48
SDLP	www.sdip.ie	48
Ulster Unionist Party	www.uup.org	45
Plaid Cymru	www.plaidcymru.org	45
Respect	www.therespectparty.net	32
Democratic Unionist Party	www.dup.org.uk	26
Average score		50

The results show a clear winner in the Liberal Democrats with 2 of the 3 main parties occupying 1st and 2nd place. The Conservatives came 2nd and beat Labour by 19 points.

With only 2 websites scoring 60% or more, and 6 websites scoring lower than 50%, it's disappointing that the 10 political party websites aren't providing a better user experience.

On the whole, the websites scored well on key user tasks, with averages of 3.1 out of 5 for guidelines 5-10. However, there was a wide range in performance for some key user tasks with some sites scoring very low, for example on finding out why to vote for the party (guideline 6) and finding out how to join the party (guideline 10).

There was also a wide range in performance over the 2 key guidelines regarding engagement with users (guidelines 11 and 12), with sites either scoring very highly or very poorly.

7 of the 20 guidelines can be directly associated with **communicating with voters**:

Number	Guideline
4	Homepage lists key tasks that are easy to locate and understand
5	It's easy to find out about policies
6	It's easy to find out why to vote for the party
7	It's easy to find out about key party figures

8	It's easy to get party news
11	Engaging delivery of content
12	Opportunities to contribute content

With these 35 points up for grabs, the top 10 table alters slightly, indicating those websites that are currently best geared up for a general election in terms of usability:

Political party	Website	Total score (out of 35)
Conservatives	www.conservatives.com	32
Liberal Democrats	www.libdems.org.uk	29
Sinn Fein	www.sinnfein.ie	24
Labour	www.labour.org.uk	23
SDLP	www.sdlp.ie	22
Scottish National Party	www.snp.org	18
Plaid Cymru	www.plaidcymru.org	17
Respect	www.therespectparty.net	16
Ulster Unionist Party	www.uup.org	15
Democratic Unionist Party	www.dup.org.uk	12
Average score		20.8

Purely in terms of communicating with voters, overall the sites perform slightly better, with 6 sites getting over 50%. The Conservatives come out on top, with the Scottish National Party dropping from 3rd to 6th. In this crucial aspect of a political party website, the Conservatives beat the Liberal Democrats by 3 points and Labour by 9 points.

In terms of communication with voters, the 3 main political parties were awarded similar scores with a few exceptions. The Liberal Democrats scored consistently high marks for the 7 communication guidelines except guideline 12 (opportunities to contribute content) where they failed to score a point. This is the main reason the Liberal Democrats lost their top position to the Conservatives in terms of communication with voters.

Overall, Labour's relatively low ranking is a reflection of the fact that the site only scored full marks for 1 guideline (Guideline 9 – It's easy to find out about campaigning/fundraising/volunteering).

Please consult the Appendix on p33 for a full breakdown of scores.

Category: Site and homepage priorities

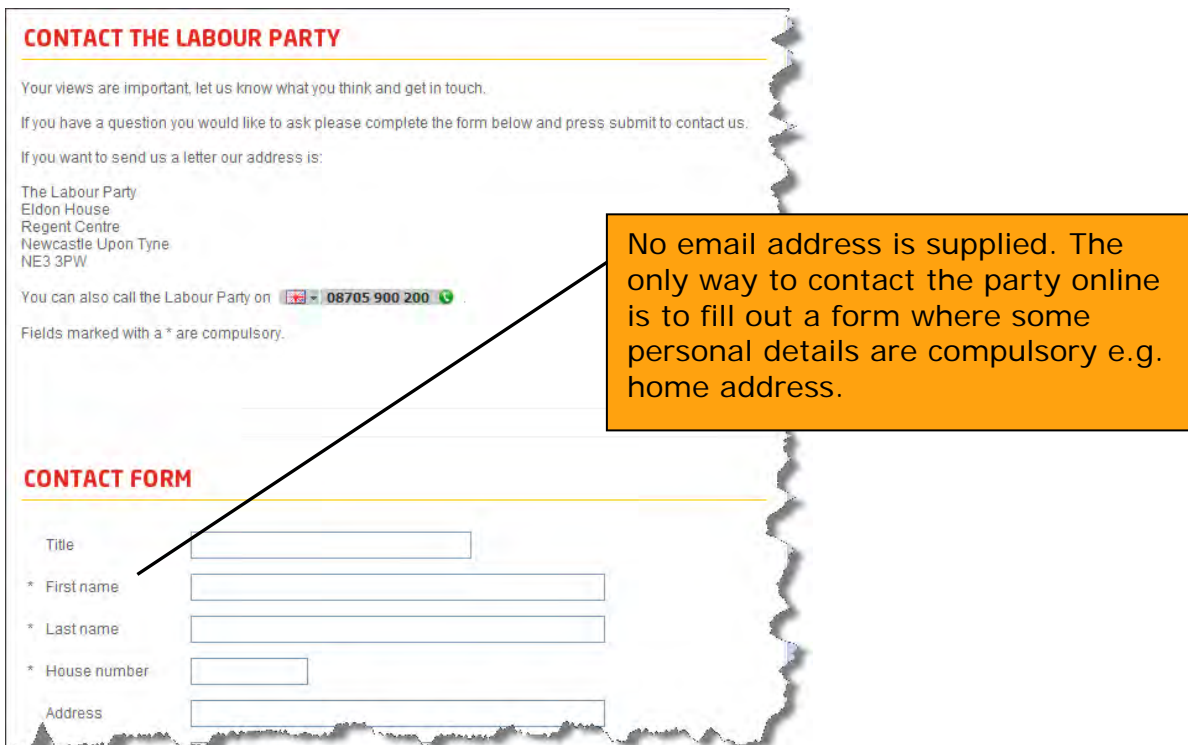
1. Prominent 'Contact us' link with details

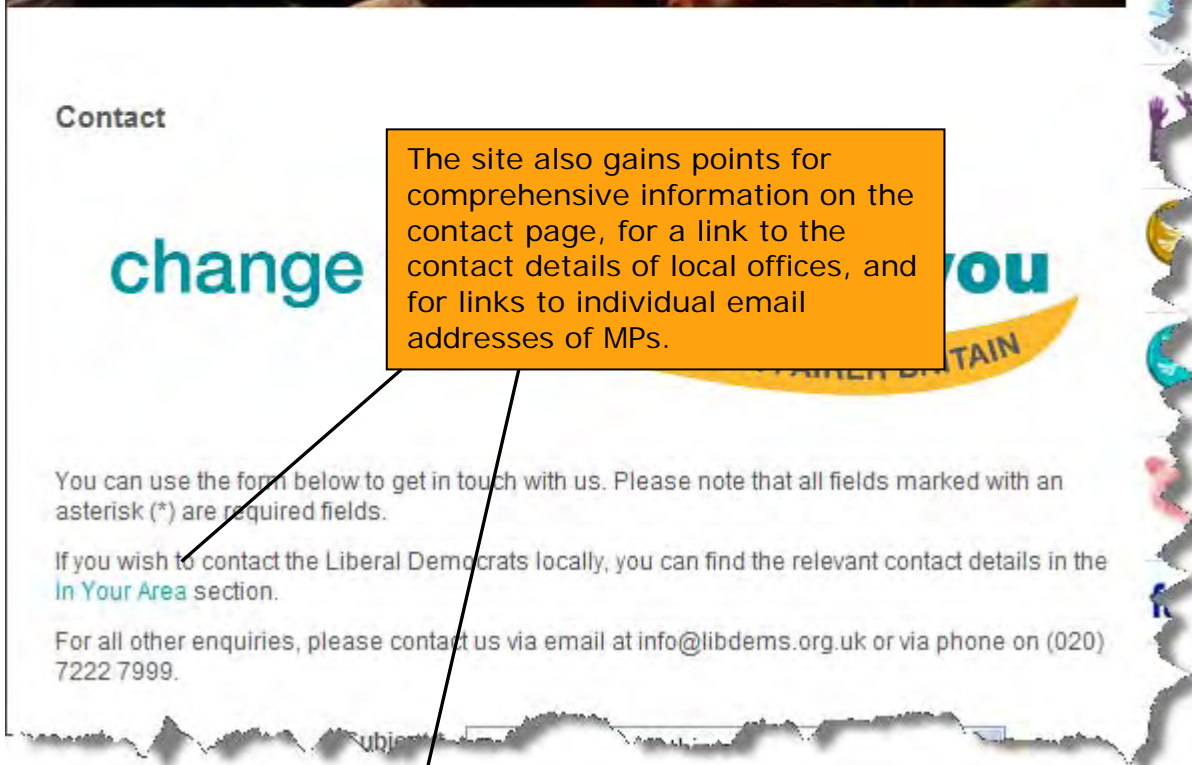
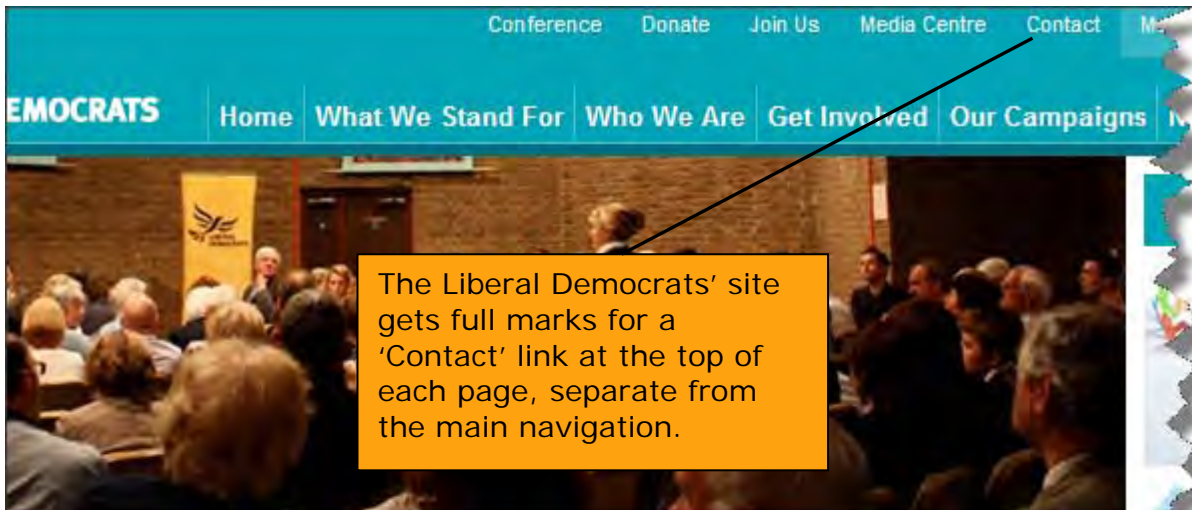
Average score: 2.9 (out of 5)

For those web users who wish to contact party figures directly (e.g. to write a letter to their local MP), it's essential that they can easily find full contact details from a link on the homepage.



Labour's site only has a 'Contact' link at the bottom of each page, below the fold, buried amongst many other links, making it difficult to find.





Overall, the websites fared reasonably well for this guideline, with 6 sites scoring 3 or more out of 5.

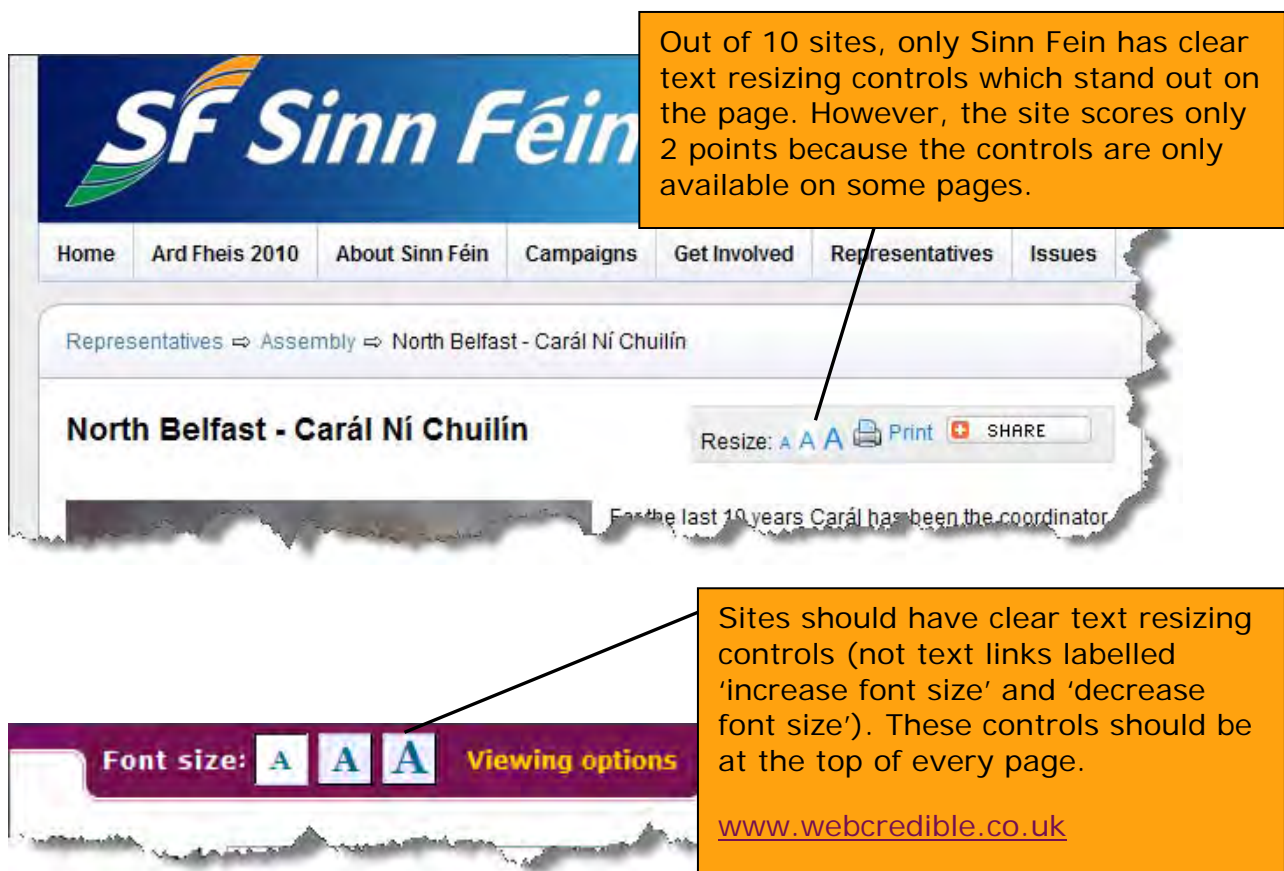
Category: Site and homepage priorities

2. Clear text resizing controls at top of the page

Average score: 0.3 (out of 5)

Many users don't know how to change the text size of a page using their browser controls³. A good solution to this problem is to provide text resizing controls on the actual web page itself.

Many elderly users, and especially users with low vision, will struggle to find text resizing controls unless they're clearly promoted at the top of the page.



With so many elderly users coming online to find information, it's surprising that political party websites aren't doing more to embrace this important guideline. Shockingly, 9 out of 10 websites scored just 0 or 1 out of 5 as they had no text controls at all or only provided links to poorly designed accessibility pages.

Category: Site and homepage priorities

3. Clearly marked home link on every page

Average score: 3.2 (out of 5)

Web users have grown accustomed to getting back to the homepage by clicking a 'home' link at the top of the navigation. This is one of the most important navigation aids that users rely on. During usability tests users often feel comforted knowing that however lost they get, they can find their way back to the website homepage easily.

It's essential that a clear 'home' link is provided in the top left area so users can easily find their way back to the homepage, with just one click.



The SDLP site relies on users clicking the logo to get back home. Users often aren't aware of this convention. They will be even less likely to find it on this site because the logo is positioned centrally rather than top left where users expect it.



The SNP scores 5 out of 5 for its prominent home link, and for providing a breadcrumb link to the homepage.

Most websites scored well for this guideline, with 6 out of the 10 sites scoring 4 or 5 out of 5. However, with 4 sites scoring 2 out of 5 and below there's clearly room for improvement.

Category: Site and homepage priorities

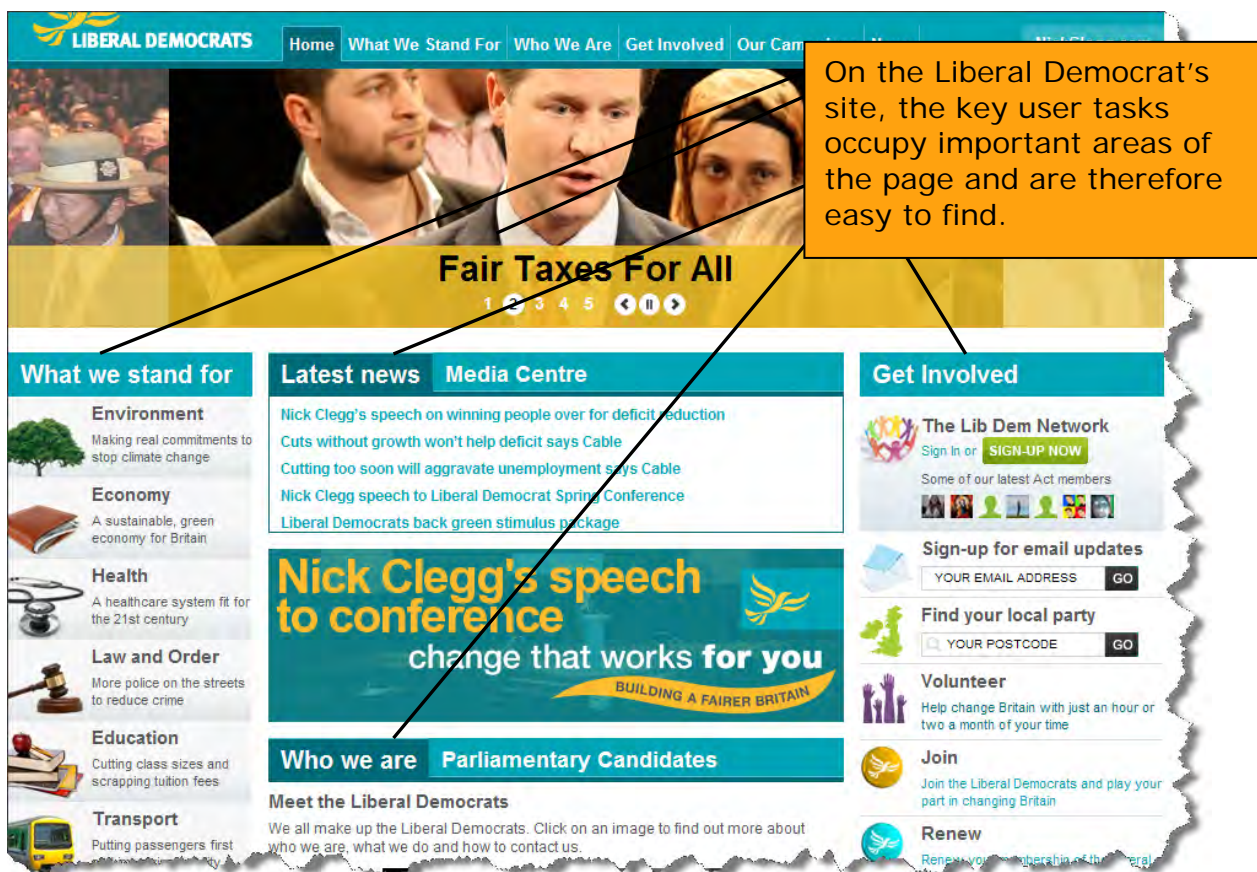
4. Homepage lists key tasks

Average score: 2.6 (out of 5)

Any political party homepage should clearly promote the key tasks available to users above the fold. The following are examples of common tasks that users are likely to want to perform on a political party website:

- Find out about policies
- Find out why to vote for the party
- Get information on party figures
- Get party news
- Find out about campaigning/fundraising/volunteering

Users often don't scroll on long pages, particularly homepages, so it's crucial that key tasks are promoted above the fold on the homepage.



The screenshot shows the Liberal Democrats homepage. At the top, there is a navigation menu with links: Home, What We Stand For, Who We Are, Get Involved, and Our Campaigns. Below the navigation is a large banner for 'Fair Taxes For All' featuring a video player with a play button and a progress bar. To the right of the banner is a callout box with the text: 'On the Liberal Democrat's site, the key user tasks occupy important areas of the page and are therefore easy to find.' Below the banner, the page is divided into several sections: 'What we stand for' (Environment, Economy, Health, Law and Order, Education, Transport), 'Latest news' (Nick Clegg's speech on winning people over for deficit reduction, Cuts without growth won't help deficit says Cable, Cutting too soon will aggravate unemployment says Cable, Nick Clegg speech to Liberal Democrat Spring Conference, Liberal Democrats back green stimulus package), 'Media Centre', 'Get Involved' (The Lib Dem Network, Sign-up for email updates, Find your local party, Volunteer, Join, Renew), and 'Who we are' (Parliamentary Candidates, Meet the Liberal Democrats).

With 6 out of 10 websites scoring 3 or more out of 5, the majority of political party sites are doing a reasonable job of prioritising key tasks for users.

Category: The site supports key user tasks

5. It's easy to find out about policies

Average score: 3.1 (out of 5)

The guiding principles that underpin this guideline are:

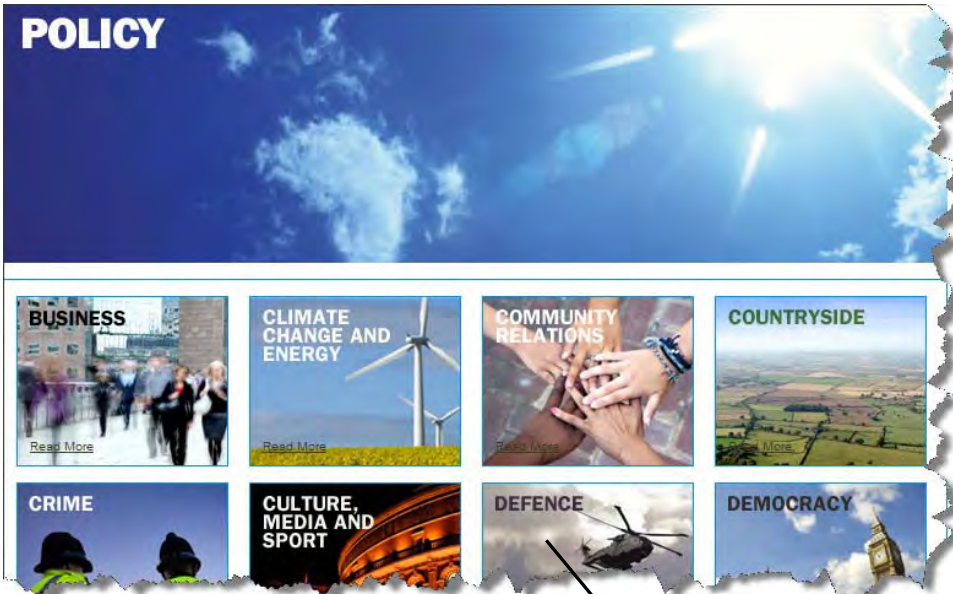
- ❑ Clear link from the homepage
- ❑ The labels for policy categories should be understandable without having to click on them
- ❑ The policies should be summarised
- ❑ The detail of the policy should follow good writing for the web guidelines so that users can easily scan the information e.g. use of headings, bullet points and highlighting key terms



It's not clear from top level navigation options whether the SDLP's policies are held in 'Our Ideas' or 'Our Campaigns'. It also isn't clear whether the campaigns are actual policies or more broad values/beliefs. Additionally, some of the labels, such as 'New Priorities', are vague i.e. they don't clearly describe the content behind the links.

The campaigns are in fact policies but they don't map to the traditional list of policy topics that users would recognise (e.g. crime).

It isn't clear why 'Our Ideas' and 'Our Campaigns' are separate. Merging them would be useful.



Defence

The soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, civilians and their families that make up our Armed Forces are the backbone of this nation's security. But more than a decade of neglect by Labour has left them overstretched, undermanned, and with key equipment arriving late.

A Conservative government will, most importantly, repair the broken Military Covenant, respect our Armed Forces, and ensure that Forces' families and veterans are taken care of. We will double the operational bonus for troops serving in Afghanistan. And we will pilot a follow-up telephone service that will track and monitor veterans' mental health after they leave the Armed Forces, so that those who are deemed at risk can be referred for treatment.

Our [Military Covenant Commission](#) has recommended better ways of taking care of service members and their families. The [Commission's report](#) will provide the basis for our Armed Forces manifesto which will establish a strong relationship between the Armed Forces and the next Conservative government.

A Conservative government will **match defence resources with commitments** by launching a Strategic Defence Review and introducing a US-style system of regular defence reviews. We will also conduct a capabilities review to maximise efficiency in the Ministry of Defence.

Future defence procurement projects will be determined on five criteria:

- Capability
- Interoperability
- Adaptability
- Affordability
- Exportability

We will continue to improve procurement processes to ensure that we get the best value for money.

The Conservatives' site scores top marks for offering a clear route to the policy topics and its use of emboldened text and bullet points to highlight key information.

With 6 out of 10 sites scoring 3 out of 5 or more, the majority are doing a reasonable job of communicating policies. The sites that score poorly for this guideline have long-winded or confusing routes to this basic information, and they publish text-heavy pages that are difficult to scan.

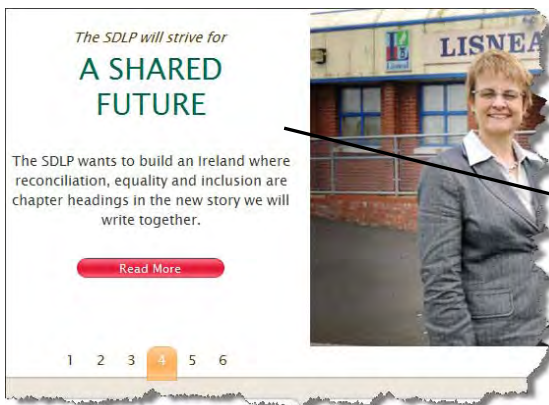
Category: The site supports key user tasks

6. It's easy to find out why to vote for the party

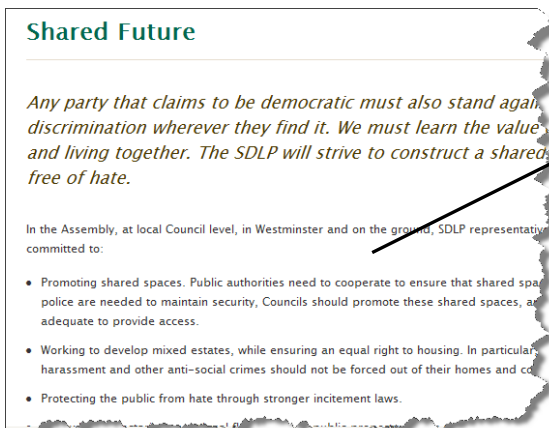
Average score: 2.8 (out of 5)

This task differs from finding out about policies in that it's more concerned with persuading voters. The policies are a statement of intent, but they should reflect broader principles that help to define what the party stands for, what it believes in and what its values are.

Sites were awarded high marks for clearly communicating these defining principles and relating them to voters either in a positive way (i.e. the party belief would benefit the voter) or a negative way (i.e. a rival party belief would harm the voter). The key is to help the voter to make a decision by differentiating the party's position from another party.



The SDLP site gets full marks for clearly communicating its principles on a homepage carousel. (Interestingly, the SDLP scored only 2 points for 'It's easy to find policies' because the site doesn't link the policies to the values.)



The site communicates each principle well by using simple, short pieces of text that are easy to scan.

There's a wide range of marks for this guideline with 5 websites scoring 4 or 5 out of 5, and 5 websites scoring 2 out of 5 or lower. The sites that scored poorly make little or no attempt to communicate their core beliefs to users. This is extraordinary given that the main aim of parties is to persuade potential voters of their intentions, especially in the run-up to a general election. Since a website can be an inexpensive and compelling communication channel, sites that score poorly for this guideline are missing a golden opportunity.

Category: The site supports key user tasks

7. It's easy to find out about key party figures

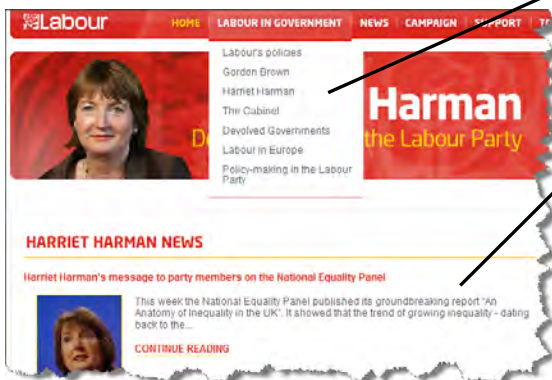
Average score: 4.1 (out of 5)

A key user task is the ability to get clear information about key party figures, for example:

- ❑ Party position e.g. leader, MP, MLA, MEP, spokesman or, shadow minister for defence
- ❑ Biography details
- ❑ Photo
- ❑ Contact details
- ❑ Planned visits
- ❑ Links to speeches or news items

The Labour Party scores 3 for a clear route to party figures and clear biography information for the prime minister. However, the site loses marks for having no biography for the deputy leader.

The site also fails to provide biographies for cabinet ministers or MPs.



THE CABINET

Correct as at 5 June 2009

The Cabinet is the group of senior government ministers who are responsible for implementing the government's manifesto pledges.

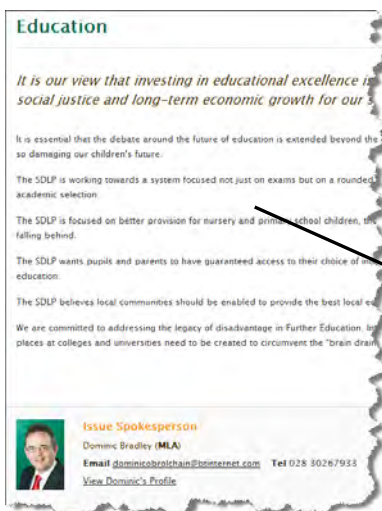
Cabinet meetings are chaired by the Prime Minister at Downing Street once a week.

The Cabinet is bound by collective responsibility, which means that all its members must abide by and defend the decisions it takes.

Cabinet ministers are appointed by the Prime Minister and chosen from Labour's MPs or peers.

Prime Minister, First Lord of the Treasury and Minister for the Civil Service
The Rt Hon Gordon Brown MP

Leader of the House of Commons and Lord Privy Seal; Minister for Women and Equality
The Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP



The SDLP gets extra marks for cross-linking from policy pages to relevant people e.g. the politician who is the main proponent of the policy.

In general, with an average of 4.1, political party sites do a good job of providing comprehensive and clear information about the important figures in the party.

Category: The site supports key user tasks

8. It's easy to get party news

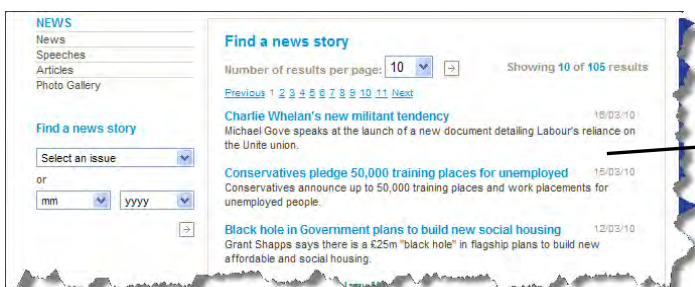
Average score: 3.5 (out of 5)

Another key user task is the ability to find out about the latest party news as a way of discovering how active the party is in achieving its aims. The ability to find this information should be supported by a number of guiding principles:

- ❑ The item should be clearly marked with the date it was posted
- ❑ It should be easy to find the desired item by date or topic
- ❑ It should be simple to share and print and bookmark the article
- ❑ It should link to other relevant content, such as other articles on the same topic by the same author or relevant speeches



Labour only scores 2 points. The news items don't have a date. There's no function to search or sort the news content. It's possible to share the article but there is no print-friendly version.



The Conservative Party site gets full marks for offering tools to find a news story by date and by issue (e.g. crime).

The majority of sites performed well on this guideline, with only 1 site, Labour, scoring below 3.

Category: The site supports key user tasks

9. It's easy to find out about campaigning/fundraising/volunteering

Average score: 2.9 (out of 5)

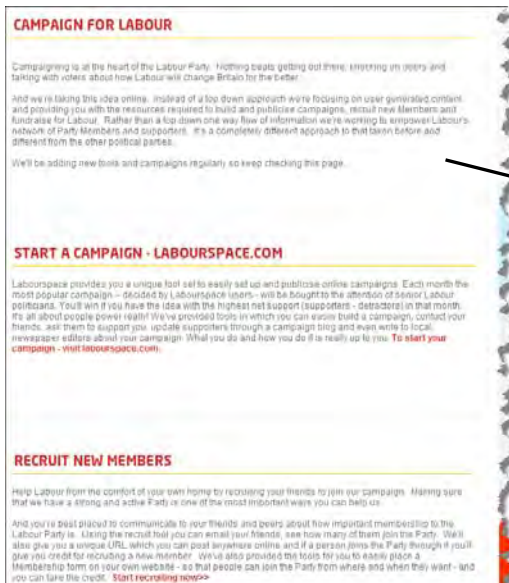
A key user task is the ability to find out what options there are for users to get involved with a party. A clear route to this type of information should be provided from the homepage. It's important that the differences between options are clearly explained and that instructions about how to get involved are provided. For example, campaigning and fundraising are different activities with different aims that both require people to volunteer their time. These distinctions should be made clear.



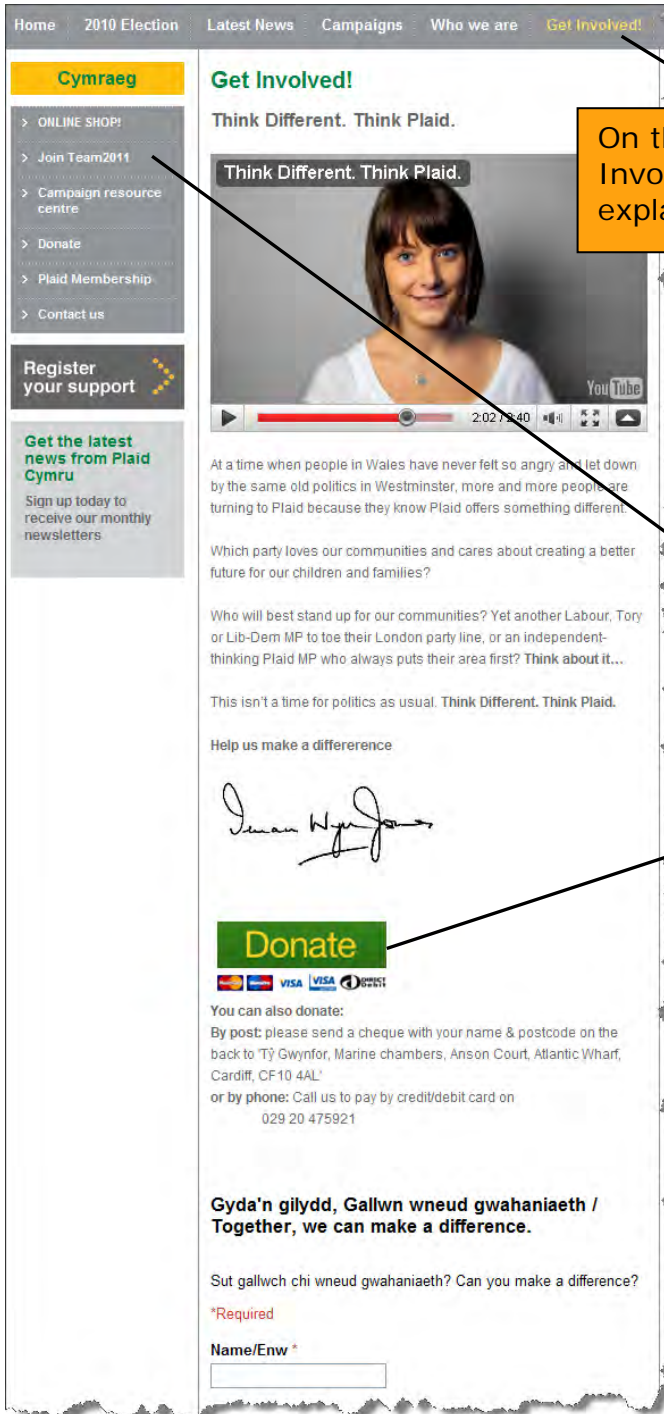
The Labour site gets full marks for a clear route from the 'Campaign' link in the top level navigation to a landing page that explains all the options for getting involved.

START A CAMPAIGN - LABOURSPACE.COM

Labourspace provides you a unique tool set to easily set up and publicise online campaigns. Each month the most popular campaign - decided by Labourspace users - will be brought to the attention of senior Labour politicians. You'll win if you have the idea with the highest net support (supporters - detractors) in that month. It's all about people power really! We've provided tools in which you can easily build a campaign, contact your friends, ask them to support you, update supporters through a campaign blog and even write to local newspaper editors about your campaign. What you do and how you do it is really up to you. **To start your campaign - visit labourspace.com.**



There's a wide range of options to get involved. Each option is clearly explained and differentiated from the others.



On the Plaid Cymru site, the route to the 'Get Involved' site is simple, but the page doesn't explain what the user's options are.

It's unclear what Team2011 is. The user must click on the link to find out. The link leads to content appealing to people to donate to the election campaign, which is unlikely to match user expectations.

It's likely that users will assume that the main (and only) call to action on this page is this 'Donate' button, without realising that there's a 'Get involved' form below it.

With 4 sites scoring just 2 out of 5 or below, there's clearly room for improvement in terms of communicating how site visitors can interact with political parties.

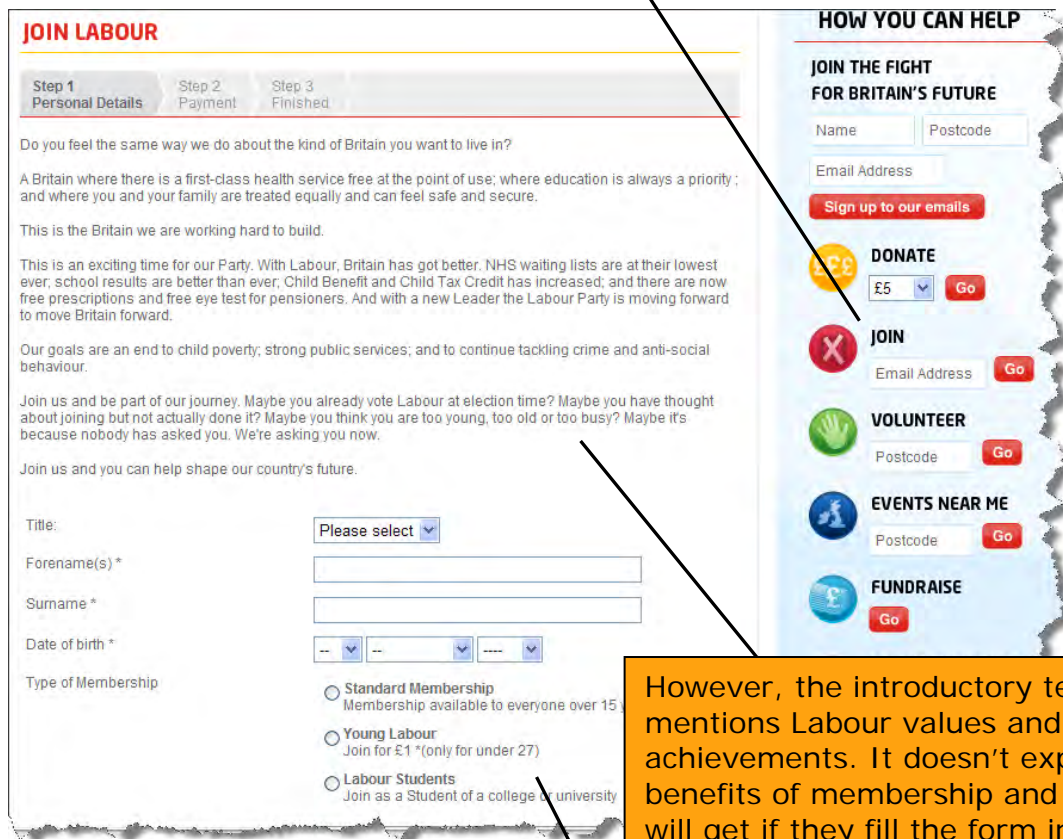
Category: The site supports key user tasks

10. Find out how to join the party

Average score: 2.6 (out of 5)

When contemplating whether to join a party or not, users want more information than simply how to get involved. As well as a clear route from the homepage, they need clear information about how to join, what the joining options are, how much it costs and what the benefits of membership are.

Labour's site has a clear route from every page to an online joining form.



JOIN LABOUR

Step 1 Personal Details | Step 2 Payment | Step 3 Finished

Do you feel the same way we do about the kind of Britain you want to live in?

A Britain where there is a first-class health service free at the point of use; where education is always a priority; and where you and your family are treated equally and can feel safe and secure.

This is the Britain we are working hard to build.

This is an exciting time for our Party. With Labour, Britain has got better. NHS waiting lists are at their lowest ever, school results are better than ever, Child Benefit and Child Tax Credit has increased; and there are now free prescriptions and free eye test for pensioners. And with a new Leader the Labour Party is moving forward to move Britain forward.

Our goals are an end to child poverty; strong public services; and to continue tackling crime and anti-social behaviour.

Join us and be part of our journey. Maybe you already vote Labour at election time? Maybe you have thought about joining but not actually done it? Maybe you think you are too young, too old or too busy? Maybe it's because nobody has asked you. We're asking you now.

Join us and you can help shape our country's future.

Title:

Forename(s)*

Surname*

Date of birth*

Type of Membership

- Standard Membership
Membership available to everyone over 15
- Young Labour
Join for £1 *(only for under 27)
- Labour Students
Join as a Student of a college or university

HOW YOU CAN HELP

JOIN THE FIGHT FOR BRITAIN'S FUTURE

Name Postcode

Email Address

DONATE

JOIN

Email Address

VOLUNTEER

Postcode

EVENTS NEAR ME

Postcode

FUNDRAISE

However, the introductory text only mentions Labour values and achievements. It doesn't explain the benefits of membership and what the user will get if they fill the form in and join.

Membership prices aren't mentioned, apart from the £1 price for those aged under 27. The membership packages aren't explained in terms of price and actual benefits

It's disappointing that half of the sites evaluated scored only 2 out of 5 or below. It demonstrates that these parties are failing to communicate the basic information users are likely to want before committing to joining.

Category: Engagement

11. Engaging delivery of content

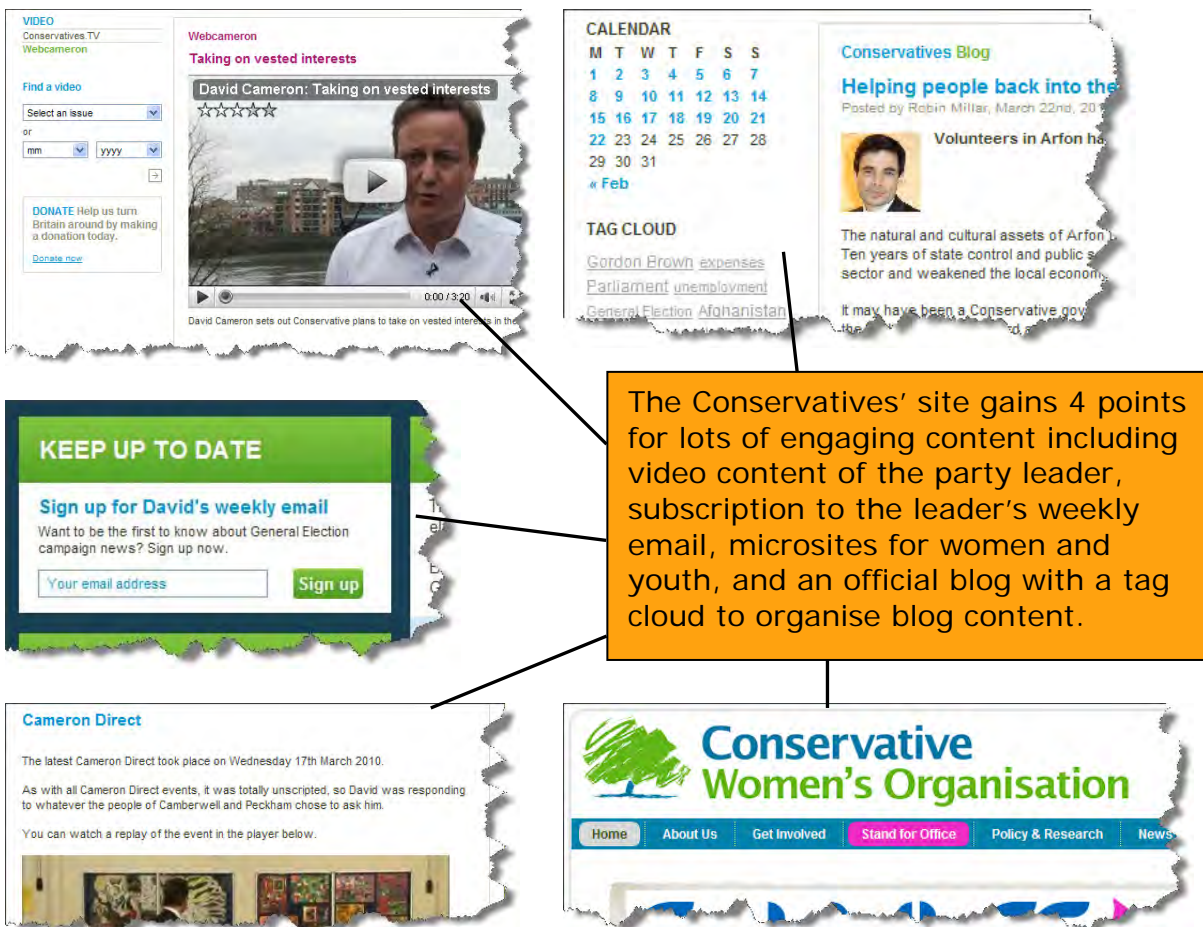
Average score: 2.9 (out of 5)

Political party websites are an opportunity to engage with people which is important for 2 main reasons:

- Engaging content adds to the **enjoyment** of a site visit making it more likely that site visitors will identify with the party's message
- Engaging content helps to communicate the values/beliefs of the party if content is **delivered via richer formats** (e.g. video) rather than just plain text

Sites were awarded points for content that's both enjoyable and delivered in richer formats. Sites lost points if novel attempts to engage users are misconceived i.e. if they have no stated purpose or if the experience fails to communicate a clear message.

Most sites had video content or links to dedicated video content on a separate site (e.g. YouTube). Sites gained points for successfully integrating the video content into relevant areas (e.g. a speech on economic policy positioned with other economic policy content).



The Conservatives' site gains 4 points for lots of engaging content including video content of the party leader, subscription to the leader's weekly email, microsites for women and youth, and an official blog with a tag cloud to organise blog content.



However, the site loses a point for the 'Wall'. It's unclear what the purpose of the feature is, whether the participants are MPs, party members or members of the public.

Without communicating this, exploration of the Wall is an aimless activity. The sound bites would be more persuasive if they were related to people's opinions of actual policy.

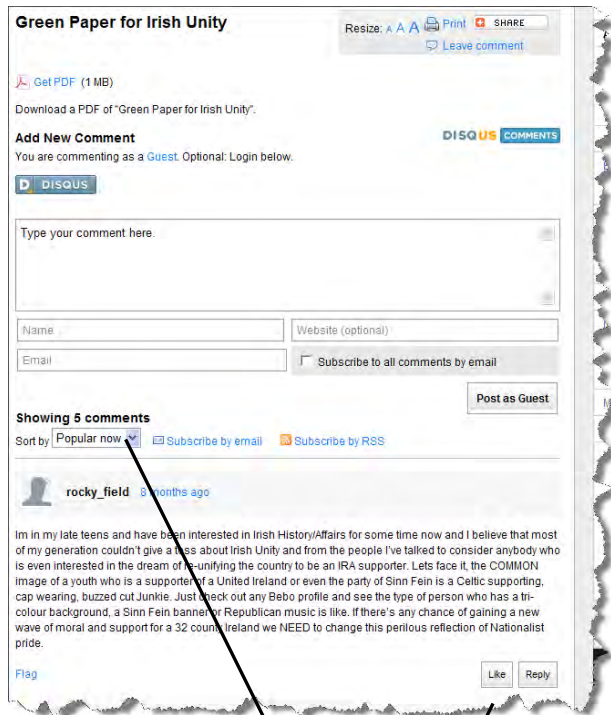
With 6 sites scoring 3 out of 5 or more, generally the sites are performing well with this guideline. Increasing the engagement of users through well-designed content should be seen as a great opportunity to communicate party values and messages.

Category: Engagement

12. Opportunities to contribute content

Average score: 1.8 (out of 5)

Another way political party websites can engage with users is to provide them with an opportunity to respond directly to the content (e.g. by commenting on articles). Facilitating user-generated content is important because it demonstrates that the party is willing to listen to public opinion and it provides a platform to gather views from potential voters.



The Sinn Fein site gets 5 points for providing a simple way for site visitors to respond directly to party policies. Contributors aren't required to set up an account. The interface options are useful and simple e.g. sort comments and flag popularity.

There's a wide range of marks for this guideline with 3 sites scoring 4 out of 5 or more, and 4 sites scoring 0 out of 5, (the Liberal Democrats, the Democratic Unionist Party, Respect and the Scottish National Party). The gap shows that many sites could improve this aspect drastically by offering users ways to post comments to official blogs, video content and policy.

Category: Transactional capabilities

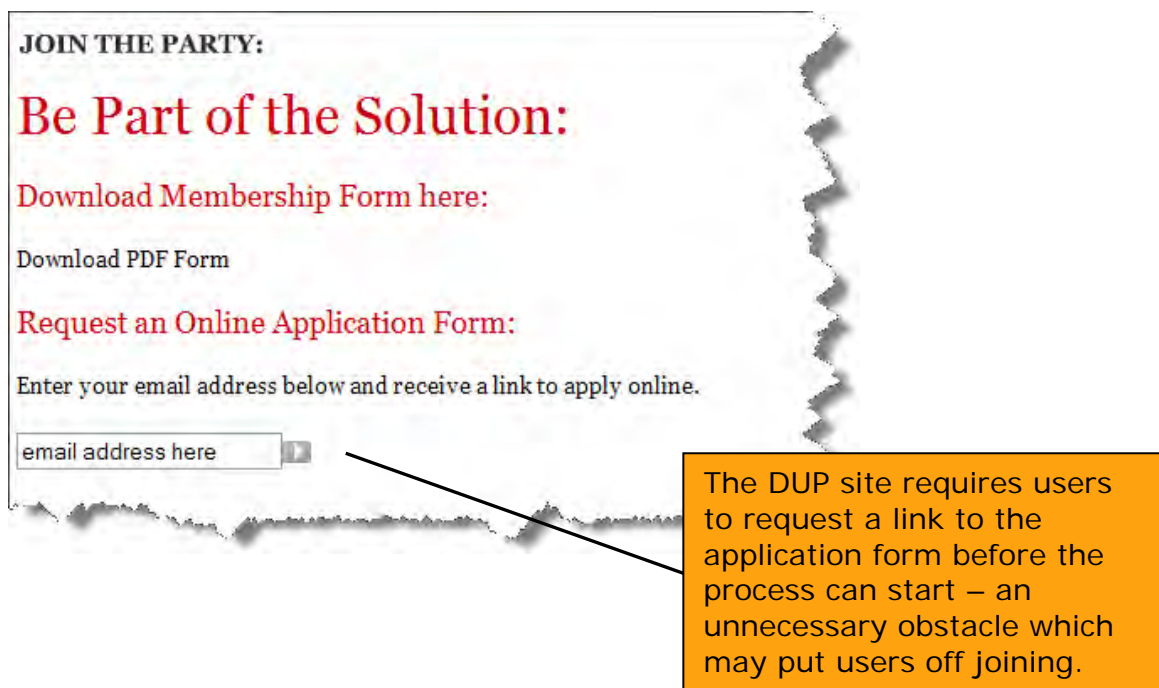
13. Forms clearly labelled and laid out

Average score: 2.6 (out of 5)

Once users have made the decision to join the party, they're keen to complete the process with the minimum of fuss and time.

One way to facilitate this is to design online forms with the following principles in mind:

- Use succinct and clear labels rather than text-heavy instructions
- Position the labels so that they're clearly associated with the relevant fields
- Organise the form so there's a logical progression from top to bottom
- Avoid more than one column of fields
- Show which fields are required and which are optional (e.g. by displaying an asterisk next to required fields and explain what the asterisk means)
- Make the main call to action easy to spot and well-labelled

A screenshot of a website form titled "JOIN THE PARTY: Be Part of the Solution:". The form contains a link to "Download Membership Form here:", a "Download PDF Form" link, and a section titled "Request an Online Application Form:" with the instruction "Enter your email address below and receive a link to apply online." Below this is an input field labeled "email address here". An orange callout box with a black border points to the input field, containing the text: "The DUP site requires users to request a link to the application form before the process can start – an unnecessary obstacle which may put users off joining."/>

JOIN THE PARTY:

Be Part of the Solution:

Download Membership Form here:

Download PDF Form

Request an Online Application Form:

Enter your email address below and receive a link to apply online.

The DUP site requires users to request a link to the application form before the process can start – an unnecessary obstacle which may put users off joining.



▼ Personal Details

Title:

First Name: *

Middle Names:

Last Name: *

Suffix:

Date of Birth: *
23 Mar 2010

Gender:
 Female
 Male
 Do not wish to say

▼ Contact Details

Email Address: *

Confirm Email Address: *

Home Phone: *

Mobile:

Saltire:
 Go paper-free
 Send me Saltire by Post

We now offer our member newsletter Saltire paper-free. Obviously you can't see it but you'll be able to view Saltire on the web.

▼ Address Details

Postcode:

I live at an overseas address (outside the UK)

▼ Declaration

I confirm that I am applying to join the Scottish National Party. I endorse its constitution and rules, including the Code of Conduct for Member party active in Scotland.

I agree

Pay by Direct Debit

Please debit my account:
 Monthly
 Annually

I want to start making a monthly payment of:
 £3
 £5
 £8

Please debit my account on the:
 1st
 16th

Name(s) of account holder(s):

Branch sort code:

Bank or Building Society account number:

Pay by credit or debit card
 Pay by cheque or postal order

The SNP site gets 3 points for a well-laid out online form.

However, the form is very long and some labels such as 'Suffix' and 'Saltire' are unnecessary or ambiguous.

The main call to action doesn't stand out especially as it's not positioned at the end of the form. It's also not clear whether the button refers to the whole form or just the section on bank details.

With 6 out of 10 party political websites scoring only 2 out of 5 or less, the standard of form design is poor overall, especially given how easy it is to design usable forms. Following some simple guidelines on form layout and labelling will reduce user frustration considerably.

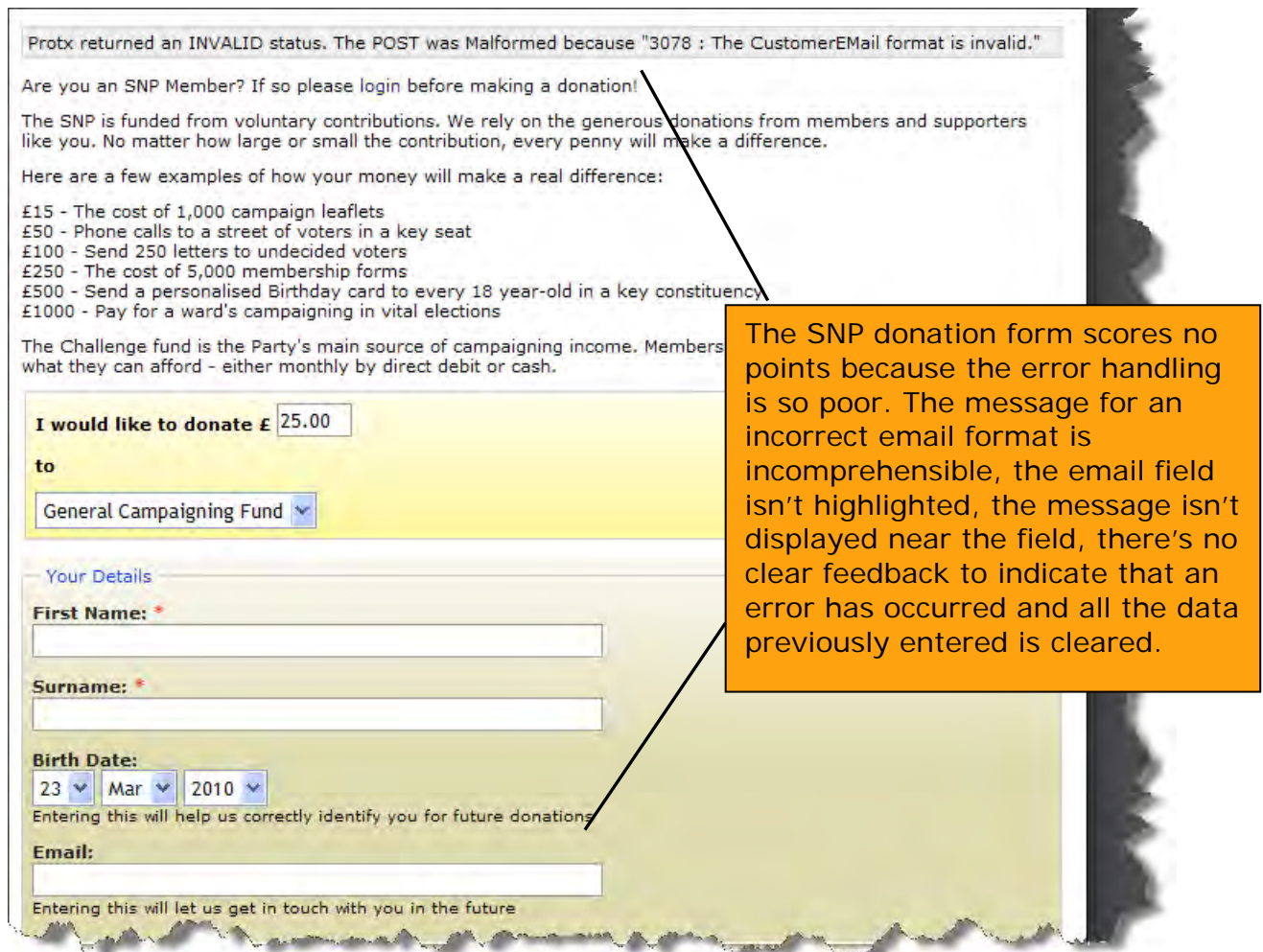
Category: Transactional capabilities

14. Error handling on forms is useful and clear

Average score: 2.5 (out of 5)

Users often make errors when completing online forms. Error handling is an essential yet often overlooked part of any online form process. If users have made an error on a form they need to be informed immediately that there's a problem. The written description should be presented at the top of the page, so it's the first thing they see after submitting a form.

In addition to instantly informing users that errors have been made and what the errors are, a helpful message should be provided next to each erroneous item. If the error occurs in a form item below the fold then when users scroll down they'll be unable to see the error summary at the top of the page. Likewise, if the error summary is provided in a pop-up then there's no reminder as to what the error was when the pop-up is closed.



Protx returned an INVALID status. The POST was Malformed because "3078 : The CustomerEMail format is invalid."

Are you an SNP Member? If so please login before making a donation!

The SNP is funded from voluntary contributions. We rely on the generous donations from members and supporters like you. No matter how large or small the contribution, every penny will make a difference.

Here are a few examples of how your money will make a real difference:

- £15 - The cost of 1,000 campaign leaflets
- £50 - Phone calls to a street of voters in a key seat
- £100 - Send 250 letters to undecided voters
- £250 - The cost of 5,000 membership forms
- £500 - Send a personalised Birthday card to every 18 year-old in a key constituency
- £1000 - Pay for a ward's campaigning in vital elections

The Challenge fund is the Party's main source of campaigning income. Members what they can afford - either monthly by direct debit or cash.

I would like to donate £

to

Your Details

First Name: *

Surname: *

Birth Date:

Entering this will help us correctly identify you for future donations

Email:

Entering this will let us get in touch with you in the future

The SNP donation form scores no points because the error handling is so poor. The message for an incorrect email format is incomprehensible, the email field isn't highlighted, the message isn't displayed near the field, there's no clear feedback to indicate that an error has occurred and all the data previously entered is cleared.

With 4 out of the 10 sites scoring 2 out of 5 or less for this guideline, there is clearly room for improvement.

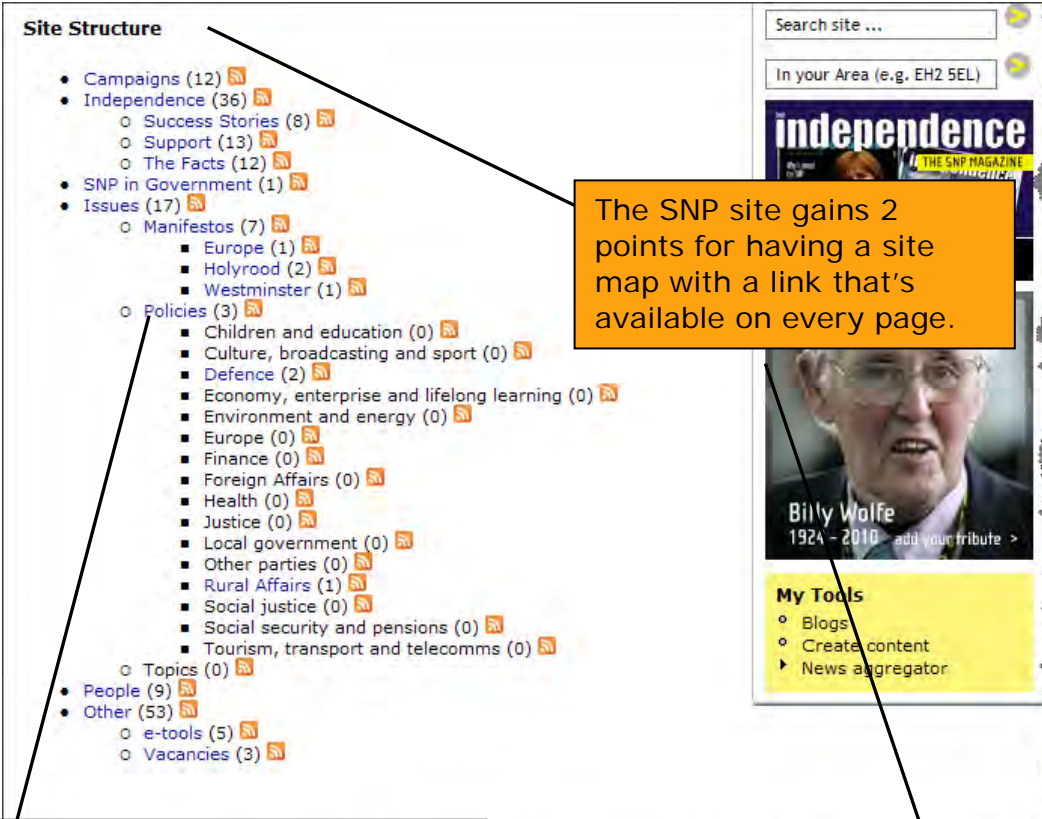
Category: Navigation and orientation

15. Site offers a simple site map

Average score: 1.4 (out of 5)

Users will often try to get an overview of what a site has to offer by looking at the homepage. If users decide to look at a site map then they're probably lost so it's important that the site map is called 'site map', with a clear link to it on each and every page.

A site map should be kept short to give users an overview of the site's main areas quickly. The idea of a site map is to let users visualise the overall structure of the site to take in the map as a whole.



Site Structure

- Campaigns (12)
- Independence (36)
 - Success Stories (8)
 - Support (13)
 - The Facts (12)
- SNP in Government (1)
- Issues (17)
 - Manifestos (7)
 - Europe (1)
 - Holyrood (2)
 - Westminster (1)
 - Policies (3)
 - Children and education (0)
 - Culture, broadcasting and sport (0)
 - Defence (2)
 - Economy, enterprise and lifelong learning (0)
 - Environment and energy (0)
 - Europe (0)
 - Finance (0)
 - Foreign Affairs (0)
 - Health (0)
 - Justice (0)
 - Local government (0)
 - Other parties (0)
 - Rural Affairs (1)
 - Social justice (0)
 - Social security and pensions (0)
 - Tourism, transport and telecomms (0)
 - Topics (0)
- People (9)
- Other (53)
 - e-tools (5)
 - Vacancies (3)

Search site ...

In your Area (e.g. EH2 5EL)

independence
THE SNP MAGAZINE

Billy Wolfe
1924 - 2010 add your tribute >

My Tools

- Blogs
- Create content
- ▶ News aggregator

compliance Privacy Statement Job Vacancies Site map

House, 3 Jackson's Entry, Edinburgh, EH8 9R1

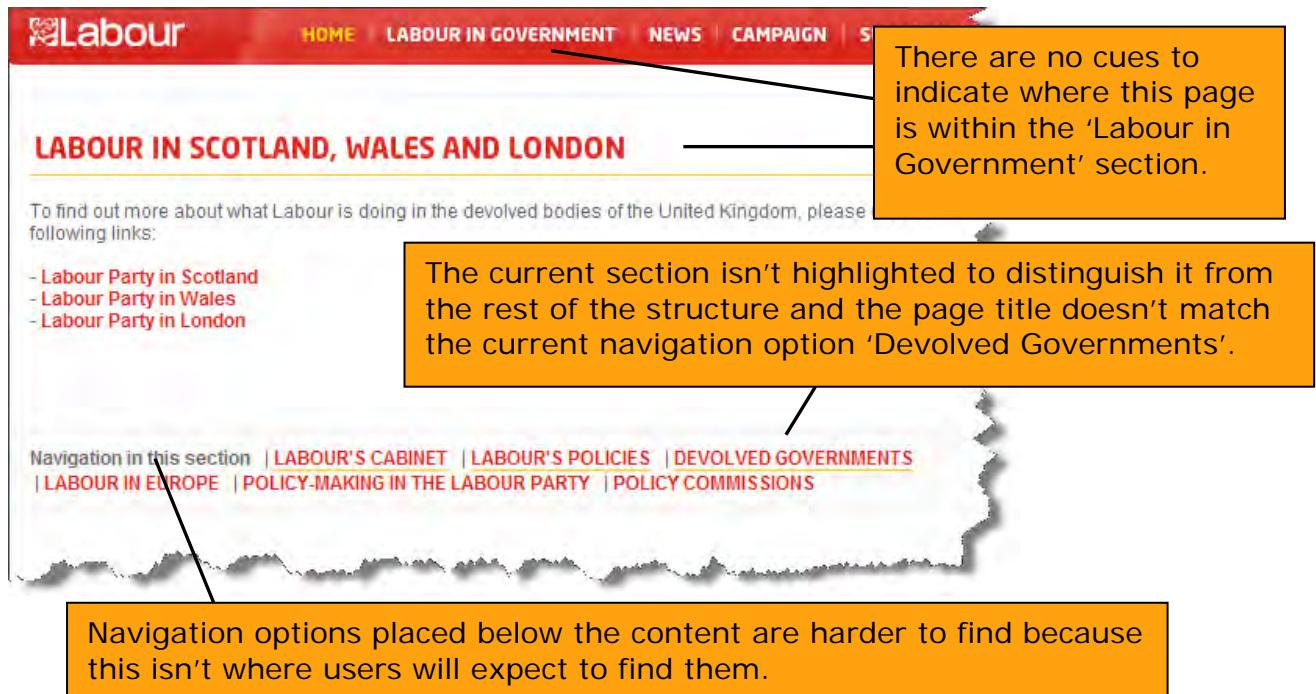
6 out of the 10 sites scored 2 or less out of 5, which shows that this basic guideline is not being implemented well enough.

Category: Navigation and orientation

16. It's easy to know where you are within a given section

Average score: 2.5 (out of 5)

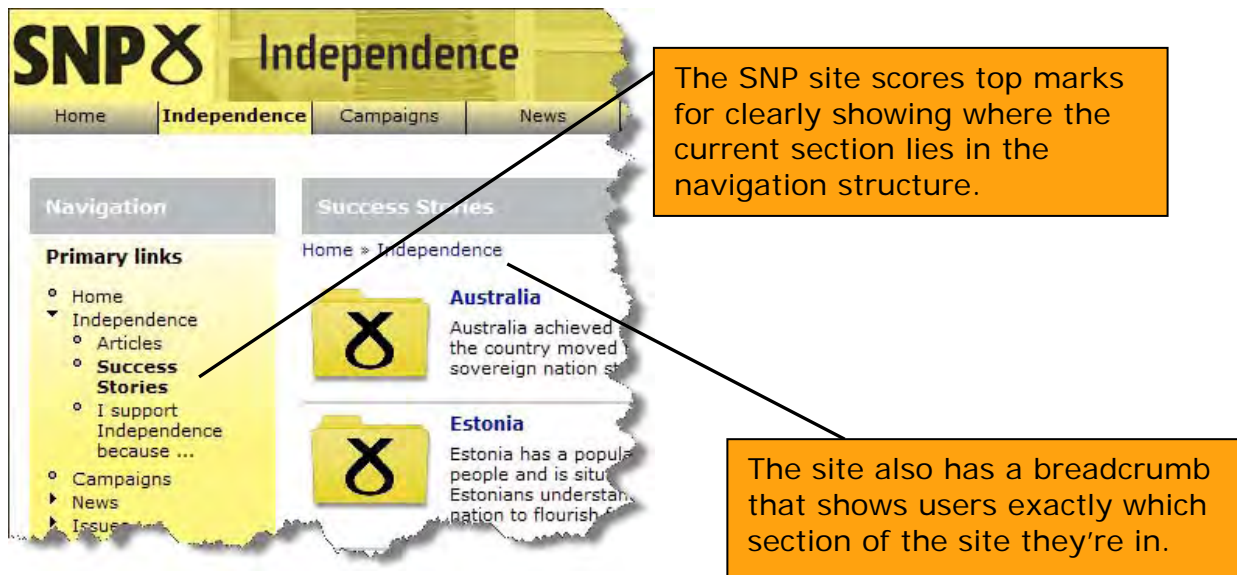
Giving users the tools to know where they are within a section of a site relies on a number of orientation cues. When these orientation cues are missing users have to guess where they are and what other information is available.



There are no cues to indicate where this page is within the 'Labour in Government' section.

The current section isn't highlighted to distinguish it from the rest of the structure and the page title doesn't match the current navigation option 'Devolved Governments'.

Navigation options placed below the content are harder to find because this isn't where users will expect to find them.



The SNP site scores top marks for clearly showing where the current section lies in the navigation structure.

The site also has a breadcrumb that shows users exactly which section of the site they're in.

5 out of 10 sites scored poorly with 2 out of 5 or lower. Many of the sites make some use of breadcrumbs, highlighted navigation options, consistent link text and page titles to help orientate their users, but few sites use all these cues.

Category: Navigation and orientation

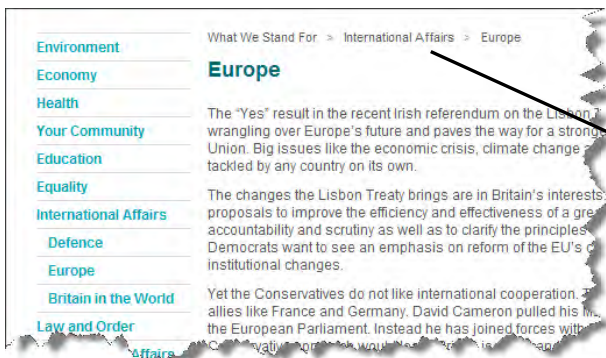
17. It's easy to get back to where you were

Average score: 2.4 (out of 5)

Aside from the use of the browser 'back' button, good websites often provide users with a clear journey back to where they were. This is normally achieved through a clear link to the previous page in the navigation area or a 'back' button.



The lower-level menu that appears when 'About us' is clicked replaces the top-level menu (i.e. 'Home' and all the high-level options at the same level as 'About us' disappear). There's nothing that shows where the 'Manifesto' page is in the overall structure. This makes it difficult to retrace the journey to previous pages.



The Liberal Democrats site provides an alternative means of getting back to where you were via a breadcrumb.

With 4 out of 10 sites scoring 2 out of 5 and below this is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed.

Category: Navigation and orientation

18. The navigation style is consistently applied and easy to understand

Average score: 3 (out of 5)

Users rely on a clear set of navigation controls to move around a website. When the navigation controls appear below the fold or unexpectedly within the content area of the page they often struggle to find the link they're looking for. It's essential that there's a clear separation between the navigation and content areas of a web page with the primary navigation controls within easy reach above the fold.



With 4 out of 10 sites scoring 2 or less out of 5, it's disappointing that not all political party sites have grasped the importance of providing clear, well-placed navigation controls to help their users get around easily.

Category: Navigation and orientation

19. Search is easy to use

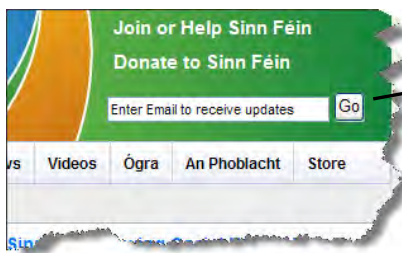
Average score: 1.5 (out of 5)

For users who either can't find what they're looking for by browsing the navigation options or who prefer to use search, it's important that the search box is prominently placed above the fold so they can find it easily.

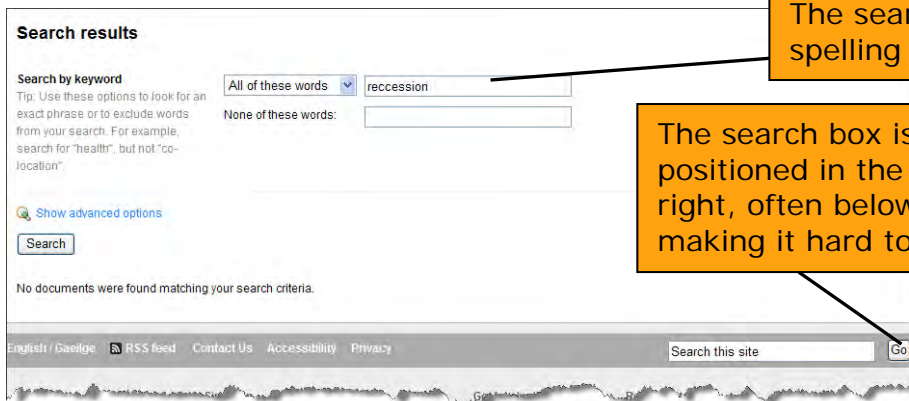
The site search should specify clearly whether it covers all or just some of the site content. By default, the site search should allow users to search the entire site. If it doesn't, it should clearly specify exactly what it does cover.

Anticipating common errors and supporting users in achieving their goals provides a good user experience. Similarly, a search function should be forgiving of common spelling mistakes by proactively making suggestions.

If users get no search results they could potentially leave the site with the belief there's no relevant content there. A good search engine should anticipate common spelling errors 'recession' to return results.



This box on the Sinn Féin site is likely to cause confusion because it's positioned in the top right of the page where users expect to find the search box.



The search doesn't cope with the spelling mistake 'recession'.

The search box is actually positioned in the bottom right, often below the fold, making it hard to find.

6 sites out of 10 scored 1 or 0 out of 5. The poor scores for this guideline reflect that many sites:

- ❑ Don't have search functionality
- ❑ Have search functionality that doesn't work (e.g. DUP site)
- ❑ Have search functionality that only covers limited sections e.g. just news
- ❑ Have search functionality that's hard to find or hard to use

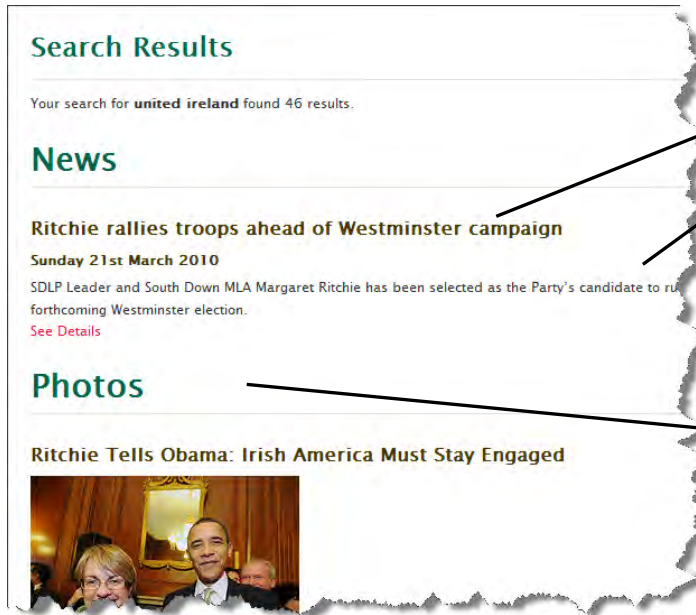
It's disappointing that so many political party sites offer so little assistance to users who wish to search for content.

Category: Navigation and orientation

20. Search results are simple to interpret and useful

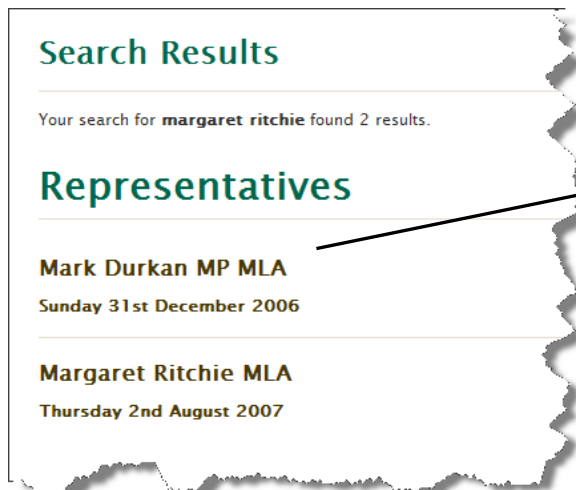
Average score: 1.6 (out of 5)

It's important that search results have meaningful titles and summary descriptions to help users interpret matching pages. Many sites just return URLs and the first few lines of the page content, which users find difficult to relate back to the search terms they've entered.



The title and summary of each result on the SDLP site are clear, allowing users to see quickly whether the content interests them.

The site gains marks for splitting the content into useful categories such as News and Photos.



However, the site loses marks for including some results that aren't clickable. It's also unclear how the first result 'Mark Durkan' is relevant to the search term.

The majority of sites scored 2 or below for this guideline, showing that there is much room for improvement here.

Conclusion

With 47 million users in the UK online², the opportunity for political parties to increase their audience contact – especially with hard to reach groups – is huge. Usability will undoubtedly prove to be a key factor in the success of the online channel, particularly when it comes to communicating key information and messages to potential voters.

With an average score of just 50%, this sample of political party websites has performed poorly against our guidelines. There's still significant scope for improvement, for example on reasons to vote for the party, providing engaging content and basic navigation and orientation.

The usability guidelines presented in this report represent just the start to achieving excellent usability and an outstanding user experience. The use of usability guidelines is essential, but they should always be used in conjunction with usability testing on a regular basis. Usability testing involves analysing typical site visitors completing typical tasks on your website (see www.webcredible.co.uk/testing for more).

For more information on other general usability guidelines that should be conformed to, visit www.webcredible.co.uk/articles or book a place on a Webcredible usability course at www.webcredible.co.uk/training.

References

1. UK Political Information (www.ukpolitical.info/Turnout45.htm)
2. Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com/europa.htm#uk)
3. Let Users Control Font Size (www.useit.com/alertbox/20020819.html)



Appendix: Full results

The full list of websites audited and the score they achieved for each guideline is as follows:

Political party	Guideline number																				TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Conservative Party	2	0	0	3	5	5	5	5	3	4	4	5	4	3	3	3	3	4	4	2	67
Democratic Unionist Party	3	0	0	1	2	1	3	3	0	1	2	0	2	3	0	1	0	3	0	1	26
Labour Party	1	0	4	3	4	4	3	2	5	2	3	4	4	4	3	0	0	2	0	0	48
Liberal Democrats	5	0	5	5	4	5	5	5	5	5	5	0	4	5	3	4	5	5	3	2	80
Plaid Cymru	3	0	5	4	2	1	5	3	2	0	1	1	2	2	3	4	3	4	0	0	45
Respect	2	0	2	2	3	2	3	3	2	3	3	0	4	1	0	1	0	1	0	0	32
Scottish National Party	3	0	5	3	2	4	5	3	3	4	1	0	2	0	2	5	5	4	3	2	56
Sinn Féin	3	2	5	2	4	1	4	4	4	1	4	5	2	3	0	2	3	2	1	3	55
SDLP	2	0	1	3	2	5	5	4	3	2	2	1	2	4	0	2	2	2	3	3	48
Ulster Unionist Party	5	1	5	0	3	0	3	3	2	4	4	2	0	0	0	3	3	3	1	3	45
TOTAL	29	3	32	26	31	28	41	35	29	26	29	18	26	25	14	25	24	30	15	16	
Average score	2.9	0.3	3.2	2.6	3.1	2.8	4.1	3.5	2.9	2.6	2.9	1.8	2.6	2.5	1.4	2.5	2.4	3	1.5	1.6	50



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- Interaction design

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- Accessible CSS web design
- Accessible content management system
- Accessibility audits

User research

- Usability testing
- Interviews & focus groups
- Persona creation

Training & mentoring

- Usability, IA & web writing
- Accessibility & CSS
- Ongoing support & mentoring

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- Approachable** – We're friendly and jargon-free. Consultants, despite being highly educated and experienced, only communicate in a user-friendly manner.

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