

Energy and water suppliers: Sink or swim?

A usability study of the leading UK energy and water supplier websites



www.webcredible.co.uk

Report written and researched by Webcredible © 2008.
Questions or comments? E-mail info@webcredible.co.uk.

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Introduction

The market opportunity

More and more of the UK population are turning to the Internet as a key source of information. Energy and water supplier websites must be developed inline with this expectation – fulfilling user needs and streamlining communications with customers.

However, the drive to embrace online communications prematurely without also taking advantage of usability best practice can mean that key services are let down by difficult-to-use sites.

About this report

Webcredible investigated the usability of the top 17 energy and water supply websites in the UK.

Increasing the usability of any website will increase the success users have in finding the information they need – it's as simple as that. Improved usability will also lead to an increase in channel loyalty and return site visitors, and an improvement in the perception of the online and offline brand.

Evaluations of the 17 websites featured in this study were conducted in November 2008.

Who is this report for?

This report is aimed at anyone involved with energy and water supply, including marketing managers, Internet managers and web developers. Although our analysis is focused on these websites, the guidelines are highly transferable to other information and transaction-based websites. The report assumes no prior usability or technical knowledge.

Methodology

Webcredible analysed 17 of the UK's leading energy and water supply websites in November 2008. Based on our collective experience of usability testing conducted on service and transactional websites, we devised 20 essential guidelines for both energy and water suppliers.

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 energy and water suppliers were:

Main consumer page

1. Prominent contact us link with phone number & hours of operation provided
2. Prominent calls-to-action to main tasks made available

General

3. Key tasks don't require registration
4. Search is in an obvious and consistent place on every page

Sign-up (water companies only)

5. Checklist of requirements clearly displayed upfront
6. Explanation for why personal or ambiguous information is required
7. Noticeable and easy-to-understand progress bar utilised
8. Well designed buttons used with a different format to other buttons

Meter readings

9. Giving a reading online is possible
10. Help on finding meter reading is provided
11. Current tariff is easy to find

Navigation

12. Site offers a simple site map, called 'site map'
13. Clear orientation cues provided
14. Key features easily located through the main navigation
15. Navigation labels are easy to understand

Forms

16. Required/optional fields are clearly indicated
17. Forms are well laid out
18. Contextual help provided where appropriate
19. Effective error handling is employed
20. Unnecessary information not required in forms

Switching (energy companies only)

21. Easy-to-use quote & price savings calculator provided
22. Price list is provided and is easy-to-use
23. Good explanation of switching process provided before signing up
24. Clear tariff names/descriptions provided & current tariff is easy to change

Results

Executive Summary

The 6 energy supplier and 11 water supplier websites received the following scores in total, out of 100:

Company	Website	Total score	Change
Energy suppliers			
EDF Energy	www.edfenergy.com	76	+22
npower	www.npower.com	75	+13
British Gas	www.britishgas.co.uk	64	+11
Scottish & Southern Energy	www.southern-electric.co.uk www.swalec.co.uk www.hydro.co.uk	61	+26
Scottish Power	www.scottishpower.co.uk	57	+9
E.ON	www.eonenergy.com	54	-16*
Water suppliers			
Southern Water	www.southernwater.co.uk	77	+26
United Utilities	www.unitedutilities.com	65	+12
Thames Water	www.thameswater.co.uk	64	+26
Severn Trent Water	www.stwater.co.uk	61	+8
Northumbrian Water	www.nwl.co.uk	57	+7
Anglian Water	www.anglianwater.co.uk	56	+4
Wessex Water	www.wessexwater.co.uk	55	+14
Yorkshire Water	www.yorkshirewater.com	52	+14
Southwest Water	www.southwestwater.co.uk	51	+1
Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water	www.dwrcymru.com	41	-8
Scottish Water	www.scottishwater.co.uk	32	+14
Average score		58.7	

* E.ON was measured against last year's score for Powergen, now incorporated into E.ON



User experience research & design

The number of websites scoring over 60% has risen from 2 last year (2007) to 8 this year. Last year the average score was 47.7% - this year it's risen to 58.7% - so it's clear that improvements have been made. A special mention should go to EDF Energy, Scottish & Southern Energy, Southern Water and Thames Water for increasing their scores by more than 20%.

In spite of these improvements, it's clear that energy and water supply websites do however have significant scope to improve the usability of their online offering.

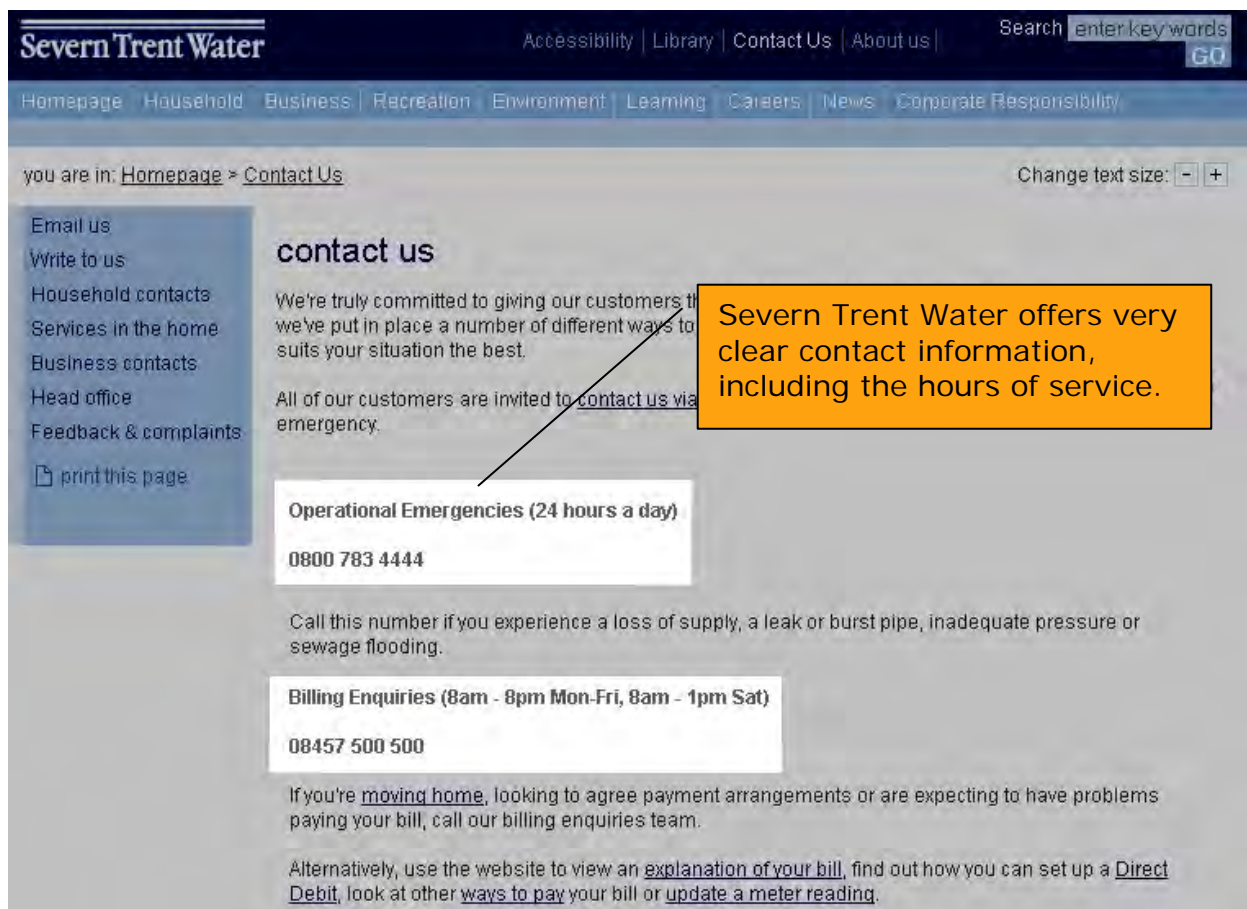
The potential benefits and cost savings of getting their users online can only be realised if the sites sign up to delivering a first class user experience. If users can't find the information they need they'll switch off and pick up the phone – or worse still they won't bother at all.

Category: Site and homepage priorities

1. Prominent contact us link with phone number & hours of operation

Average score: 3.5 (out of 5) [Last year: 2.9]

People will often visit a utility website to find a means of contacting the organisation. As such, it's essential that users can easily find the contact details and opening hours of their local supplier on each web page (particularly the homepage).



Severn Trent Water

Accessibility | Library | Contact Us | About us | Search enter keywords GO

Homepage | Household | Business | Recreation | Environment | Learning | Careers | News | Corporate Responsibility/

you are in: [Homepage](#) > [Contact Us](#) Change text size: - +

Email us
Write to us
Household contacts
Services in the home
Business contacts
Head office
Feedback & complaints
print this page

contact us

We're truly committed to giving our customers the best service. We've put in place a number of different ways to contact us to suit your situation the best.

All of our customers are invited to [contact us via](#) our [customer service](#) team. For an [emergency](#), please call our [operational emergencies](#) team.

Operational Emergencies (24 hours a day)
0800 783 4444

Call this number if you experience a loss of supply, a leak or burst pipe, inadequate pressure or sewage flooding.

Billing Enquiries (8am - 8pm Mon-Fri, 8am - 1pm Sat)
08457 500 500

If you're [moving home](#), looking to agree payment arrangements or are expecting to have problems paying your bill, call our billing enquiries team.

Alternatively, use the website to view an [explanation of your bill](#), find out how you can set up a [Direct Debit](#), look at other [ways to pay your bill](#) or [update a meter reading](#).

Severn Trent Water offers very clear contact information, including the hours of service.

The energy websites didn't fare well for this guideline, with only 2 energy suppliers scoring 3 or more out of 5. Only 1 water supplier scored less than 3 out of 5 (with 5 scoring 5).

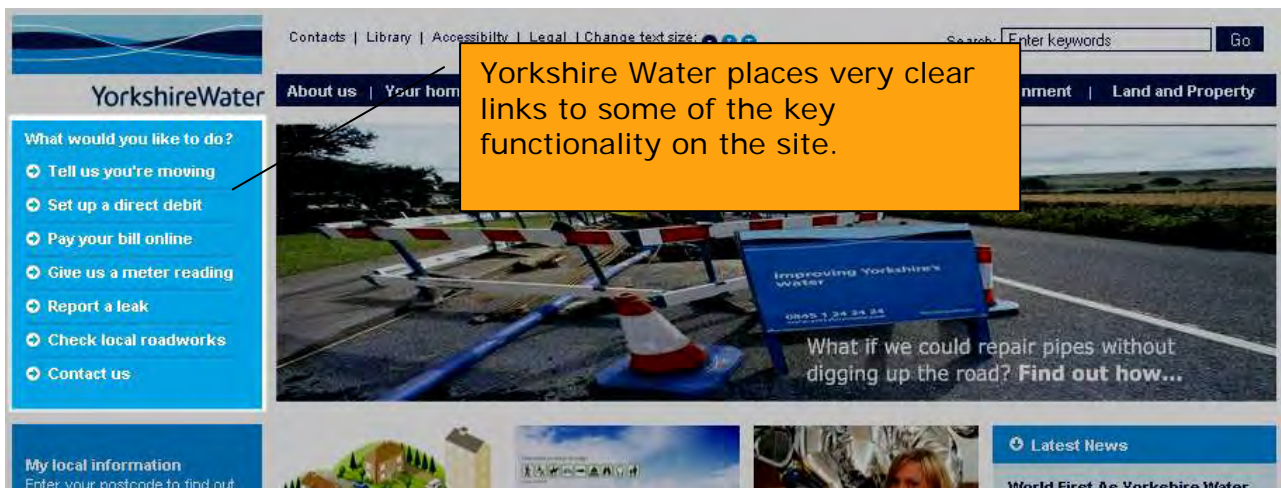
Category: Site and homepage priorities

2. Prominent calls-to-action to main tasks made available

Average score: (2.8 out of 5) [Last year: 1.3]

One of the main goals for each of these online suppliers is of course for users to self-serve. Key online tasks could include paying a bill, providing a meter reading, getting a quote, viewing prices and switching suppliers. As such, it's crucial that every page within the relevant section has very strong calls-to-action to these key tasks.

The call-to-action should visually stand out from the text on the page and should be formatted the same on each page. It should however be formatted differently to all other items on the page so it really stands out.



Overall, the websites scored poorly for providing this kind of support, but there was a noticeable improvement from last year.

Previously 3 of the energy suppliers scored below 3 for this guideline and no water suppliers scored higher than 2. This year all but 2 energy suppliers and 5 water suppliers scored 3 or over. Often the main content area (the homepage) was taken up with marketing information instead of the key calls-to-action, but sites appear to be aware that a change is needed.

Category: General

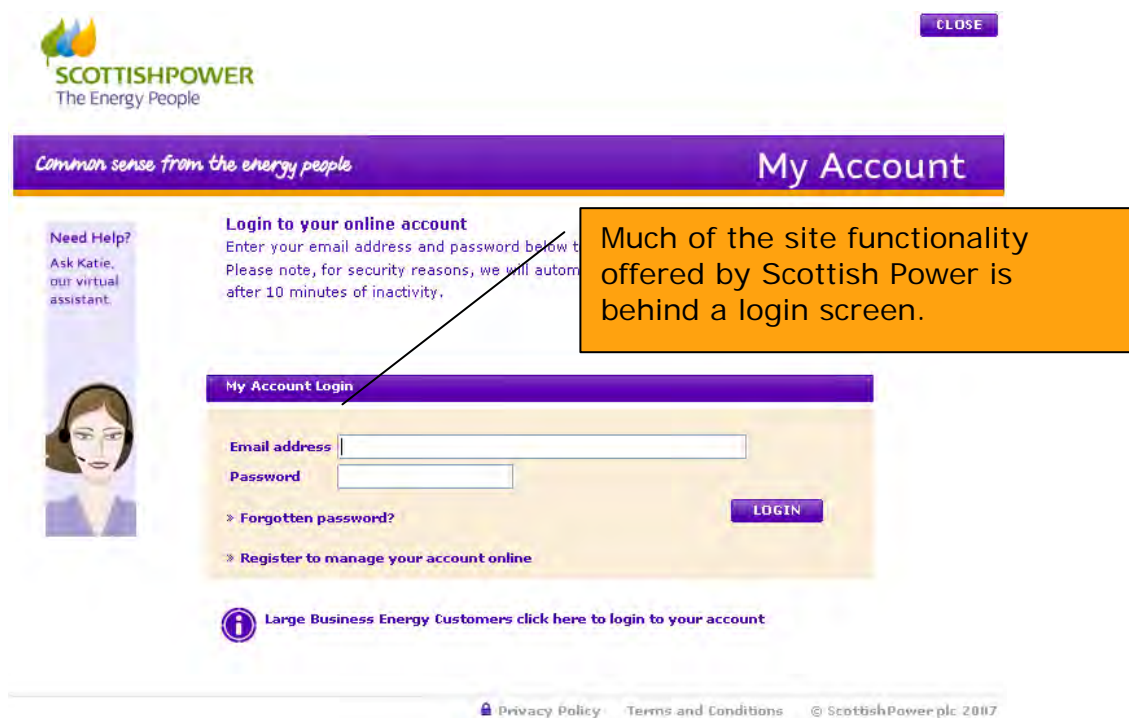
3. Key tasks don't require registration

Average score: (4.1 out of 5) [Last year: 1.9]

Users shouldn't be required to register or login to complete key tasks, such as:

- Paying online
- Giving meter reading
- Getting a quote
- Viewing prices

If they must register users may abandon the site, preferring to use costlier methods of contact or abandoning their enquiry altogether.



With a higher average score than last year, most websites did well with this guideline. 4 energy supplier sites scored 3 or more for this. Water supplier sites also did well with none scoring below 4.

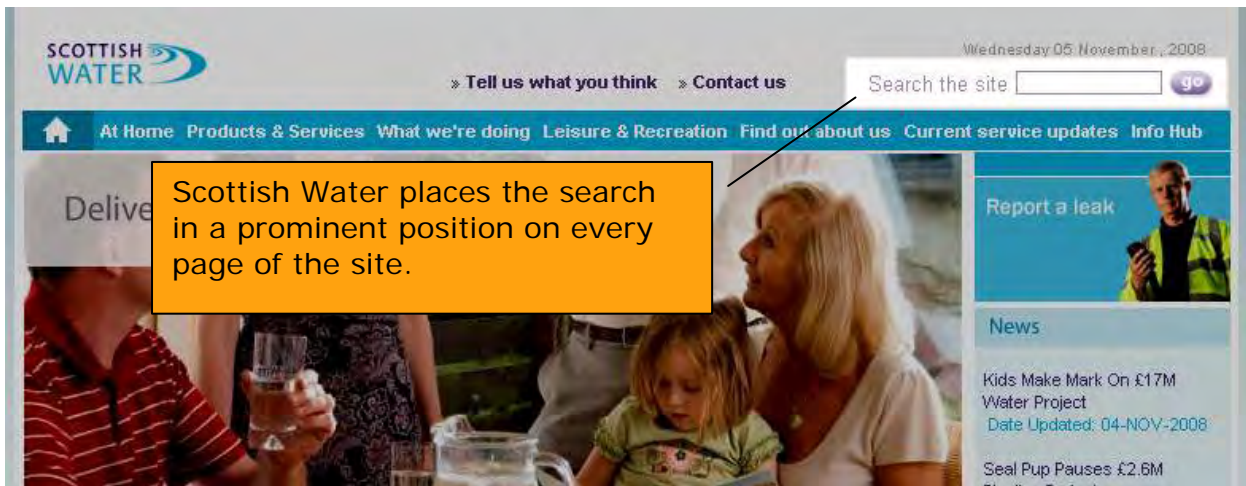
Category: General

4. Search is in an obvious and consistent place on every page

Average score: 4.0 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.8]

Website users shouldn't have to hunt around to find what they're looking for, no matter what site they're on.

The search box should be promoted high up on the page to provide a quick route to support users' information needs, and be in a consistent place on every page.



With an average score of 4.0, the sites are performing well for this important guideline.

Having a search is a fairly basic requirement with only the simplest of sites not needing to have one. 3 sites reviewed didn't have a search and as such may frustrate users.

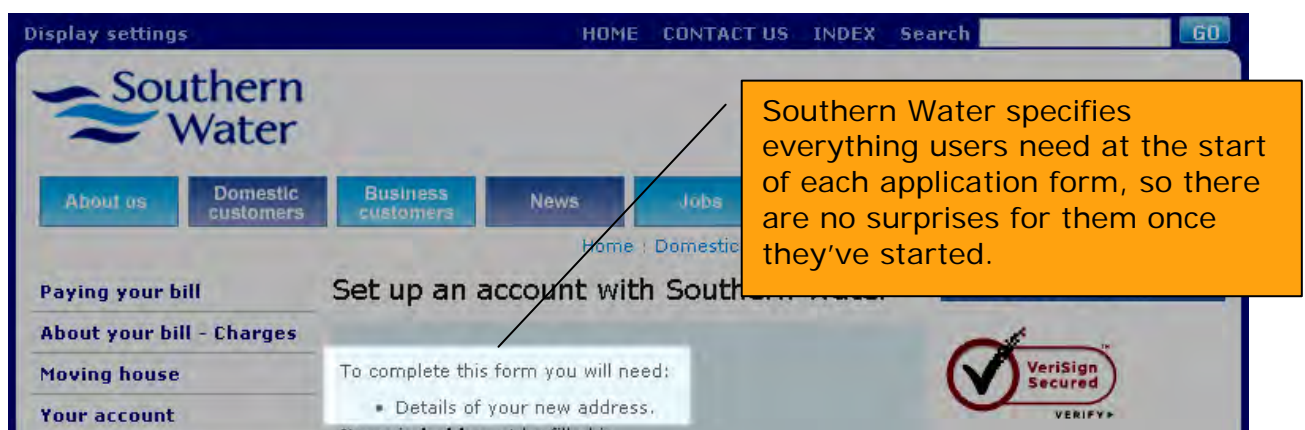
Category: Sign-up (water companies only)

5. Checklist of requirements clearly displayed upfront

Average score: (0.5 out of 5) [Last year: 1.7]

Before entering into any process on any website it's essential that users' expectations are clearly set out. A variety of information is required from users when signing-up to a water supplier, some of which they may not know off-hand. This can include bank details, recent energy bills and the current meter reading.

There's nothing worse for web users to spend 5-10 minutes filling in a form only to find out they don't have all the information they need.



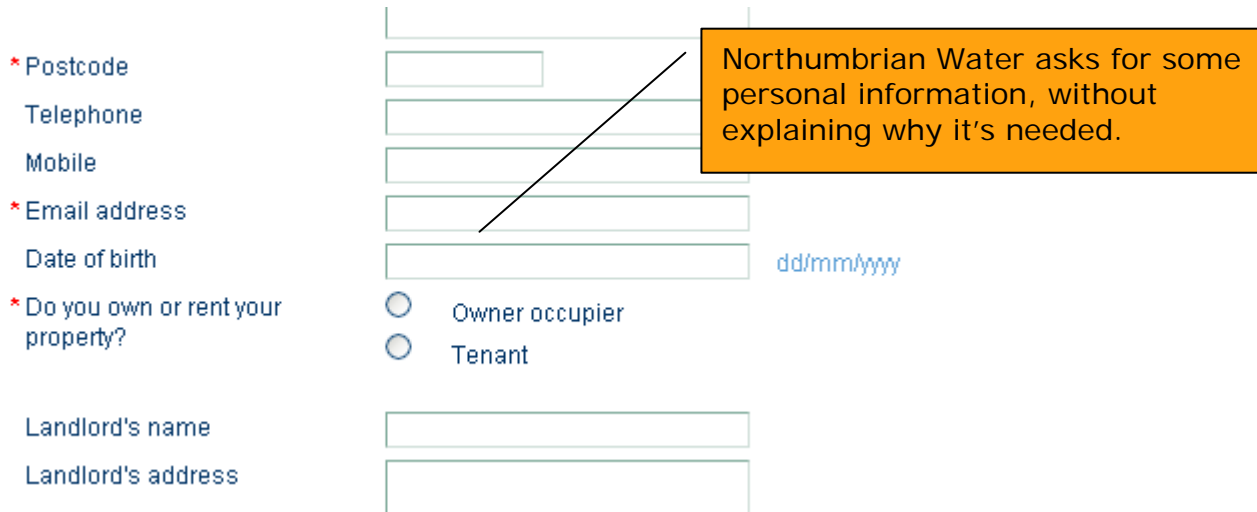
With just 1 website gaining any points against this guideline, too many websites are running the risk of forcing users to abandon a half-completed form, wasting their effort.

Category: Sign-up (water companies only)

6. Explanation for why personal or ambiguous information is required

Average score: (2.5 out of 5) [Last year: 0.4]

A brief explanation of why certain 'personal' information is required can make the difference between users filling out a form or resorting to more costly enquiry avenues (e.g. picking up the phone) to clarify why information is needed.



The image shows a sign-up form with the following fields:

- * Postcode
- Telephone
- Mobile
- * Email address
- Date of birth (with a placeholder 'dd/mm/yyyy')
- * Do you own or rent your property? (with radio buttons for 'Owner occupier' and 'Tenant')
- Landlord's name
- Landlord's address

An orange callout box points to the form with the text: "Northumbrian Water asks for some personal information, without explaining why it's needed."

There was a clear division between sites either scoring highly or those scoring 0. This was because several sites didn't ask for personal information (beyond name and address), whilst others continued to ask for more controversial information (such as date-of-birth) with no explanation as to why it was needed.

These sites need to provide simple and concise explanations to build trust with their users.

Category: Sign-up (water companies only)

7. Noticeable and easy-to-understand progress bar utilised

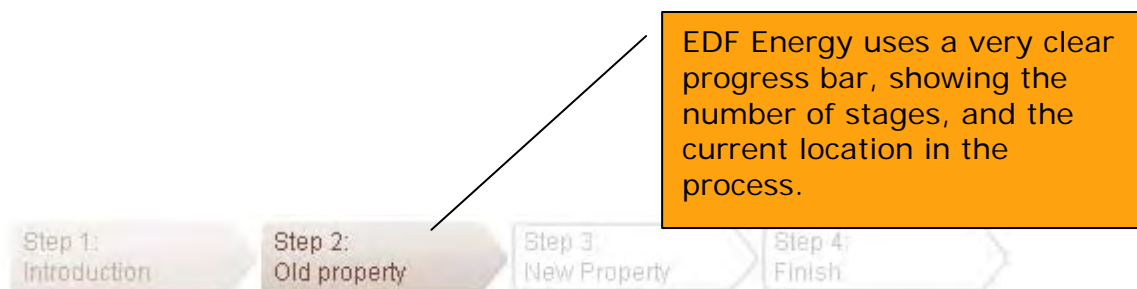
Average score: (2.1 out of 5) [Last year: 0.3]

When it comes to setting expectations within any online transaction, a progress bar is a great way of feeding back to users where they are, where they've been and where they're going.

The progress bar should:

- ▣ Be very easy to spot
- ▣ Use easy-to-understand language
- ▣ Highlight users' current location
- ▣ Have the appearance of a process flow

Even if there's only 1 page to a form this should be explained at the top of the page.



Few sites used long, multiple page forms, but those that did failed to score highly for this guideline, implying care must be taken with this. Those sites using 1-page forms often failed to explain that there was only one page to the form, and the resulting forms were often long and laborious. Only 1 site scored well for this guideline, with 4 out of 5.

Category: Sign-up (water companies only)

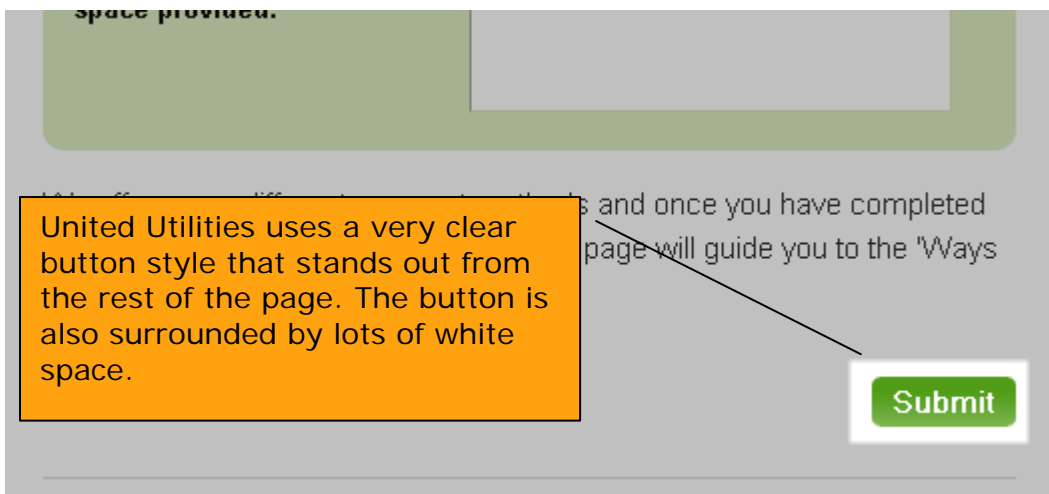
8. Well designed buttons used with a different format to other buttons

Average score: (2.1 out of 5) [Last year: 1.5]

The 'proceed' buttons on each page should use identical formatting and have a different background colour to everything else on the page. This will ensure users always know what to look for when seeking to proceed and can easily find this crucial button.

To further aid findability, the button should also have plenty of white space around it.

For forms with multiple pages, the buttons preceding the last page should be labelled "Next" or "Proceed", whilst the final page should use "Submit" (all using the same formatting).



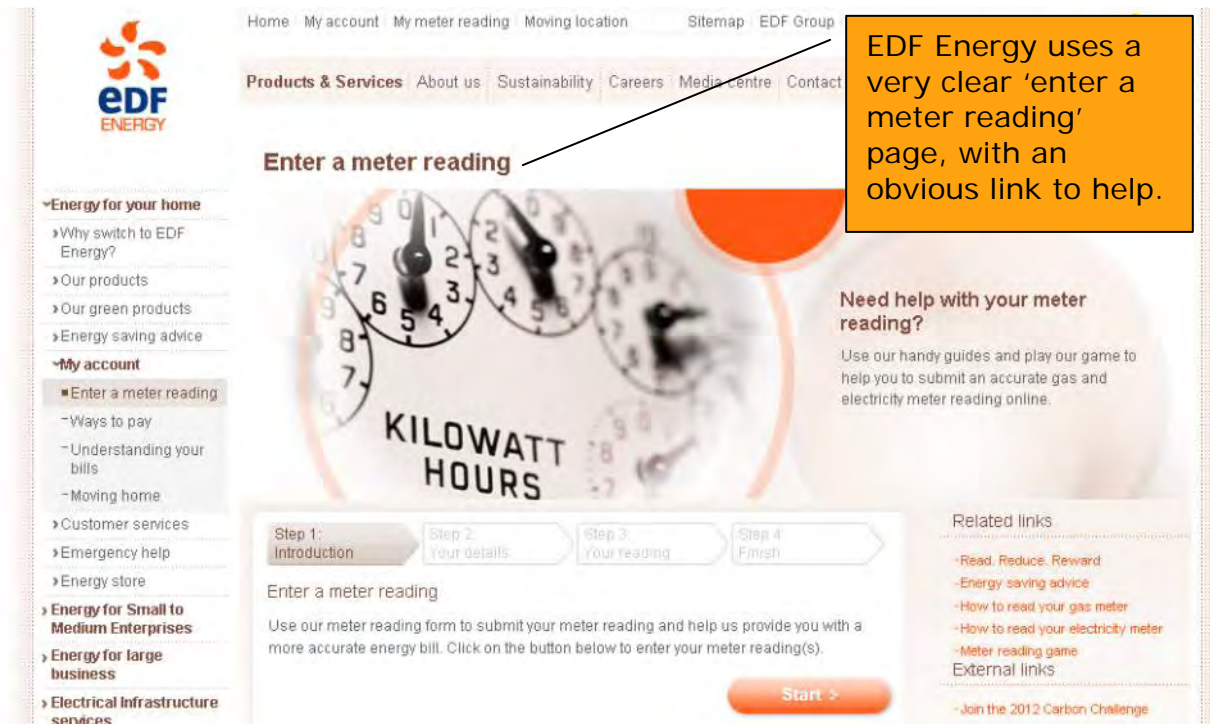
With an average of 2.1 out of 5, this guideline needs to have more attention paid to it. Only 1 site scored 5, with the majority scoring 3. This is a slight increase from last year, but further care must be paid to this guideline.

Category: Meter readings

9. Giving a reading online is possible

Average score: (4.4 out of 5) [Last year: 3.2]

The ability to give a meter reading online is of course important in ensuring users can self-serve online.



EDF Energy uses a very clear 'enter a meter reading' page, with an obvious link to help.

This functionality is almost pervasive, with only 1 energy and 1 water supplier not offering it.

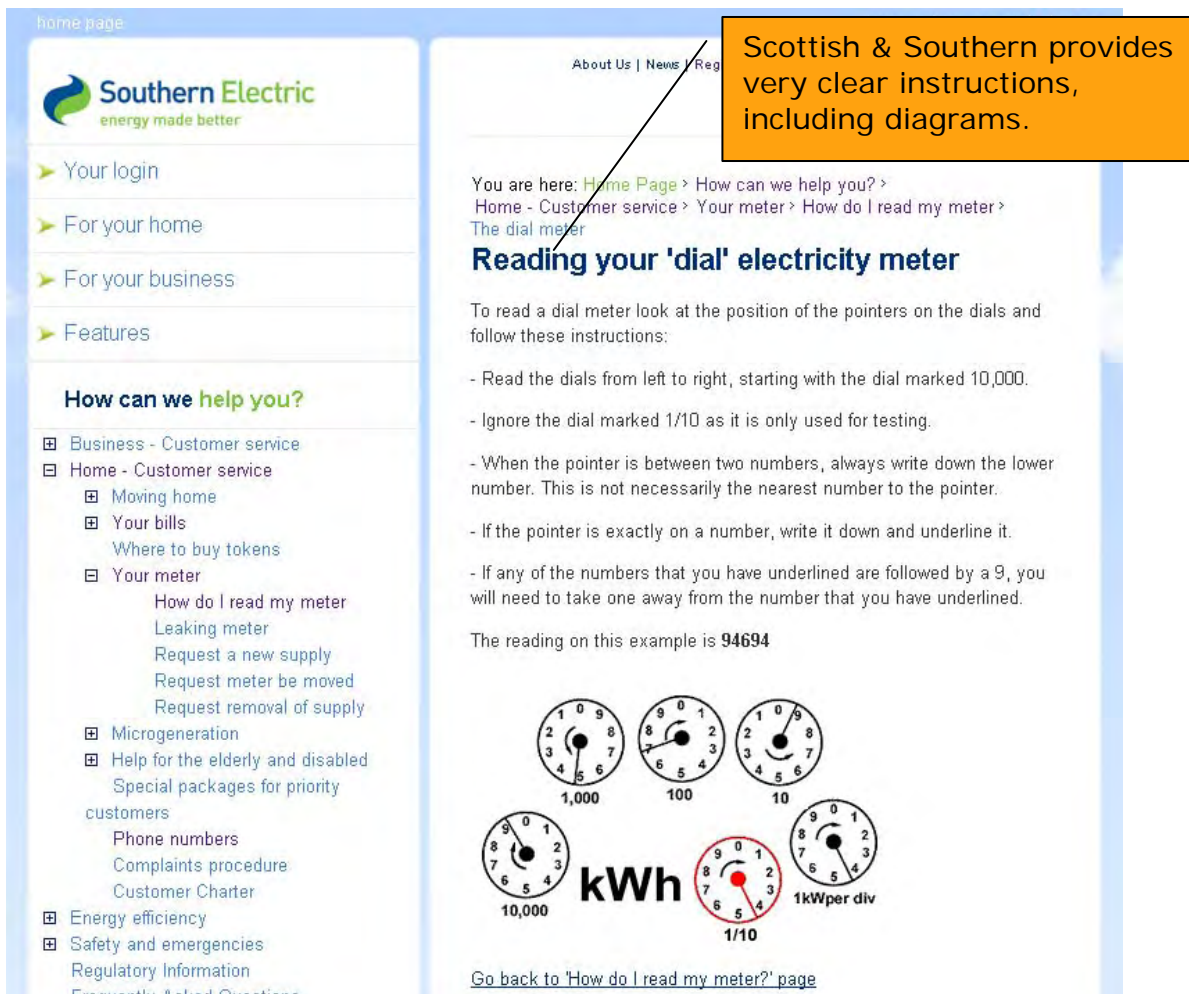
Category: Meter readings

10. Help on finding meter reading is provided

Average score: (2.5 out of 5) [Last year: 1.8]

Additional information should be provided when site visitors may be unsure as to how to read a meter. This could be provided in the form of a clickable question mark or similar icon directly next to the relevant form label. This help icon should visually stand out on the page. When users click on the icon, help should appear either in a pop-up window or on the page.

As this is an important reason for visiting the site, it could be argued that 'Help on finding a meter reading' warrants its own navigation item with clear instructions and diagrams provided on-page.



home page

About Us | News | Reg

Scottish & Southern provides very clear instructions, including diagrams.

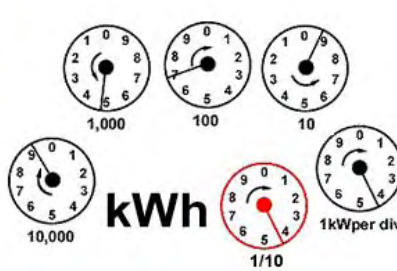
You are here: [Home Page](#) > [How can we help you?](#) > [Home - Customer service](#) > [Your meter](#) > [How do I read my meter?](#) > [The dial meter](#)

Reading your 'dial' electricity meter

To read a dial meter look at the position of the pointers on the dials and follow these instructions:

- Read the dials from left to right, starting with the dial marked 10,000.
- Ignore the dial marked 1/10 as it is only used for testing.
- When the pointer is between two numbers, always write down the lower number. This is not necessarily the nearest number to the pointer.
- If the pointer is exactly on a number, write it down and underline it.
- If any of the numbers that you have underlined are followed by a 9, you will need to take one away from the number that you have underlined.

The reading on this example is **94694**



kWh **1kWper div**

[Go back to 'How do I read my meter?' page](#)

How can we help you?

- Business - Customer service
- Home - Customer service
 - Moving home
 - Your bills
 - Where to buy tokens
 - Your meter
 - How do I read my meter
 - Leaking meter
 - Request a new supply
 - Request meter be moved
 - Request removal of supply
 - Microgeneration
 - Help for the elderly and disabled
 - Special packages for priority customers
 - Phone numbers
 - Complaints procedure
 - Customer Charter
 - Energy efficiency
 - Safety and emergencies
 - Regulatory Information
 - Frequently Asked Questions

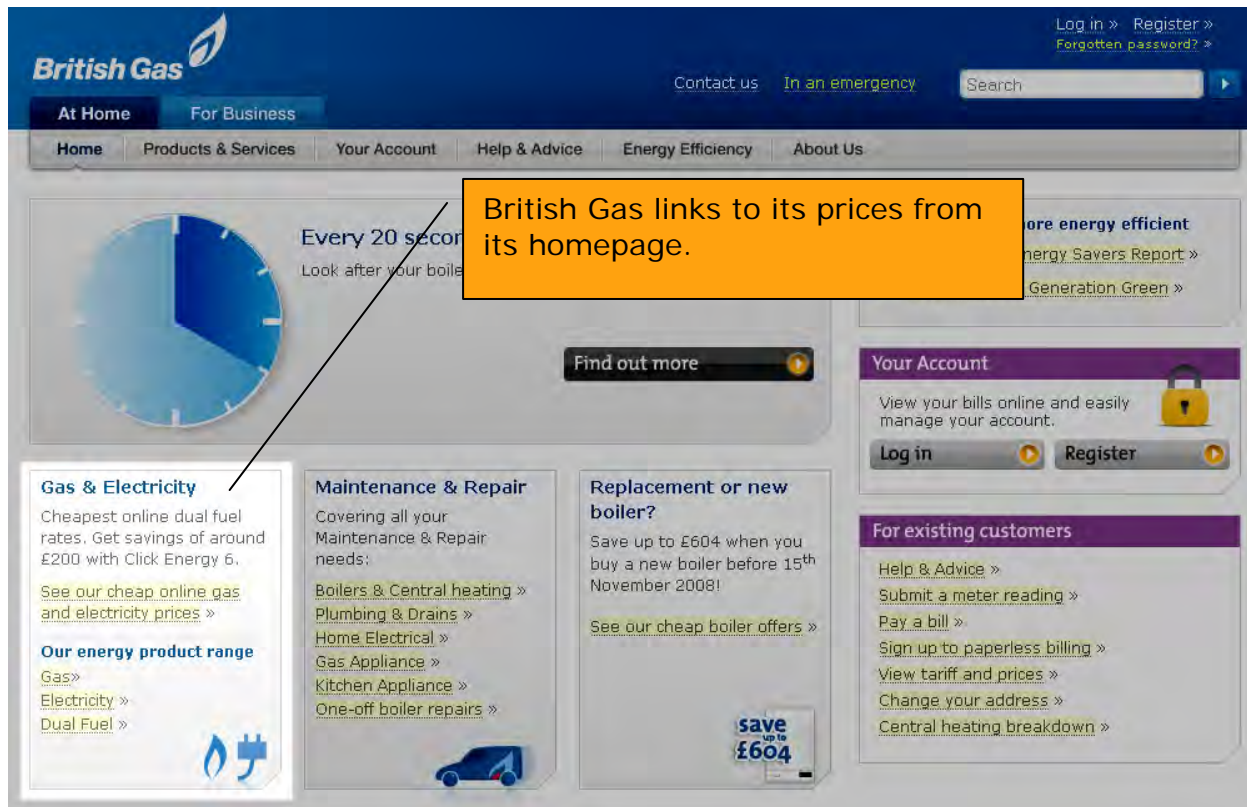
The energy suppliers did well with this guideline, with 4 out of 6 of them scoring 5 out of 5. The water supplier websites fared less well, with only 3 of 11 scoring 5 (4 offered no help at all).

Category: Meter readings

11. Current tariff is easy to find

Average score: (3.5 out of 5) [Last year: 1.7]

Users will likely spend as short an amount of time as possible on each site when comparing prices and tariffs. It's therefore essential that the tariff and pricing is easy to find otherwise users may dismiss the site altogether.



The screenshot shows the British Gas website homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with 'At Home' and 'For Business' tabs, and a secondary bar with 'Home', 'Products & Services', 'Your Account', 'Help & Advice', 'Energy Efficiency', and 'About Us'. A search bar is located on the right. Below the navigation, there are several promotional banners and sections. A callout box with an orange background and black text points to a link in the 'For existing customers' section. The callout text reads: 'British Gas links to its prices from its homepage.' The link it points to is 'View tariff and prices'.

With an average of 3.5 out of 5 (a large increase from last year's 1.7), sites are actively seeking to improve the clarity of their charges. Companies are recognising that this is a key piece of information to users and making it more readily available. Last year only 2 sites scored more than 3; this year 9 did.

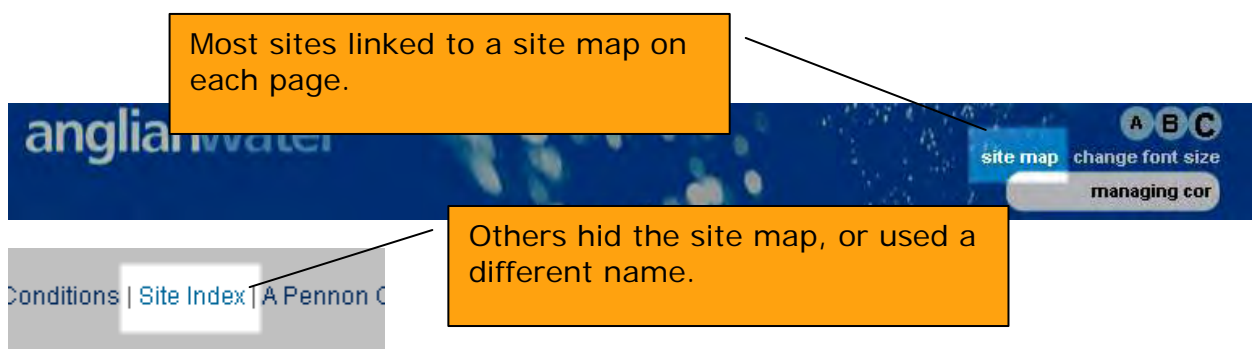
Category: Navigation

12. Site offers a simple site map, called 'site map'

Average score: (3.7 out of 5) [Last year: 2.8]

Most users try to get an overview of what a website 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 see the site as a whole.



The majority of websites scored very highly on this guideline with clear links to a site map. All 6 energy companies scored 5 for this guideline, but only half of the water companies received 5 out of 5. Many used a different name, which users may struggle to find (as it will be different from their expectations).

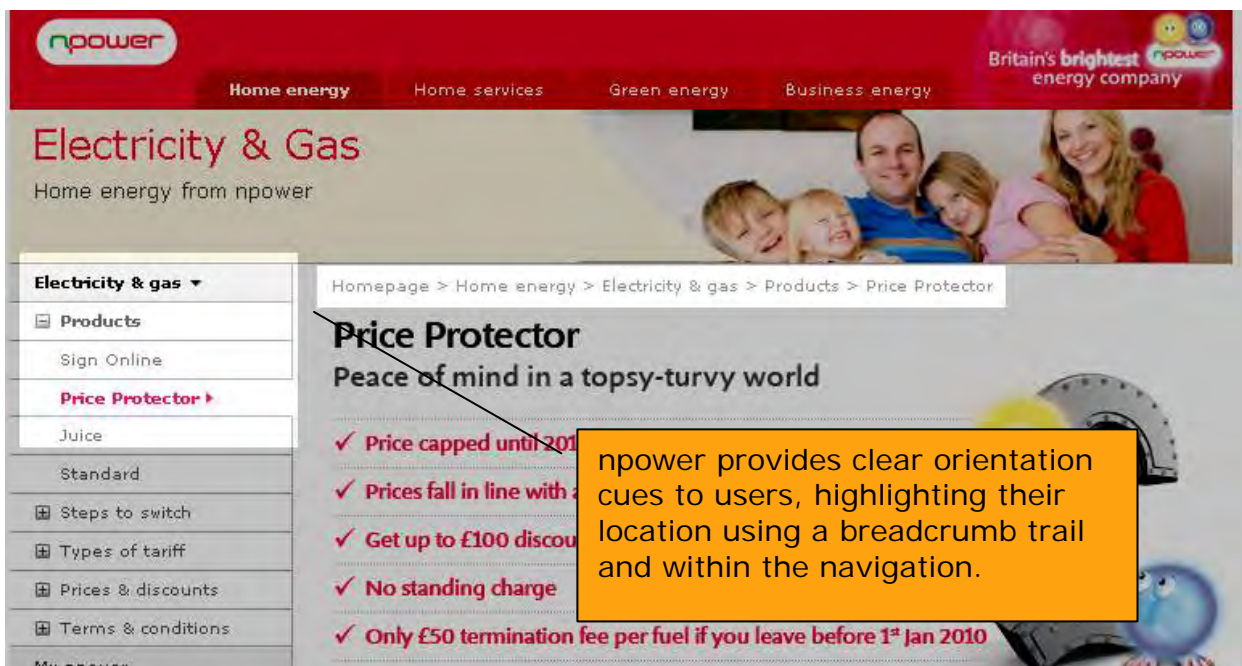
Category: Navigation

13. Clear orientation cues provided

Average score: (4.1 out of 5) [Last year: 3.9]

Helping site visitors understand where they are within the site relies on a number of orientation cues. When these orientation cues are missing users have to play a guessing game to establish where they are and what other information is available.

Sites should highlight with the navigation where users are located, include a clear breadcrumb trail and have a prominent main heading on each page.



As one of the highest scoring guidelines within the study, the importance of clearly displaying users' location is recognised as significant. 2 energy supplier websites scored 5 out of 5 on this and 5 water supplier websites also scored 5. No site scored below 3 for this guideline.

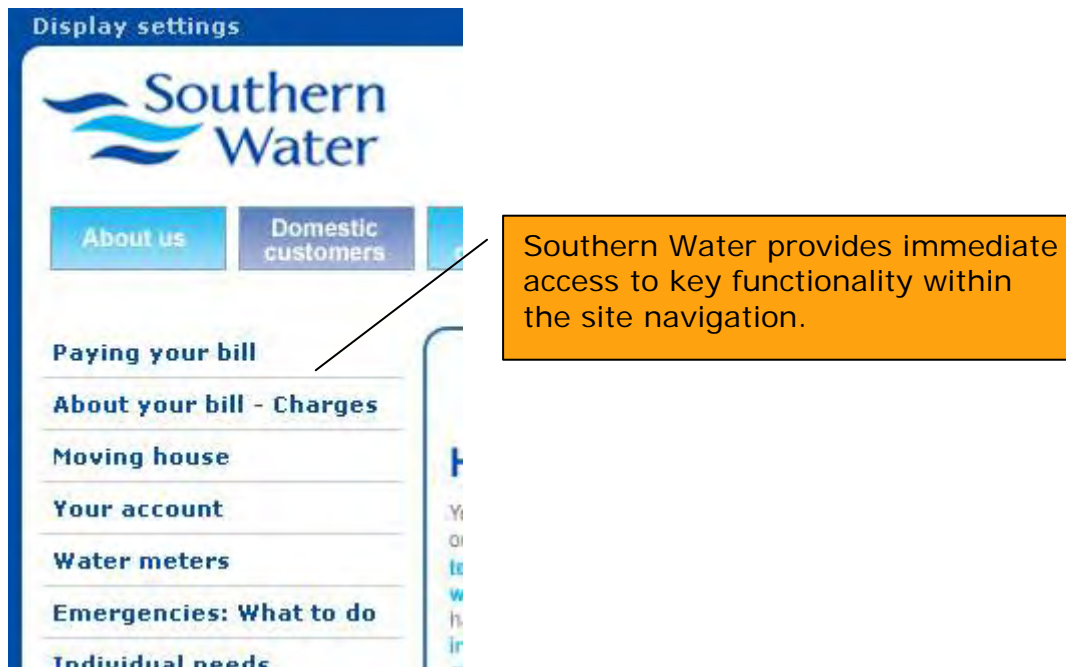
Category: Navigation

14. Key features easily located through the main navigation

Average score: (2.5 out of 5) [Last year: 3.4]

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

It's also essential that key features and items are clearly represented in the navigation.



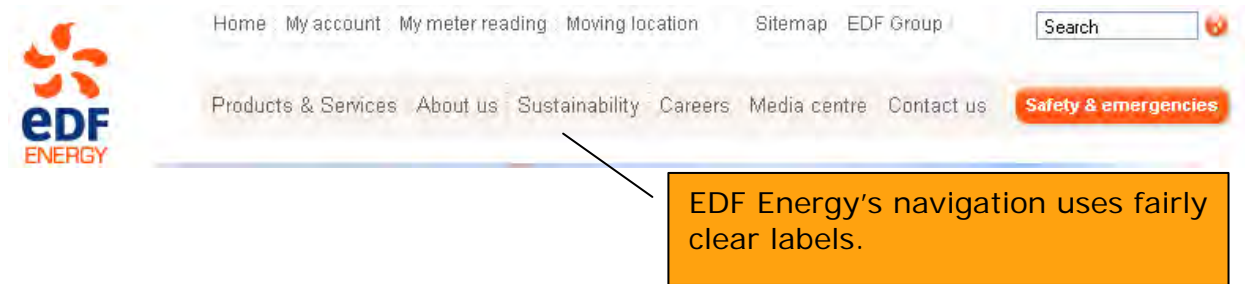
The sites scored poorly for this guideline with the majority of all sites scoring 3 out of 5 or below. This is a significant drop from last year.

Category: Navigation

15. Navigation labels are easy to understand

Average score: (3.4 out of 5) [Last year: 3.1]

Web users are visiting energy and water suppliers with key tasks in mind. It's essential that these key tasks are represented in the navigation and that the labels are clear and easy to understand.



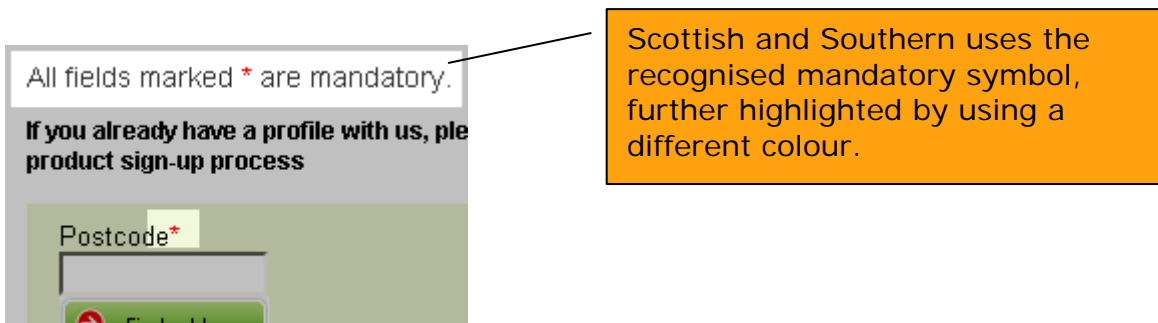
Only 3 websites scored below 3 for this guideline. 5 of the 6 energy supplier websites scored 4 out of 5 for this guideline.

Category: Forms

16. Required/optional fields are clearly indicated

Average score: (3.4 out of 5) [Last year: 2.5]

It's a very well known usability guideline with forms to show web users which fields are required and which are optional. The most common way of doing this, and one to which many web users are accustomed, is by inserting an asterisk next to required fields. This asterisk should ideally be of a different colour and be explained at the top of the page.



The energy suppliers improved with this guideline, with all but 2 scoring 4 or 5 (up from half in 2007). The water supplier websites also fared well with 6 sites scoring 4 or 5 out of 5.

Category: Forms

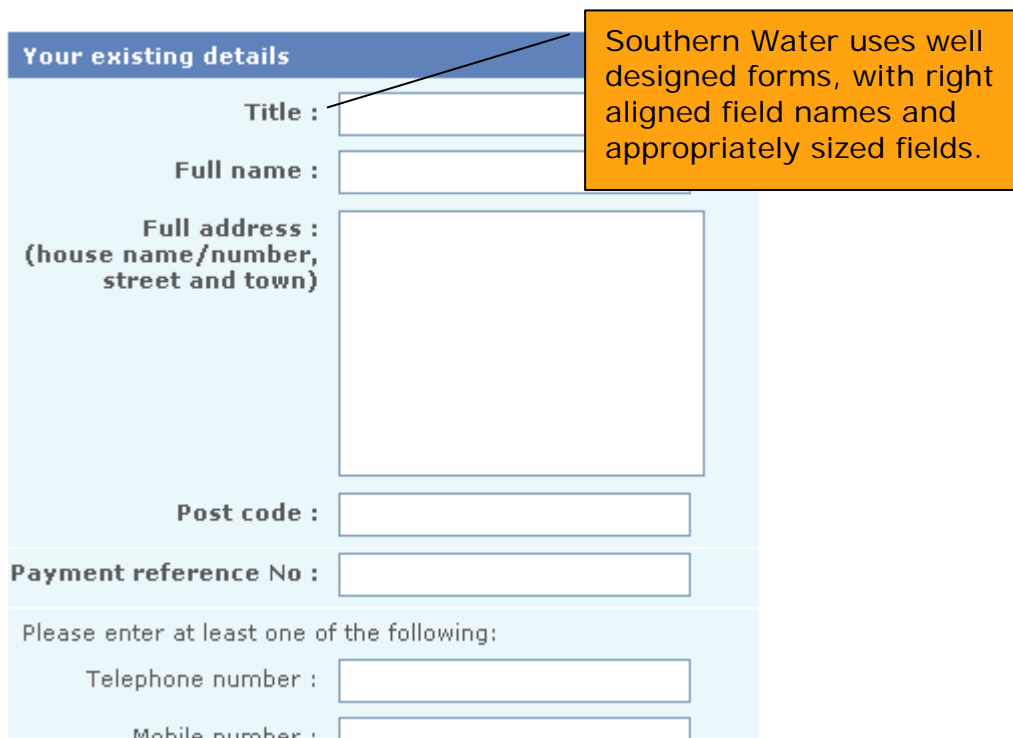
17. Forms are well laid out

Average score: (2.9 out of 5) [Last year: 2.6]

It's essential that forms are clearly laid out, especially with longer forms with many fields. In particular, labels should be right aligned and date fields easy to use (not restricted to a single format).

There are of course a myriad of ways a date can be written out. Separating the date field into 3 separate input fields saves users from working out whether to use spaces/hyphens/dashes to separate the date, month and year.

A clickable calendar next to the input fields is also useful to help users select an upcoming date (but not a birthday).



Your existing details

Title :

Full name :

Full address :
(house name/number,
street and town)

Post code :

Payment reference No :

Please enter at least one of the following:

Telephone number :

Mobile number :

Southern Water uses well designed forms, with right aligned field names and appropriately sized fields.

The sites showed mixed scores across the board with this guideline, the most common problems being that form fields were left aligned and contained difficult-to-use date fields.

Category: Forms

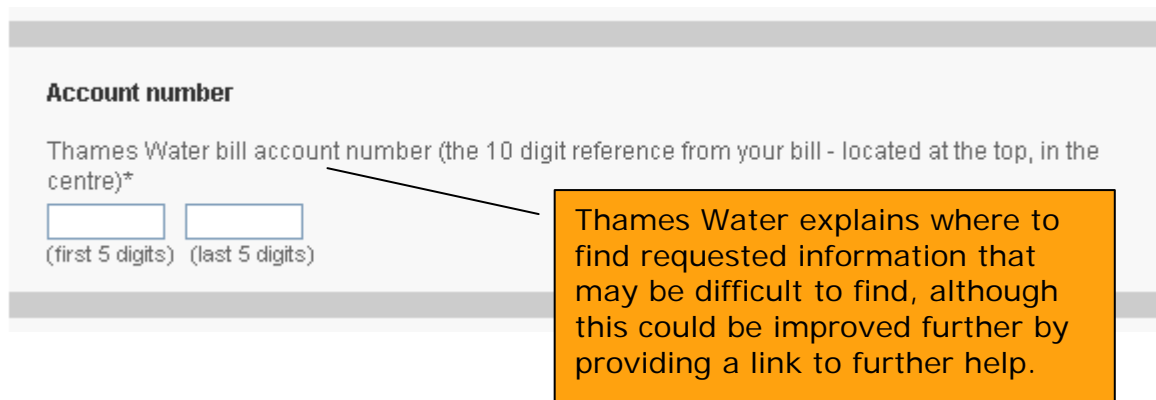
18. Contextual help provided where appropriate

Average score: (1.5 out of 5) [Last year: 1.8]

When working through a form, web users will often need contextual help to aid them in completing some of the fields. This help is usually accessed by clicking on a question mark (or a similar icon) and the help text is opened in a new window (or displayed on the page).

Because the help typically opens in a small pop-up window users are fully aware of how to return to the page they were on. They can then toggle between this new window and the main page, using the help text as they complete the form.

This additional help should be provided anywhere where there is a possibility of a site visitor becoming stuck, otherwise they're forced to call in or abandon the form altogether.



Account number

Thames Water bill account number (the 10 digit reference from your bill - located at the top, in the centre)*

(first 5 digits) (last 5 digits)

Thames Water explains where to find requested information that may be difficult to find, although this could be improved further by providing a link to further help.

A disappointing 10 of 11 water supplier websites scored 0 or 1 out of 5 for this crucial guideline. Energy supplier websites fared better with 4 of 6 scoring 5.

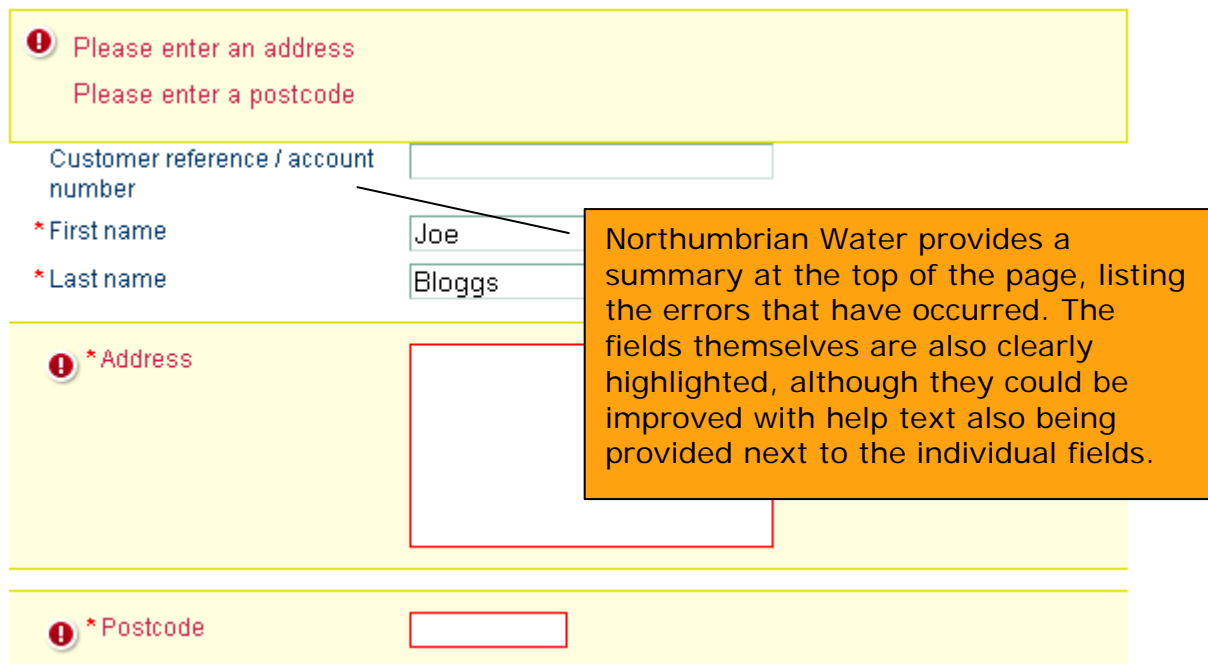
Category: Forms

19. Effective error handling is employed

Average score: (1.7 out of 5) [Last year: 2.2]

Web users often make mistakes 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. This written description summarising the errors should be presented at the top of the page, so it's the first thing they see after submitting the form page.

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. This is because 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 as an alert pop up then there's no reminder as to what the error was when the alert is closed.



The screenshot shows a form with several error handling examples. At the top, a yellow box contains a red exclamation mark icon and the text "Please enter an address" and "Please enter a postcode". Below this, there are input fields for "Customer reference / account number", "* First name" (with "Joe" entered), and "* Last name" (with "Bloggs" entered). A red box highlights the "Address" field, which is empty. Below that, a red box highlights the "Postcode" field, which is empty. An orange callout box points to the "Address" field and contains the text: "Northumbrian Water provides a summary at the top of the page, listing the errors that have occurred. The fields themselves are also clearly highlighted, although they could be improved with help text also being provided next to the individual fields."

The sites struggled with this guideline, with only 1 site scoring 4 out of 5. This needs to be immediately improved, as web users often have problems completing forms.

Category: Forms

20. Unnecessary information not required in forms

Average score: (2.4 out of 5) [Last year: 2.6]



The screenshot shows a 'Moving house' form on the Northumbrian Water website. The form is titled 'Moving house' and contains numerous fields for personal and property information, including current and new addresses, contact details, and occupancy status. A callout box points to the form with the text: 'Northumbrian Water requires a phenomenal amount of information simply to submit a change of address.'

Considering the main goal of most utility sites is to have visitors sign-up to an energy or water supplier, it's crucial that unnecessary information isn't requested when not needed. Users can be very protective about their personal information and may be put off if they're asked questions which don't seem immediately relevant. Web users are often worried that their data is used for marketing.

Asking for this extra information is unconstructive if it dissuades users from completing the form.

Northumbrian Water requires a phenomenal amount of information simply to submit a change of address.

This disappointing average score was down to the low scores of the water supplier websites. Only 1 of 11 sites scored 5, compared to the energy supplier websites which had 4 of 6 sites scoring 5.

Category: Switching (energy companies only)

21. Easy-to-use quote & price savings calculator provided

Average score: (3.3 out of 5) [Last year: 4.0]

It's essential that a quote tariff is made as clear as possible to users. A key feature such as a price savings or a quote calculator will give site visitors immediate information on pricing and build trust with the site.



The screenshot shows the npower website homepage. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the npower logo, the tagline 'Britain's brightest energy company', and a 'My npower' button. Below the navigation bar is a large image of a woman and a child sitting on a red sofa. A yellow callout box with a black border and a black arrow pointing to the 'Quick quote' button contains the text: 'npower provides a clear 'quick quote' functionality directly on the homepage.' Below the image is a navigation menu with links for 'My npower', 'Electricity & gas', 'Go green', 'Customer service', and 'Moving home'. The main content area is divided into several sections: a 'See how much you could save!' section with a 'Quick quote' button and a 'Switch to npower' button; a 'View your bills online' section with a 'View your bills online' link; a 'Price protection' section with a 'Find out more' link; a 'CommunityMark award' section with a 'Find out more' link; a 'A tariff for those in need' section; a 'Products & services' section with links for 'Electricity & Gas', 'npower Juice', 'npower Solar', 'Gas boilers', 'Spreading warmth', and 'Prices in your area'; a 'Customer service' section with links for 'Send a meter reading', 'View or pay my bills', 'Change my details', 'Moving home', 'FAQ', and 'Contact us'; and an 'Energy Prices' section with a 'Find out more' link and a video thumbnail featuring Peter Snow and Kevin Miles.

The energy sites continued to score well with this guideline; however the fall in the average was caused by 1 site seemingly no longer offering this functionality.

Category: Switching (energy companies only)

22. Price list is provided and is easy-to-use

Average score: (2.7 out of 5) [Last year: 3.0]

A strong call-to-action to a price list shows transparency, credibility and trust. The price list should also be closely related to the quote/savings calculator(s). Site visitors will likely be looking for this feature, so it should be provided in an easy-to-understand format.

Gas and Electricity prices

We review our prices and tariffs regularly – to check they stay competitive and offer real value for money. Check them out for yourself – and why not use our Price Savings Calculator to see how much you could save with EDF Energy?

Click on the title links below (eg. Electricity prices are available for the gas and electricity)

EDF Energy uses a clear 'prices' page, linking to PDFs showing the breakdown of prices.

Electricity (pdf)	Gas (pdf)	EDF Energy Pay As You Go (pdf)	Green Tariff (pdf)	Climate Balance (pdf)
Standard	Standard	Electricity	Standard	Electricity
Economy 7		Gas	Economy 7	Standard
Economy 10				Economy 7

2 sites scored 5 out of 5, with the other 4 sites missing out on potential customers by making their prices hard to find.

Category: Switching (energy companies only)

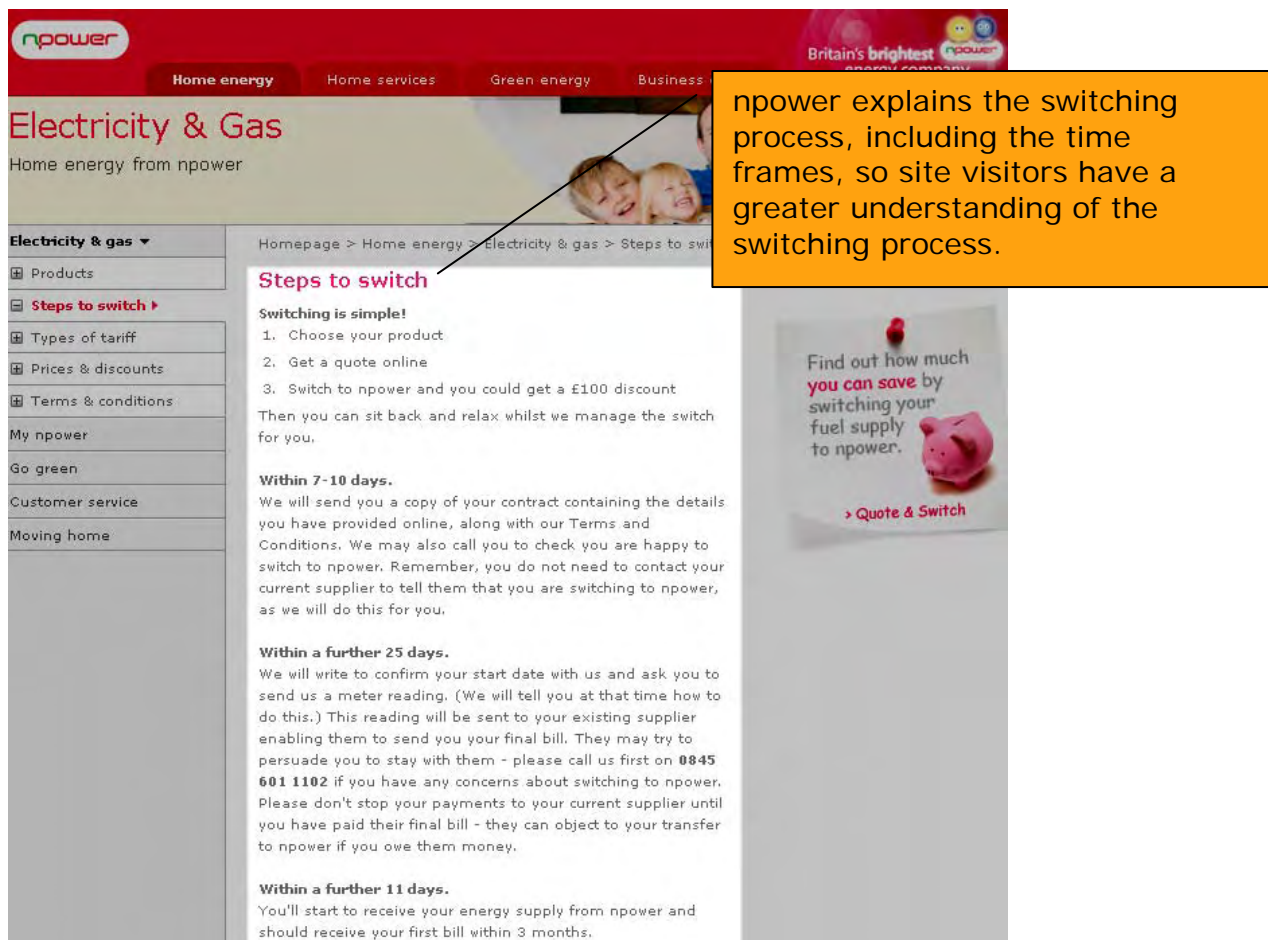
23. Good explanation of switching process provided before signing up

Average score: (1.7 out of 5) [Last year: 1.7]

Web users often aren't interested in reading the small print or finding out about the ins-and-outs of the switching process. Rather, many users will enter straight into the process to see if they can get a better quote than their existing supplier.

Providing a clear bulleted list of the process will inform users of what to expect and will meet their expectations. For example:

- Process takes up to 6 weeks
- The customer has 14 days to change mind, after which current supplier is given 4 weeks notice.



npower explains the switching process, including the time frames, so site visitors have a greater understanding of the switching process.

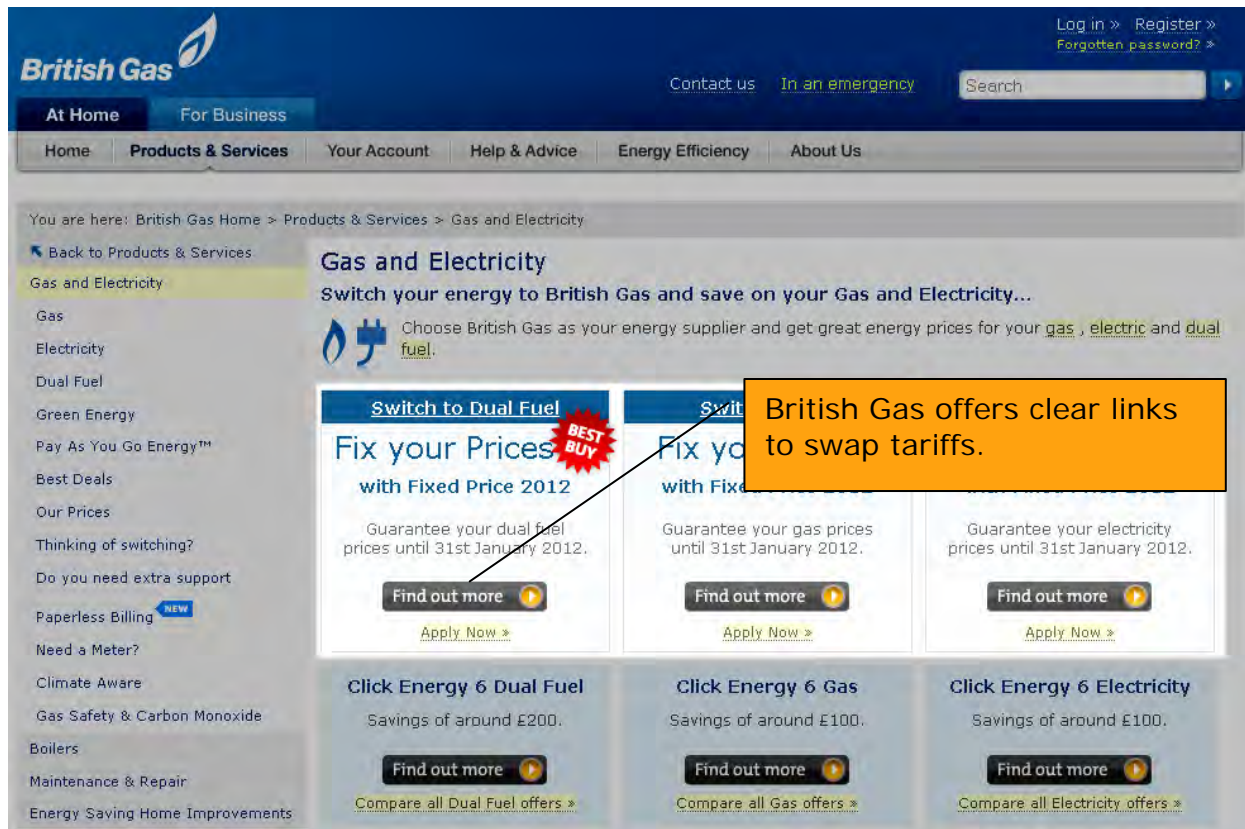
There was a clear division here with 3 sites scoring some points and 3 scoring 0 out of 5. If the switching process was broken down into easy-to-understand steps then more potential customers may take the plunge.

Category: Switching (energy companies only)

24. Clear tariff names/descriptions provided & current tariff is easy to change

Average score: (2.8 out of 5) [Last year: 2.0]

It's of course crucial to be up-front about tariffs and costs. To promote trust it's important to allow current customers to easily change their current tariffs (and show potential customers how easy it is).



The screenshot shows the British Gas website's 'Gas and Electricity' section. The page features a navigation menu with 'Products & Services' selected. The main content area is titled 'Gas and Electricity' and includes a sub-header 'Switch your energy to British Gas and save on your Gas and Electricity...'. Below this, there are three prominent offers for 'Fix your Prices with Fixed Price 2012' for Dual Fuel, Gas, and Electricity. Each offer includes a 'Find out more' button and an 'Apply Now' link. A yellow callout box with a red arrow points to the 'Find out more' button for the Dual Fuel offer, containing the text: 'British Gas offers clear links to swap tariffs.' The page also features a sidebar with various service links and a footer with contact information.

This guideline saw an improvement from last year, with 2 sites scoring 4 or 5 out of 5. There was a wide range of scores, so some sites need to pay careful attention to this guideline.

Conclusion

With so much of the UK population going online, the opportunity for energy and water supplier websites 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 transactional support for key user services.

Quite simply, the majority of the 17 websites in this report aren't doing enough to provide the best possible online experience to their users. Improvements have been made from 2007, but with the average score still in the 50s, further improvements can easily be made. Many of the energy sites scored poorly even with regards to basic usability fundamentals.

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.

Appendix: Full results

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

Energy suppliers	Guideline number																								TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	
EDF Energy	2	3	3	5	-	-	-	-	5	5	5	5	3	4	4	2	4	5	3	5	3	5	3	2	76
npower	3	3	4	0	-	-	-	-	5	5	5	5	5	2	4	4	3	5	1	5	5	3	5	3	75
British Gas	2	3	4	5	-	-	-	-	5	5	3	5	4	2	4	4	5	0	3	5	0	1	0	4	64
Scottish & Southern Energy	4	1	4	0	-	-	-	-	0	5	4	5	5	0	2	5	3	5	2	2	4	5	0	5	61
Scottish Power	0	4	2	5	-	-	-	-	5	2	5	5	3	2	4	5	1	0	1	5	5	2	0	1	57
E.ON	2	2	2	5	-	-	-	-	5	0	0	5	3	2	4	3	4	5	3	2	3	0	2	2	54
Water suppliers																									
Southern Water	4	4	4	5	5	4	4	3	5	5	5	1	5	4	4	2	5	0	3	5	-	-	-	-	77
United Utilities	5	4	5	5	0	4	3	5	5	0	5	5	5	1	1	5	5	0	2	0	-	-	-	-	65
Thames Water	2	4	5	4	0	0	2	3	5	2	5	5	5	4	4	4	3	5	2	0	-	-	-	-	64
Severn Trent Water	5	2	4	5	0	4	3	3	5	1	1	5	5	3	4	4	3	0	2	2	-	-	-	-	61
Northumbrian Water	5	2	5	5	0	0	2	3	5	1	5	1	5	3	4	4	3	0	4	0	-	-	-	-	57
Anglian Water	5	3	5	4	0	4	2	3	5	5	3	5	3	2	2	2	1	0	0	2	-	-	-	-	56
Wessex Water	5	2	4	5	0	4	1	1	5	5	4	1	4	3	4	2	3	0	2	0	-	-	-	-	55
Yorkshire Water	5	5	5	5	0	4	2	1	5	1	2	0	4	3	3	3	2	0	0	2	-	-	-	-	52
Southwest Water	3	4	4	5	0	4	2	0	5	0	3	2	4	3	3	4	3	0	0	2	-	-	-	-	51
Dŵr Cymru Welsh Water	5	0	5	0	0	0	2	1	5	0	2	5	4	3	3	5	0	1	0	0	-	-	-	-	41
Scottish Water	3	2	4	5	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	3	3	2	3	0	1	0	1	3	-	-	-	-	32
TOTAL	60	48	69	68	5	28	23	23	75	42	59	63	70	43	57	58	49	26	29	40	20	16	10	17	
Average score	3.5	2.8	4.1	4.0	0.5	2.5	2.1	2.1	4.4	2.5	3.5	3.7	4.1	2.5	3.4	3.4	2.9	1.5	1.7	2.4	3.3	2.7	1.7	2.8	58.7



User experience research & design

About Webcredible

Webcredible is a user experience consultancy, offering a range of usability, accessibility & design services based around your specific requirements:

User-centered design

- ▣ Information architecture
- ▣ Interaction design

Web development & audits

- ▣ 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

Webcredible is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and respected user experience consultancies in the UK. Our 150+ research articles have been re-published on 100s of websites and we receive 200,000+ visitors to our website each month.

We are:

- ▣ **Focused on client needs** – Our aims are to ensure organisations most effectively disseminate information and increase conversion rates for companies.
- ▣ **Passionate** – The team here at Webcredible loves what they do and we only recruit staff passionate about usability and accessibility.
- ▣ **Approachable** – We're friendly and jargon-free. Consultants, despite being highly educated and experienced, only communicate in a user-friendly manner.

Clients include Airmiles, BBC, eBay, Lloyds TSB, Norwich Union, Sony, T-Mobile, Thomson and World Health Organization.

For more information please:

- ▣ Telephone 0870 242 6095
- ▣ E-mail info@webcredible.co.uk
- ▣ Visit www.webcredible.co.uk