

Part 1

Why central government uses forms

In this Part:

- The role of forms in central government
- The number and content of forms across central government

1.1 Government departments and agencies use forms to ensure that:

- the people dealing with them are correctly identified;
- the same information is collected from citizens in each policy area;
- officials obtain the information required by law to assess each case; and
- agencies can make decisions which are well-structured, based on evidence, consistent and equitable.

Yet asking for information in a very precise format, and using official phraseology, creates costs for citizens and businesses. People must spend time in understanding what is wanted, in ensuring that correct answers are given, and in supplying documentation or other elements asked for.

1.2 Our focus here is on government forms sent to citizens and completed by them personally or with only minimal help from others. (So we exclude forms sent to businesses or public agencies). In many cases people fill in a given form irregularly or even once only, so that its layout and requirements cannot become familiar to them. It seems particularly important that forms for citizens (and also for very small businesses, such as own account workers) are well-designed and straightforward to use.

1.3 In this study we have sought to understand in what ways citizens find forms difficult to complete (discussed in Part 3), and why government agencies produce such forms and how they keep them under review (covered in Part 2), in both cases focusing in detail on six case study forms. For the rest of this Part we cover three general aspects of forms:

- their role in the overall administrative process;
- the basic features of central government forms for citizens, assessed by a comprehensive census of 519 forms; and
- how UK forms compare with those in other leading liberal democracies.

The role of forms in central government

1.4 Forms are a highly routinised way of seeking information from citizens.

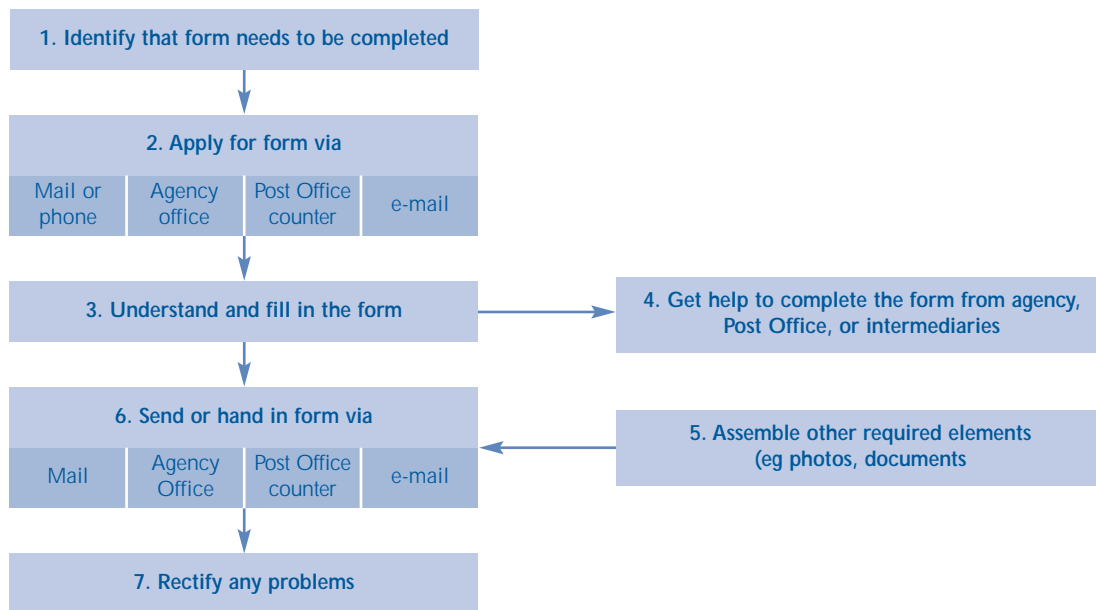
Departments and agencies use them to implement legislation on:

- issuing official identity documents, and registering changes of circumstances;
- granting licences or permissions, often for a fee;
- collecting taxes; and
- recognizing citizens as eligible for various benefits, especially welfare payments.

1.5 Completing forms is not a straightforward operation for citizens, who may need to complete the seven stages shown in [Figure 1 overleaf](#):

- Find out that they must complete a form and identify the agency concerned plus the correct name of the form.

1 Seven main stages in citizens' completing forms



- Get hold of the form from the agency (by mail, phone or over the Web), or for some forms by picking up a copy at the local Post Office.
- Understand the form and any accompanying guidance leaflets and then fill it in.
- Get further help or guidance either from visiting or ringing an agency office; or in a few cases from the Post Office by paying a 'premium' fee; or by seeking help from voluntary organizations or private sector advisors.
- Supply additional elements needed, such as correct fees, supporting documents establishing identity, photographs, or authentication by witnesses or other people.
- Submit the form direct to the agency by post, or via the Internet or at its local offices (if any); or via the Post Office in some cases.
- Rectify any errors notified to them by the agency (or by Post Office counters staff if using this route).

1.6 Putting government forms on the Internet has made them easier for citizens to find, and forms available for download have increased. But submitting forms on-line has grown less, chiefly because of difficulties in authenticating identities electronically and the need to submit other (non-identity) paper documents. Even where such facilities exist, citizens' use of electronic submission routes for forms has often been low compared to initial targets and to overall volumes of paper submissions. Electronic dealings with government agencies by businesses have taken off in several areas. But electronic form submissions by citizens have not yet

shown signs of 'breakthrough' to being a major alternative to paper-based forms. For many citizen-facing forms, the paper versions are likely to remain predominant for the foreseeable future.

1.7 How can agencies and departments tell if citizens find their forms hard to use? Some key indicators occur when:

- People collect multiple copies of forms to allow for mistakes in filling in.
- Large numbers of people defer sending in forms on time.
- Forms are sent back with many errors or omissions.
- Some or many people pay an intermediary like the Post Office for advice, or ask for help from other sources in undertaking the transaction.

1.8 Difficult forms may increase business risks or costs for agencies, because:

- More citizens ring helplines or make avoidable enquiries, sometimes creating overload crises.
- Citizens return forms late or at the last minute, creating bulges of work which are harder for agencies to handle.
- Officials (or contractors' staff) have to re-contact more people to get missing information or to correct obvious errors made on forms. Less obvious citizen errors on forms may also lead to less well-founded administrative decisions, which then create extra correspondence, complaints or appeals.

- Fewer citizens may comply with legal requirements to update information, (for instance, to notify a new address after moving house). So government databases may become less complete or current than they should be.
- Where citizens make mistakes on forms, there may be additional risk of fraud going undetected.
- Lower than expected take-up of benefits may occur if eligible citizens get put off applying for entitlements by lengthy or complex forms. A recent NAO study found that 'difficulty in completing forms' is one main reason why old age pensioners do not apply for benefits available to them.¹

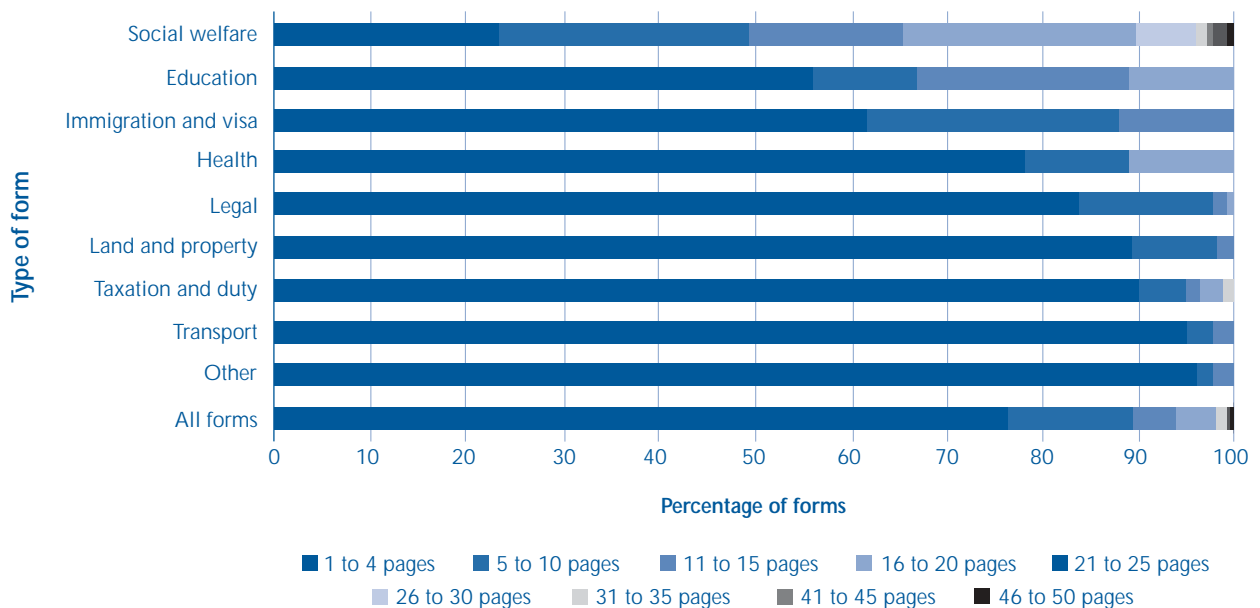
1.9 The design and processing of forms is essentially in the hands of each agency or department. There has been little central guidance on paper forms in recent years (see Annex B). The Office of the e-Envoy has led efforts to introduce electronic forms since 1999. In May 1999 the *Modernizing Government* white paper pledged central agencies to 'making sure that citizens and businesses come first... Government departments and agencies must be sensitive to their customers'. The De-regulation Taskforce inside the Cabinet Office subsequently examined forms sent to businesses with a view to pruning any unnecessary ones. And a public sector de-regulation team within the taskforce has also removed or simplified a number of forms used inside the public sector. But policy for citizen-facing forms remains set essentially by each agency and department.

The number and content of forms across central government

1.10 To establish what departments and agencies use forms for, how long they are, and what types of information is asked for, we undertook a census of all forms sent to citizens. We excluded forms sent to businesses or professional advisors, and also follow-up forms sent to citizens (see Annex A). The full results can be downloaded in a free Web report at www.nao.gov.uk or at www.GovernmentOnTheWeb.org

1.11 We found 519 central government forms, with the largest clusters of forms in taxation and duty, followed at a long distance by welfare benefits, and then legal and the immigration/passport areas. **Figure 2** shows that two thirds of forms are between 1 and 4 pages long, with most of the remainder being below 20 pages. However, there are some conspicuously long forms in the welfare/benefits area especially. Here the median form is 16 to 20 pages long, and there are seven forms which are more than 25 pages long. Only one in 14 citizens-use forms in the welfare/benefits area is 4 pages or less, compared with 100 per cent in the transport area and 95 per cent in relation to taxation and duty.

2 The page lengths of central government forms



NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

1.12 Even short forms tend to ask people to provide substantial amounts of information. **Figure 3** shows that for most policy areas the median form asks for around 30 to 40 pieces of information. Only around a quarter of forms ask for 20 pieces of information or fewer, while a similar proportion ask for more than 60 different pieces of information. In the welfare and benefits area two fifths of forms ask for 100 bits of information or more. Welfare forms are exceptionally long compared with all other areas. Legal and land and property forms need the fewest pieces of information.

1.13 How much time and effort citizens will be ready to give to a form depends on what the form is for. **Figure 4** shows whether forms give people financial benefits or a non-financial benefit. In the taxation field people mostly fill in forms because they are legally compelled to do so, as with the self-assessment income tax return. By contrast in the welfare and benefits area five out of every six forms give financial benefits if applicants are successful, and virtually all the long welfare forms (asking for more than 60 items of information) do so.

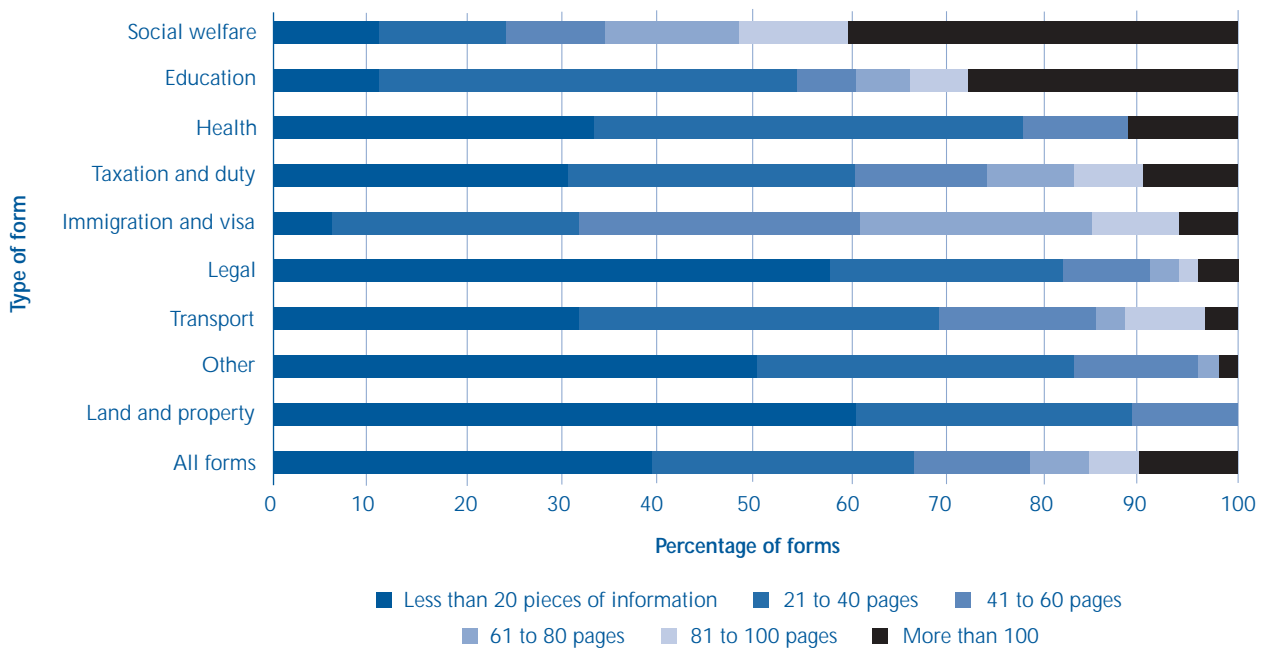
1.14 People are also more anxious about filling in forms if making mistakes or false entries could lead to serious consequences (see Part 3). **Figure 5** shows to what extent all forms include warnings of such consequences. They were quite sparingly used in taxation and legal forms.

But welfare, education, transport and immigration/visa forms all made extensive use of legal warnings, and in the last three areas warnings of financial penalties were also important.

1.15 Citizens also worry about supplying personal details information. **Figure 6 overleaf** shows the most common items requested on forms, with names and addresses naturally predominating. The next most common fields are telephone numbers and dates of birth. The most widely used official identifier number is respondent's National Insurance number, but it is used on only a fifth of all forms.

1.16 If agencies do not get people's phone numbers on forms, then officials chasing missing information or trying to correct mistakes must re-contact people via post, which **Figure 6** shows still applies to nearly half of government forms. At the other end of the spectrum, some agencies request both daytime and evening telephone numbers. The Passport Service ask this of both customers and counter-signatories, because they operate until 9pm to provide additional customer service. A related issue, important for the government's drive to make public services available on-line, is whether forms ask for users' e-mail addresses, or give a Web site address where citizens can get guidance on completing the form. **Figure 7 overleaf** shows that only one in six central government forms include these

3 The numbers of pieces of information asked for by central government forms

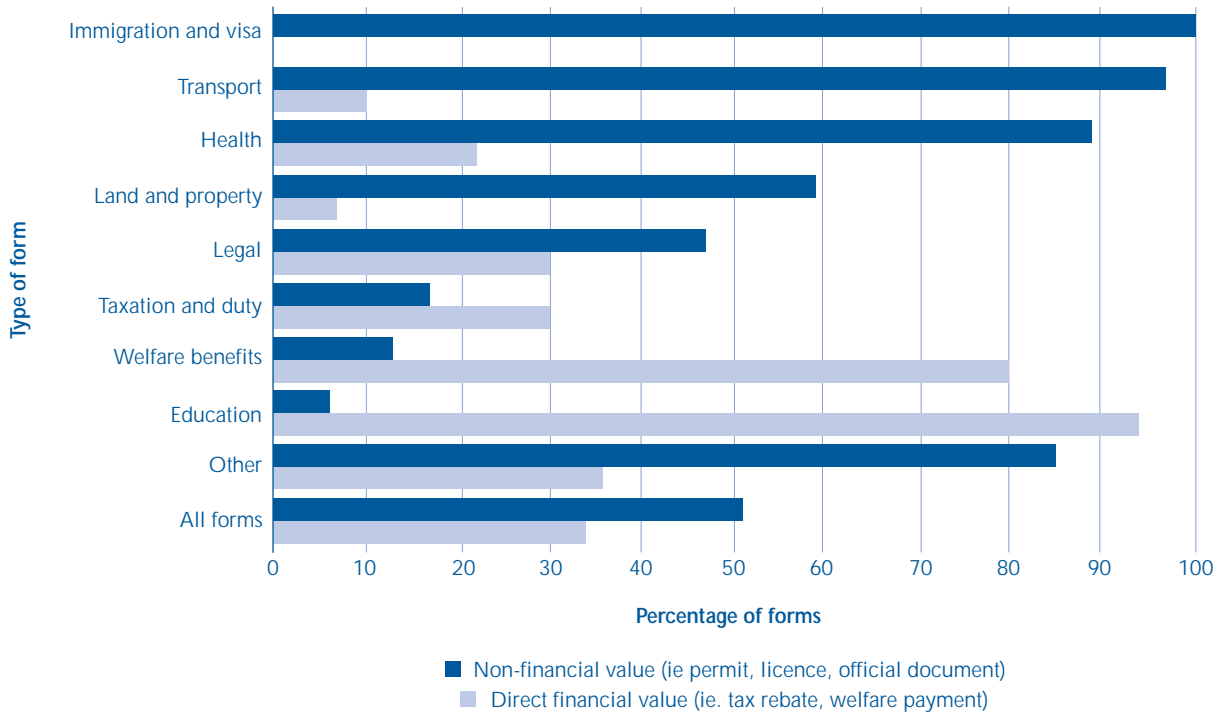


NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

4 The proportion of forms leading to financial or other kinds of benefits

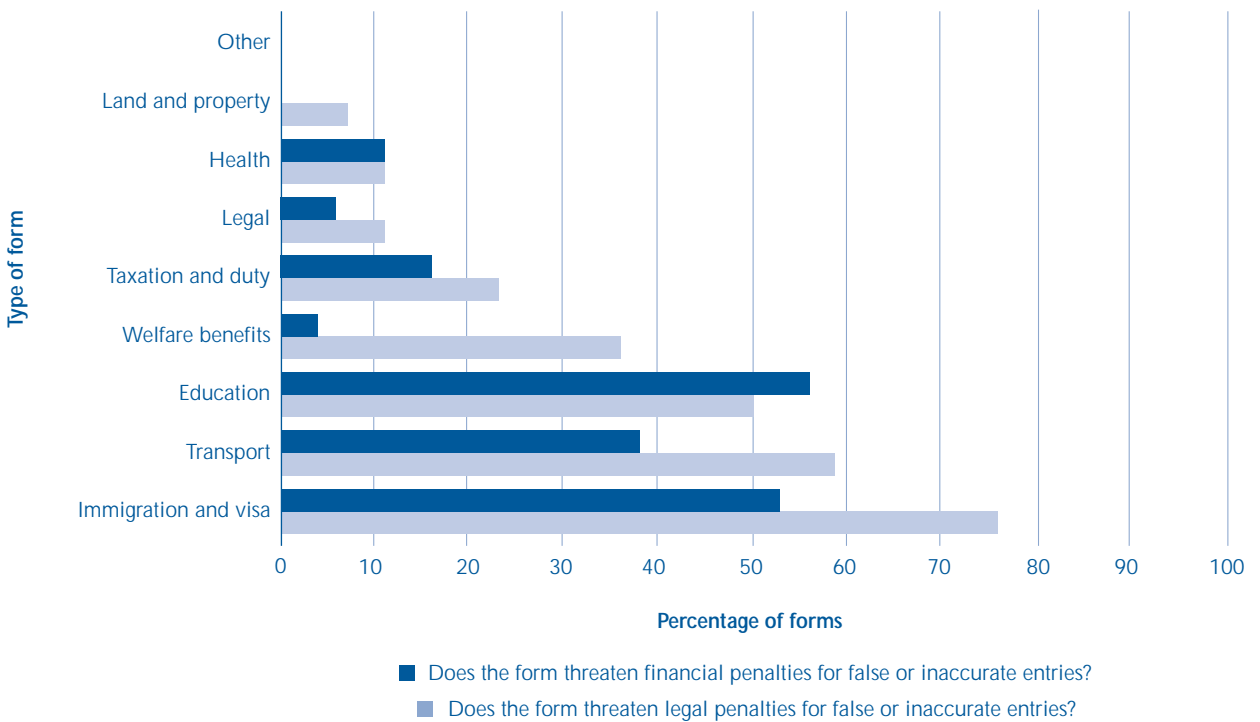


NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

5 The proportion of forms warning applicants of legal or financial penalties for false or inaccurate completion

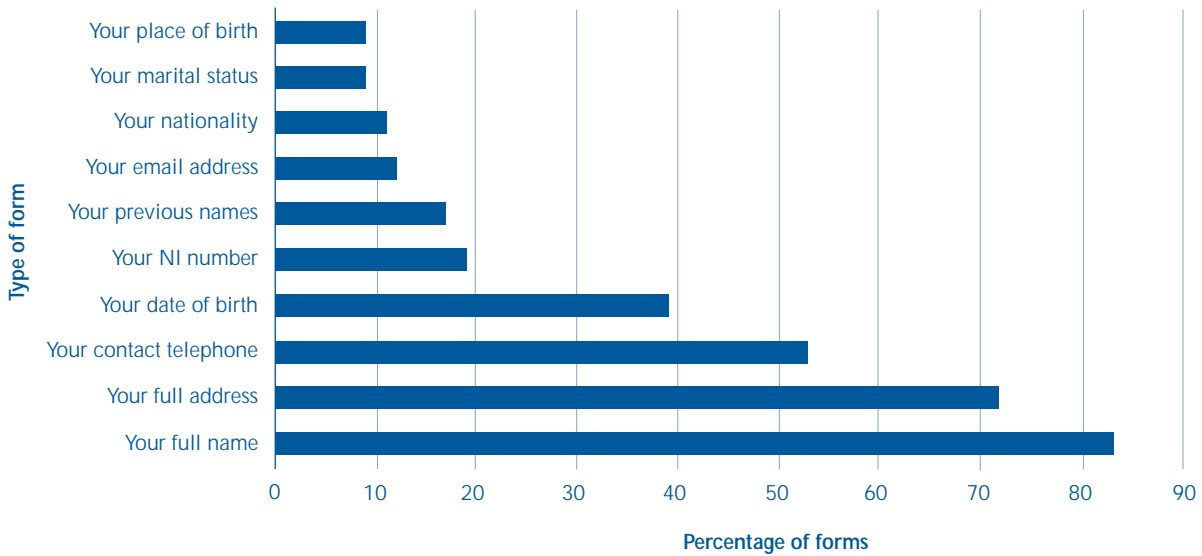


NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

6 The main types of personal details information requested on citizen-use forms

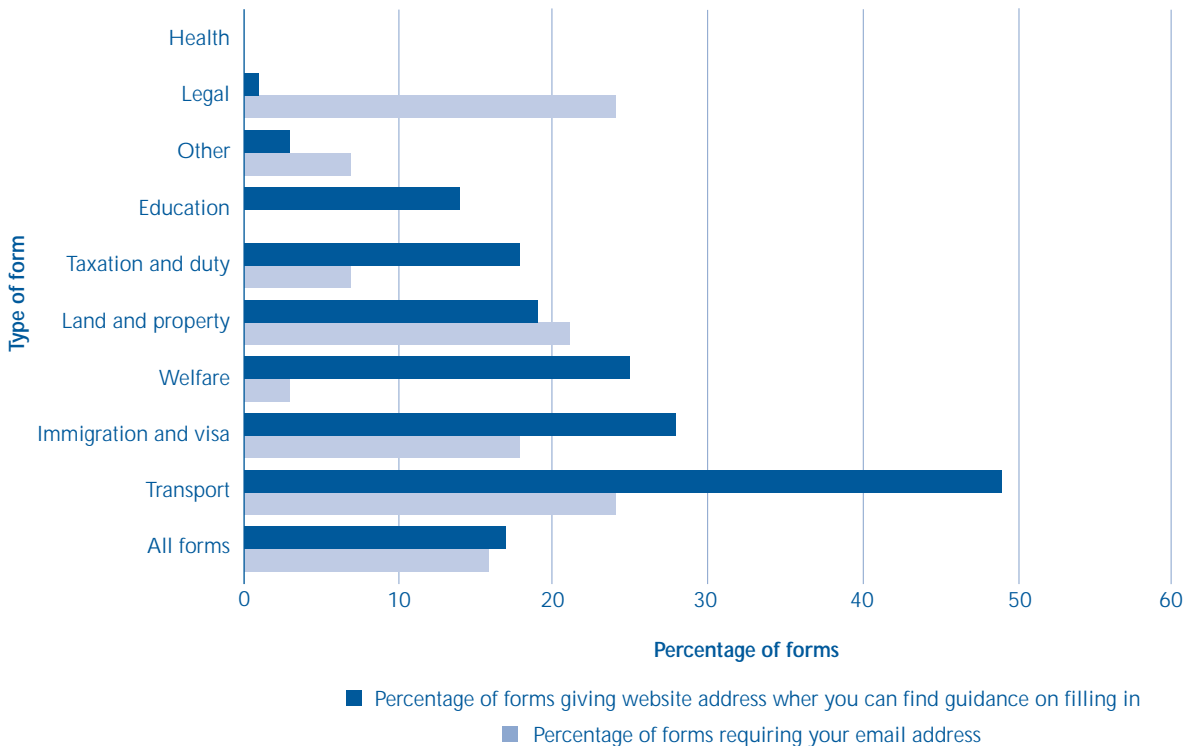


NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

7 How many forms requested e-mail addresses from users, and how many provide Web site help facilities



NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

elements. In the best policy area, transport, nearly half of all forms have accompanying Web pages and a quarter ask for e-mail addresses. Forms in the legal area are also ahead in asking for e-mail contacts.

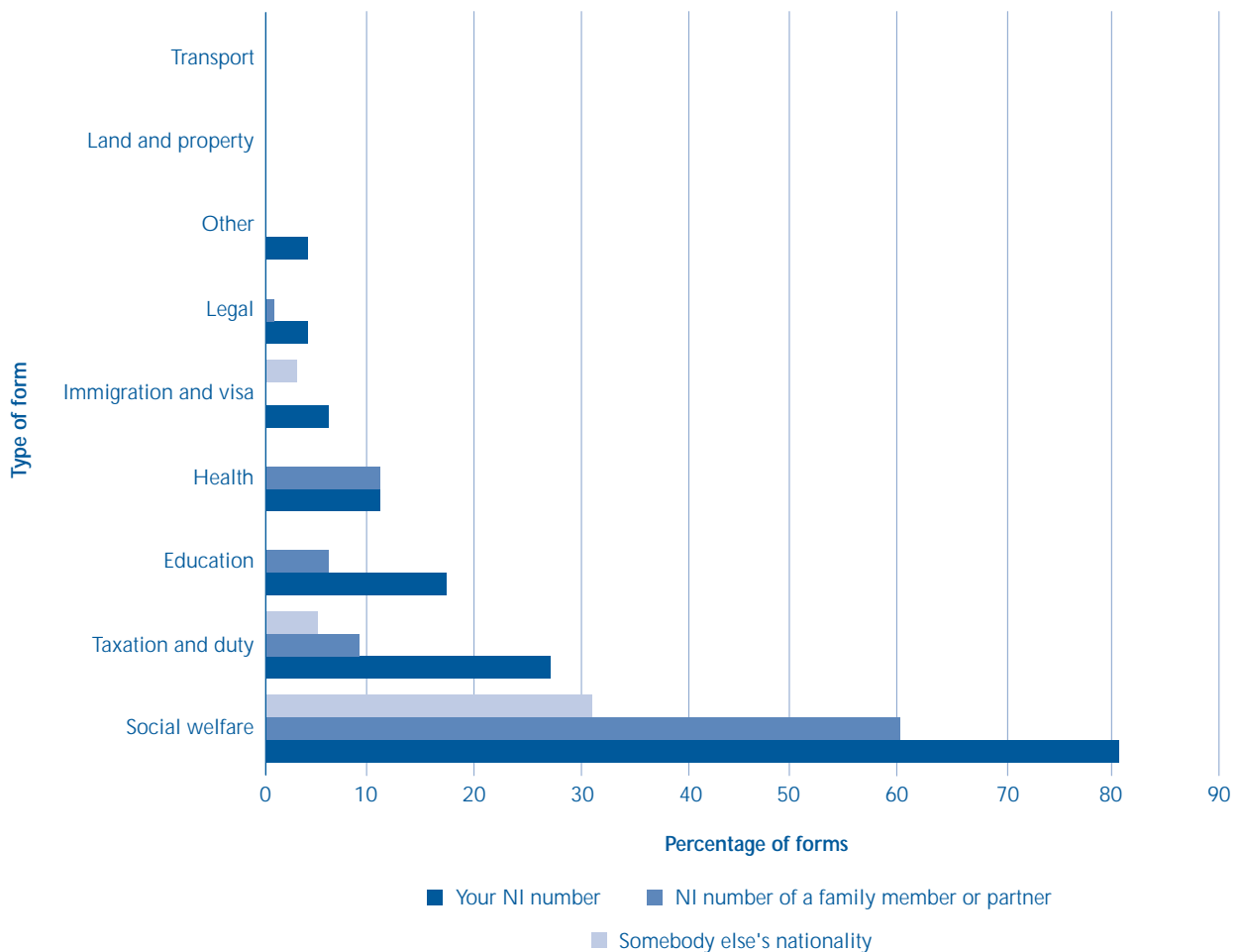
1.17 In most European countries, the central personal detail asked for in forms is a national identity card number. **Figure 8** shows that there is no equivalent central index in British government. The National Insurance number is prominent, but **Figure 8** shows that its score reflects pervasive use in just one policy sector, welfare benefits. The NI number is also included on a third of citizen-facing forms in taxation and around one in five health and education forms. Elsewhere it is very rarely used.

1.18 There has been increasing concern in some quarters about the extent to which UK government forms should require proof of nationality, rather than the traditional

required proof only of 'presence and residence'. **Figure 9 overleaf** shows how many forms asked people also about their own nationality, that of other family members or of other people. Immigration and visa forms were predictably most concerned with this issue, but a fifth of welfare and education forms also included nationality questions.

1.19 As a final element of the census of forms, we asked our coders to record the presence of 40 different objective indicators of care and attention being put into forms' design (see Annex A for details). **Figure 10 overleaf** shows that on average government forms have just under half of the quality measures we coded for, with no sharp variations between policy sectors. Immigration and visa forms have most quality features, whereas legal forms and land and property forms score least well on this measure. Health forms also come towards the bottom on this measure.

8 Proportion of government forms which use the National Insurance number as an identifier

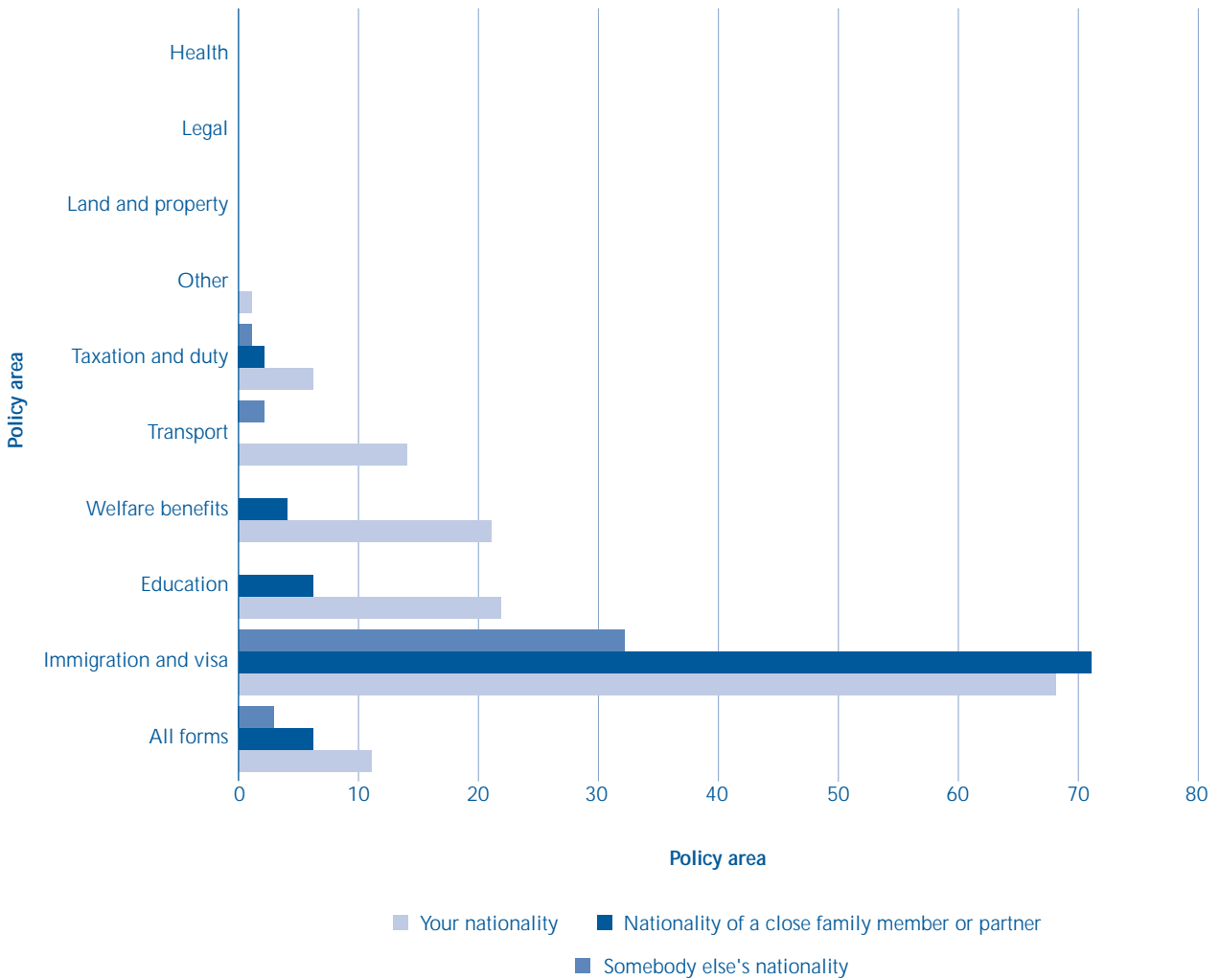


NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

9 The proportion of forms that require the applicant to give their nationality

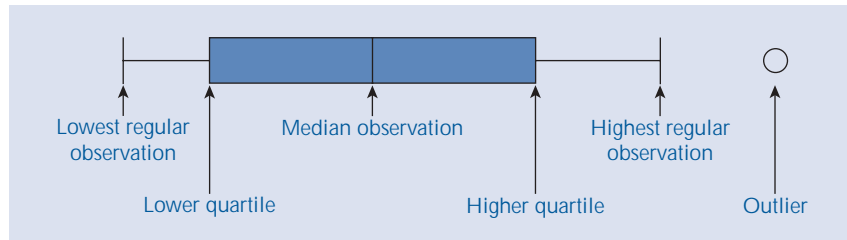
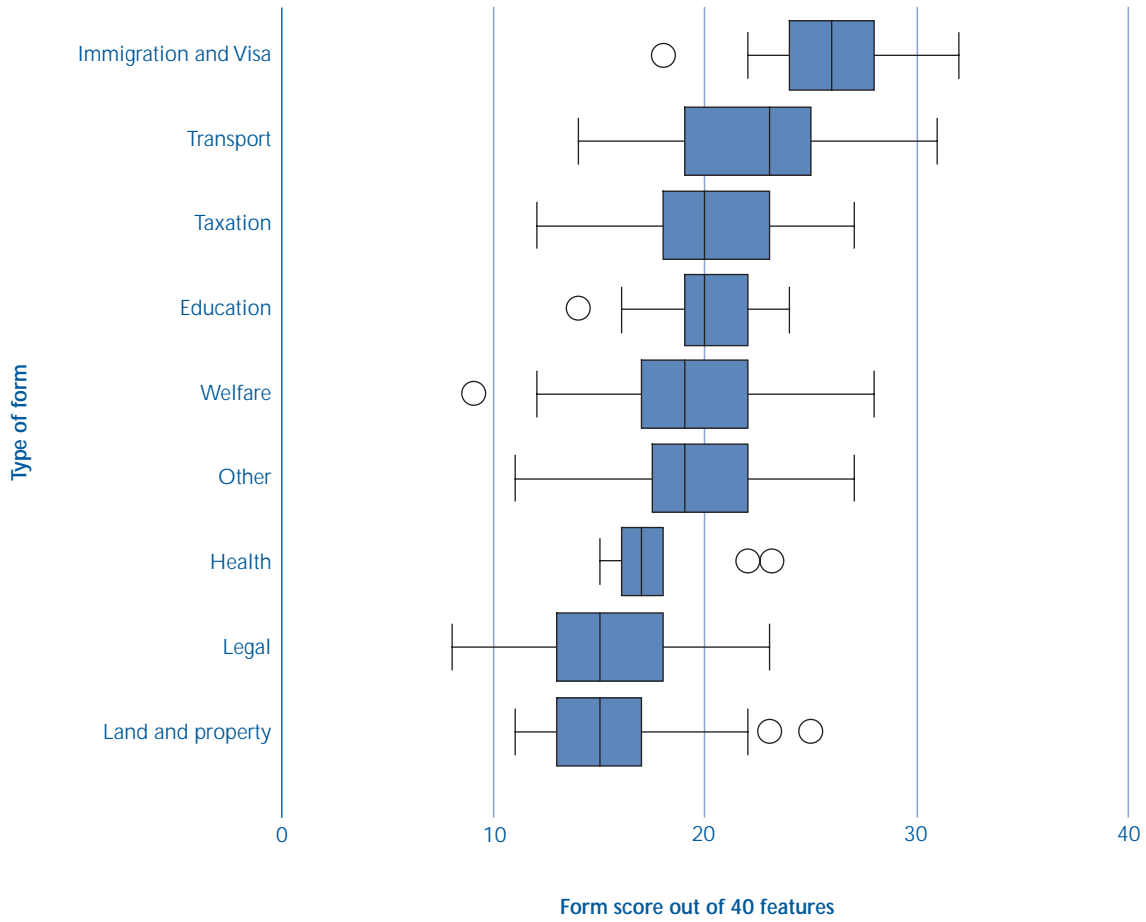


NOTE

We surveyed 519 central government forms filled by citizens.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

10 How the forms score on quality indicators of care and attention for users



NOTE

The shaded box show the position of the middle half of the data. The lines to left and right show the lowest and highest quarters of the observation, which are less typical. The O shows an outlier, that is highly unusual observation which analysis suggests is very different from the rest of the data, and may need separate explanation.

Source: National Audit Office census of forms

