

URL Standard for the Digital Public Services Policy

Last reviewed: Jan 2024
Next review: Jan 2025

Digital Citizen Experience, Ministry of SaskBuilds and Procurement

This document outlines the URL Standard as a component of the Digital Public Services Policy. These standards inform Government of Saskatchewan service design for public-facing digital services.

Background

Domain names and URLs are an important touchpoint since they are accessed at the initial stages of a user journey. For this reason, all web addresses are evaluated for their contribution to a positive user experience. Based on the URL format and the label choice, users will make assumptions about the content, functionality and orientation of the page or application prior to their visit.

With that in mind, use domain names and URLs to simplify user access to information and services. A measured and coordinated approach is important when managing these touchpoints. Without a disciplined approach applied to managing domains and URLs, in addition to the associated communication tools that reference them, managing these touchpoints can contribute to a degraded experience for users and an inefficient use of resources to track and manage.

Standard Framework

As part of the One Government principle, Saskatchewan.ca is the primary domain for the public to access information and services offered by GoS. We are aiming to reduce the number and variety of government websites available to the people of Saskatchewan.

Ministries must use Saskatchewan.ca as their primary domain. The use of other domain names and extensions (e.g. .com, .org, .net) will only be permitted for defensive purposes and must be redirected to the primary Saskatchewan.ca domain.

Benefits of this approach:

- Reduces wasteful expenditures by eliminating the need to constantly purchase, maintain, and renew domain names throughout government.
- Creates a degree of reassurance for the public that the information and applications under the Saskatchewan.ca umbrella are directly associated with the Government of Saskatchewan and portray a source which is official, identifiable, trustworthy, and publicly accountable for the quality of information.
- Increases the content equity and ranking within search engine results (SEO) as search engines consider all content under a single domain interrelated. As opposed to using multiple domain names, which dilutes the equity of the content by causing the websites to compete against each other for ranking.
- Simplified advertising via a consistent “Saskatchewan.ca treatment” for promotional website addresses on Government of Saskatchewan materials. This allows users to discover the content naturally on Saskatchewan.ca while gaining substantial cost savings with no longer having to update material when a website address is updated or removed.

Online Services and Applications

Second-level domains (subdomains) of Saskatchewan.ca must be used for all online services provided by the Government of Saskatchewan, including situations where a ministry has contracted out the development and/or support to a third party. This sends a clear message to the public that the Government of Saskatchewan is responsible and accountable for this service, even though someone else might be providing it.

Saskatchewan.ca Subdomain

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Where a new Government of Saskatchewan URL is external facing and the intended end user is the public (citizens or organizations), the subdomain must be on Saskatchewan.ca.

All Saskatchewan.ca URLs and subdomains must be approved by ITD - Digital Citizen Experience (DCE) branch.

GoS.ca and Gov.sk.ca Subdomain

Where a new Government of Saskatchewan URL is an internal-facing application and the intended users are internal, the subdomain must live on GoS.ca or gov.sk.ca.

All GoS.ca and gov.sk.ca URLs and subdomains must be approved by ITD Strategic Architecture.

URL and Subdomain Criteria

To ensure clarity and consistent URL use across government, and to ensure subdomain naming decisions can be handled efficiently, Government of Saskatchewan URLs must adhere to the following URL patterns.

Existing URLs and subdomains registered before this policy are regarded as exceptions and do not set a precedent.

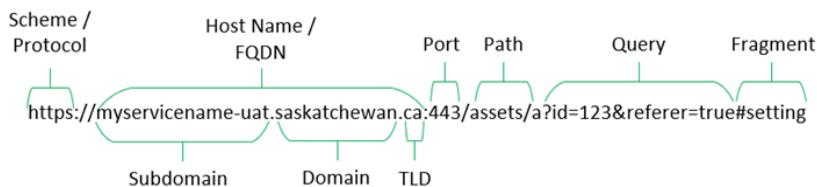
Industry standards define that a valid **Host Name** may only contain the following characters:

- o letters a through z (lower or upper case)
- o the digits 0 through 9
- o the hyphen/minus character ('-')
- o the period character ('.')
- o a host name cannot contain an underscore character ('_')

Additionally, a subdomain name cannot be more than 63 characters long.

- A URL may contain additional characters, but a valid host Fully Qualified Domain Name (FQDN) shall not.

Figure 1



URL Pattern

URLs are intended to be memorable, easy to use and SEO friendly.

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URLs must follow the following pattern:

- must be clear, easy to read and type
- must use plain language keywords
- use lowercase
- articles and extra words such as "to", "the", "a", "an", "by" should not be used
- avoid duplicate keywords and apostrophes
- avoid acronyms and abbreviations, unless they are better understood than the full version or perform better on search engines
- avoid phrases or product names that are trademarked by another company

Subdomains

Subdomains must adhere to the service naming conventions. Each service will need its own subdomain name for the transactional part of the service (application).

Subdomains must follow one of the two following patterns:

1. Single-Service Subdomains

Applications that contain only one service must follow the pattern **servicename.saskatchewan.ca**, where the **servicename** is a simple description of the service provided. The service name should not contain any acronyms or abbreviations for the service.

Example: notarypublic.saskatchewan.ca

2. Multi-Service Subdomains

Applications that contain more than one service must follow the pattern **topicname.saskatchewan.ca**, where the **topicname** is a simple description of the types of services provided. The topic name should not contain any acronyms or abbreviations for the service.

Example: emergencyalert.saskatchewan.ca

In some cases, it may be determined that a subdomain cannot follow the service name pattern. The DCE team will evaluate, and approval will be granted on a case-by-case basis.

Multiple Environments

You may require additional subdomains for testing or training. The subdomain used to access an instance of a service is

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structured in the same way as the subdomain used in the production (*Version available to the public*) version of the service. These instances would not be available to the public, only available on the GoS network.

Example:

- Production instance (*Version available to the public*), emergencyalert.saskatchewan.ca
- User Acceptance Testing instance, emergencyalert-uat.saskatchewan.ca
- Development instance, emergencyalert-dev.saskatchewan.ca

Certificates

- Certificates are required on all subdomains.
- The use of the Saskatchewan.ca wildcard certificate is not allowed, and the use of wildcard certificates is discouraged. Each service must acquire its own certificate, which should be purchased and renewed at a cost to the ministry and should be procured by the GoS Software Assets Management team through a Service Now request.

Vanity URLs

Ministries must use Saskatchewan.ca as their primary promotional web address. This consistency reinforces the domain authority of Saskatchewan.ca being the “single point of truth” online for the Government of Saskatchewan. In some cases, it may be determined that a more direct promotional address is required (vanity URL), the top-level domain with a directory will be considered acceptable. A vanity URL is not to be used as a permanent location for content but acts as a redirect to the permanent content location on Saskatchewan.ca.

- Vanity URL, example: www.saskatchewan.ca/studentloans
- Content location, example: www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/education-and-learning/student-loans

Decommissioning An Old Domain Name

When decommissioning a domain name ensure you have a plan in place and consider the following items:

- Complete an audit of content on the site to determine what content must migrate to Saskatchewan.ca,
- Determine if the current site must be archived,
- Decide if you need to keep the domain name,
- Decide if you need a redirect.

Consider the following:

- The profile of the domain name and current usage for the past six months
- How the URL performs in search engine results
- If the URL is used in print form or online publications
- Other services reliant on the domain name, such as emails, file transfer protocol and subdomains.

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Redirects

Redirects prevent users from accessing pages that no longer exist. When setting up a redirect consider the user's journey by pointing the user to the relevant information and search engine optimization.

Redirects are not a permanent solution. Redirects should be evaluated after six months.

Redirects should be removed after reviewing the following:

- Analytics - the number of users accessing the old URL has decreased substantially. This number will be determined and reviewed with DCE as the number of will varied based on usage of the service prior. The number of users varies based on the services.
- Search engines have updated to the new URL.

After six months the redirect should be evaluated, removed and decommission of the URL can be submitted to the Service Desk.

Submitting URL Requests

When a URL is requested, DCE will evaluate the request against the URL and Subdomain Criteria. When a URL does not meet the criteria, DCE will suggest a URL that does.

For new applications, this happens during the Discovery and Design phases when a full understanding of the service is reached. This is part of ITD's standard project process.