

# White paper

Rubbish and Revenues – Are these the keys to unlocking digital transformation for local government?

## Introduction

The move towards digital transformation in local authorities is well-established now. Indeed, some people believe that talking of digital transformation is redundant now as the 'digital by default' agenda is so well established within local government. However, is that really the case? And to what extent is this message resonating with the public? We've conducted some research to find out.

We've blended the empirical results of our research (conducted using an independent panel of respondents) with our own experience of over fifty successful implementations of the platform and we think there are some interesting parallels.

For further information about implementation and resourcing please contact us.



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# Executive summary:

We've worked with over fifty local authorities over the last decade or so. We consistently find that it's the same service areas that generate the highest volume of calls into the contact centre. Those service areas are waste (primarily queries about bin collections and related processes) and revenues and benefits (particularly questions relating to council tax and benefits).

If councils can successfully bring the bulk of these enquiries online and get them dealt with via self-service channels (rather than phone or face to face) then not only does the organization achieve meaningful channel shift but it acts as a catalyst for other services to follow suit and for customers to adopt self-service much more widely. In order for this to happen, councils need to deliver self-service experiences that customers want to use and that they find easy to locate and navigate.

This practical project experience is reflected in the results of our consumer survey. When we asked consumers which activities they'd done via their councils' website or app the most selected options were paying council tax and looking up bin collection schedules. So far so good.

However, when you dig into the numbers a little further things start to unravel. We see that there are many other processes that could easily be done online but either aren't offered via this medium or aren't being used by consumers. For example, only 16% of reports of fly tipping are conducted online, only 36% of missed bin reports, only 37% of new bin orders, only 25%

of bulky item uplift requests and only 26% of benefit applications. All of these are generally routine processes that could easily be automated for the majority of citizens, so why isn't this happening?

The pattern appears to be that, whilst councils have made significant progress on the basics of online self-service, they are still failing to break through and achieve a critical mass of use of online processes.

We find that most progress is made in the areas where processes are extremely simple – enquiring about when bin day is, for instance. However, the 'second wave' of processes are often slightly more complex and require the leverage of integrated technologies enabling bookings to be made, contracts to be set up, closer integration with waste collection round information, or integration with online payment options including direct debits.

Councils should not be afraid of automating these processes. Tools such as My Council Services offer behind the scenes integration of numerous different processes and systems to deliver a quick and simple self-service

experience for customers, no matter how complex the process may seem at the outset.

Well-planned programs of work in these areas will build on the efforts already made and can switch many more interactions and transactions from offline to online, delivering savings and allowing for better use of resources. Processes that are triggered by customers online immediately lend themselves to automated back office workflow and can remain digital right to the point of resolution using technologies such as mobile working on standard tablet and smart phone devices.

There is no reduction in service quality with this approach. In fact service quality is improved as automated workflow and end-to-end digital processes also allow for the automated update of progress back to customers. Keeping customers informed and managing their expectations minimises avoidable 'failure demand' contacts, when customers get back in touch to enquire about a previous contact or to report that something hasn't happened yet.

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# Methodology

We surveyed 101 UK citizens aged between 18 and 80. Participants were selected at random and we used the popular survey tool, SurveyMonkey, to distribute the survey. It is worth bearing in mind, therefore, that the survey respondents are all people who have internet access and are happy responding to surveys over the internet. This means we cannot generalise from these results to assume they reflect the views of other groups such as those with no internet access.

However, the Office of National Statistics states that 89% of the UK population use the internet at least once a week and 9 out of 10 households have internet access. Additionally, 78% of UK adults use mobile phones or smartphones to access the internet and 77% have used these devices to access the internet when 'on the go' (a figure which rises to 97% in the age group 25-34), and it is safe to assume that these percentages are only going to grow.

## The respondents

The age range of the respondents can be seen in Figure 1 below. 52% of the respondents were female, 48% male, and 40% had children under the age of 18 whilst the other 60% did not.

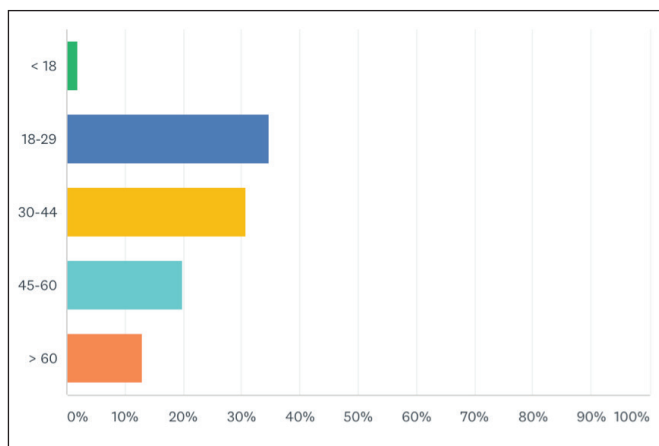


Figure 1 - The age range of survey respondents

We wanted to establish how comfortable our respondents were with interacting via the internet. Our results (see Figure 2 below) showed that 90% of them were either comfortable or very comfortable using the internet to buy things from companies that they knew.

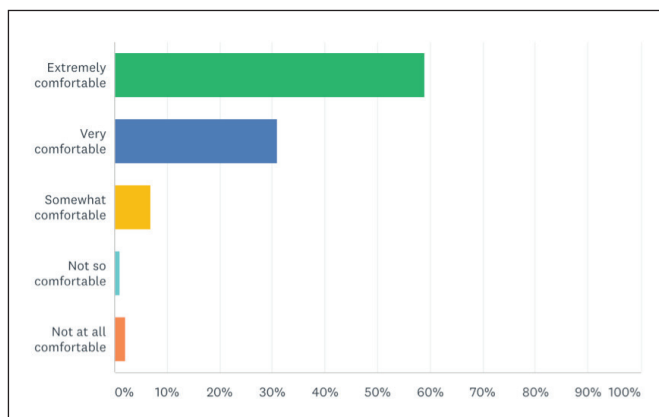


Figure 2 - How happy are you buying things from companies that you know over the internet?

We asked people how they generally access the internet. As Figure 3 below shows, smartphones are by far the most popular option with 75% of people using this method regularly.

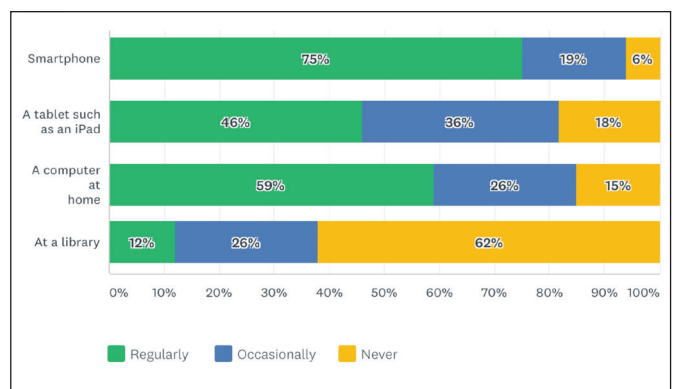


Figure 3 - How do you generally access the internet?

There's a small difference in smartphone usage by age, but smartphones are still the most popular method of accessing the internet across all age groups (67% of over 45s use this method regularly compared with 78% of under 45s). This is an important finding and something that councils need to take into account when developing their digital access strategy. "Mobile first" needs to be the mantra here. It's tempting to develop a platform that works on a desktop computer and then adapt it to work on mobile, but a much better approach is to switch this around and develop something that's truly optimised for mobile as this is the channel that the majority of customers will use, a trend that's only going to grow more pronounced over time.



## How aware are people of their council's digital services?

We asked people which methods they had used to contact their local council (see Figure 4 on right). Respondents were able to select as many options as applied to them. Only 3 respondents had not made contact with their local council at all. The two most popular methods of contact are email (63%) and telephone (58%). There's then a significant drop down to post (28%) and forms on a council's website (27%).

Perhaps the most striking figure here is how high the telephone and unsolicited email channels continue to be. It is well known and accepted that these channels are far more expensive than an automated e-form based channel of contact. What these numbers do not show us of course is whether Councils have invested in transactional websites that are integrated with back office workflow. This is a key characteristic. We have seen many examples of Councils that have created web-based e-forms that do not integrate into back office workflow and which simply generate data that then needs to be re-keyed manually. This is not best practice and delivers no efficiency gains. Integrated workflow from first point of contact is essential.

It is also interesting how low the penetration of web chat is amongst this sample. At Abavus we have been watching this channel closely. Our view is that traditional web chat staffed by humans offers little in the way of efficiency. Where there are productivity gains to be had is in the emergent technology of chat bots driven by artificial intelligence. Although this technology is still relatively immature, we are confident that this type of 'intelligent' automated functioning will make a significant contribution. However, as previously stated, this will only deliver on its promise if the chat bot technology is the entry point into an integrated and automated workflow. Bottlenecks exist where the technology is disconnected or dislocated from the process steps that come before or after.

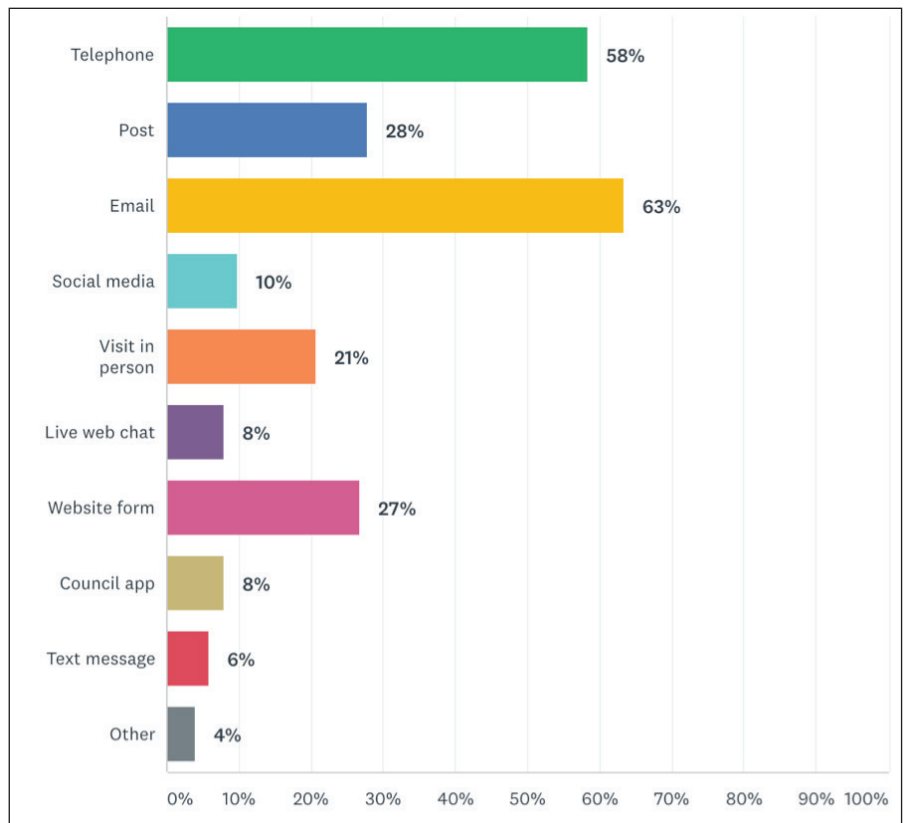


Figure 4 - Which of the following methods have you used to contact your local council?

## App usage

App usage is low in our sample. Only 8% of people said that they had contacted their council via an app. A contributing factor here could be that many people don't know that their council has an app, so we asked people 'Does your local council have an app?' (see Figure 5 below).

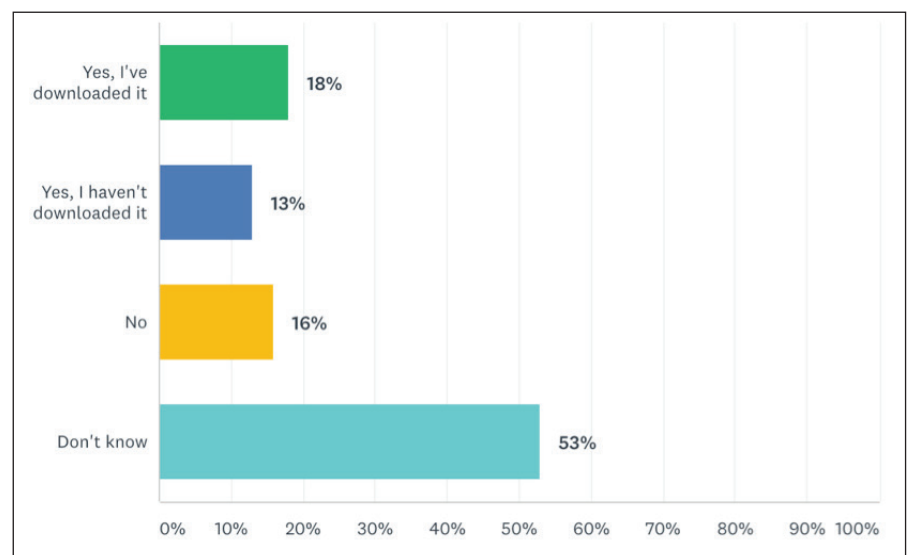


Figure 5 - Does your local council have an app?

In total, only 31% of respondents said that their council did have an app, of whom 58% had downloaded it whilst 42% had not. An additional 16% said that their council did not have an app. This leaves more than half of respondents - 53% - who did not know whether their council had an app or not. These results suggest that there's an education gap that councils need to be more proactive in filling when it comes to letting citizens know about the digital services that they provide.

Our findings also suggest that people are much more engaged with their councils' websites than with apps. As Figure 6 below shows, only 9% of respondents have never visited their local council's website, with significant numbers visiting numerous times during a month.

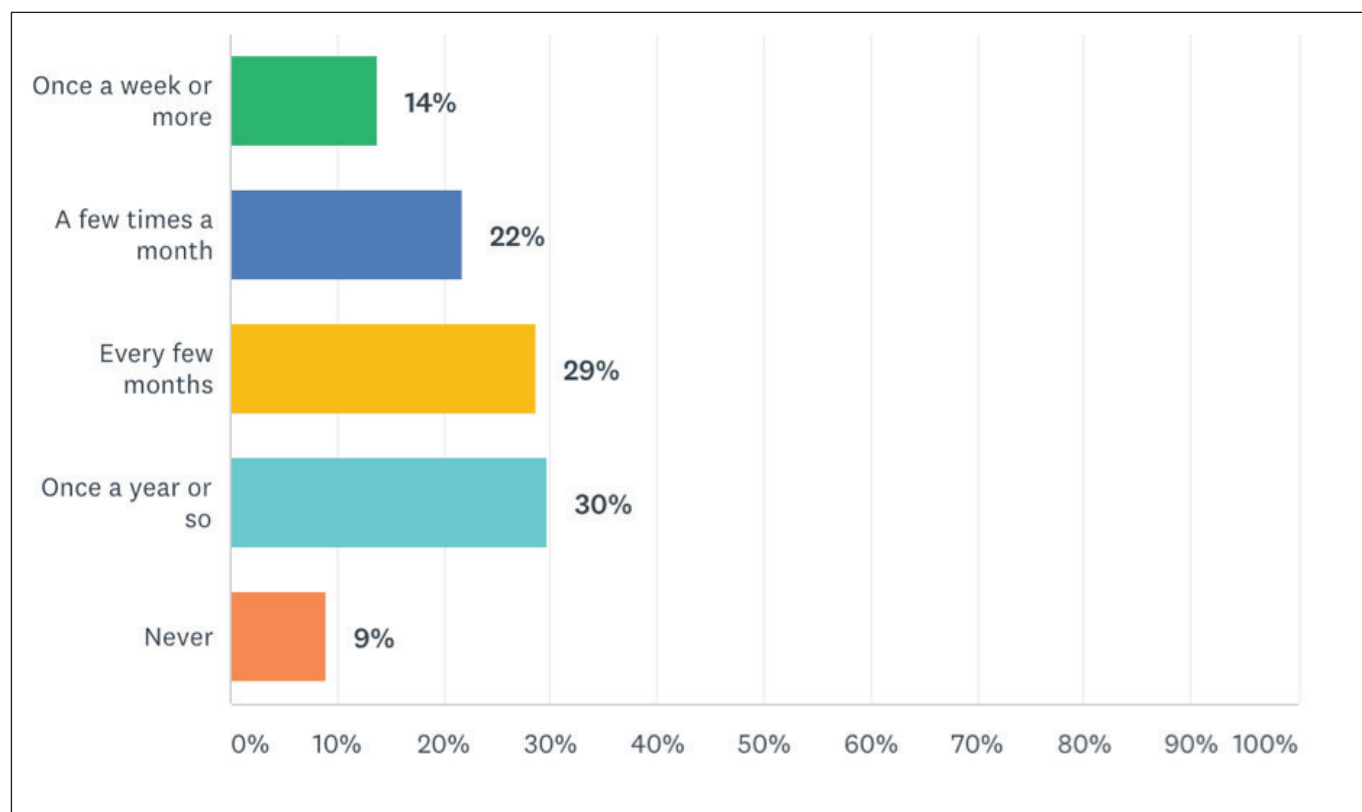


Figure 6 - How often do you visit your council's website?

These findings suggest that council websites are most people's medium of choice when it comes to getting information from and interacting with one's local council. Certainly, there is much more evidence of interaction with councils' websites than there is via council apps.

There are a number of factors that may contribute here. Firstly, an app is only accessible via a smartphone or tablet, whereas a website can be accessed via any tool – phone, tablet or computer – making websites generally more accessible to more people. Secondly, even if people have smartphones it is a challenge to get them to download and interact with an app.

Recent research suggests that 21% of consumers will abandon a newly downloaded app after just one use whilst 77% never use an app again 72 hours after installing it. The average person has 80 apps installed on their phone and most turn off notifications on those that they don't use. Given these numbers it is not surprising that council apps can struggle to get traction in a crowded app landscape.

There is some evidence to suggest that age may be a factor here, with those over 45 much more likely to say they didn't know whether their council had an app or not than those under 45 (70% of the over 45s didn't know, compared to 44% of the under 45s). However, the percentage of the two groups that had actually downloaded a council app was not significantly different – 15% of the over 45s compared with 19% of the under 45s.

Our own experience of working with more than 50 UK local authorities is that native mobile applications can play an important part in the wider accessibility and self-service agenda.

Where we have seen them really deliver demonstrable savings and efficiency gains is when they're developed for internal use, particularly when used to enable mobile working.

The right app, effectively configured for a mobile workforce, offers many advantages:

- Apps can be easily governed and controlled as part of the council's MDM (mobile device management) approach
- Apps offer a robust solution to true offline working, allowing a remote mobile worker to continue to work through their digital task list regardless of carrier signal or Wi-Fi connectivity
- Apps offer the option of role-based access control within the context of remote and mobile working
- Well-designed app interfaces are very intuitive to use and easy to navigate for remote workers, especially if working environments are harsh and workers are exposed to the elements

## What kinds of interactions do people have with their councils online?

We asked people which types of interactions they had with their council either online or via the council's app (see Figure 7 below).

The most popular application is checking bin day, something that 60% of respondents have done via the council's app or website, closely followed by 51% who have paid their council tax this way.

There is evidence that age plays a role in determining how likely people are to have done some of these things. For example, overall 26% of people have applied for benefits online but there is a big difference between the over and under 45s here: whilst 15% of over 45s have applied for a benefit online this percentage doubles to 30% for the under 45s.

Of course, it could be that under 45s are more likely to need to apply for benefits than the over 45s, but we see the same pattern for other activities that are less obviously age-related. For instance, 9% of respondents have used their council's website or app to report a child or vulnerable adult that they believe to be at risk, and 100% of these respondents are under 45. Similarly, 15% overall have applied for planning permission online, 3% of the over 45s and 21% of the under 45s.

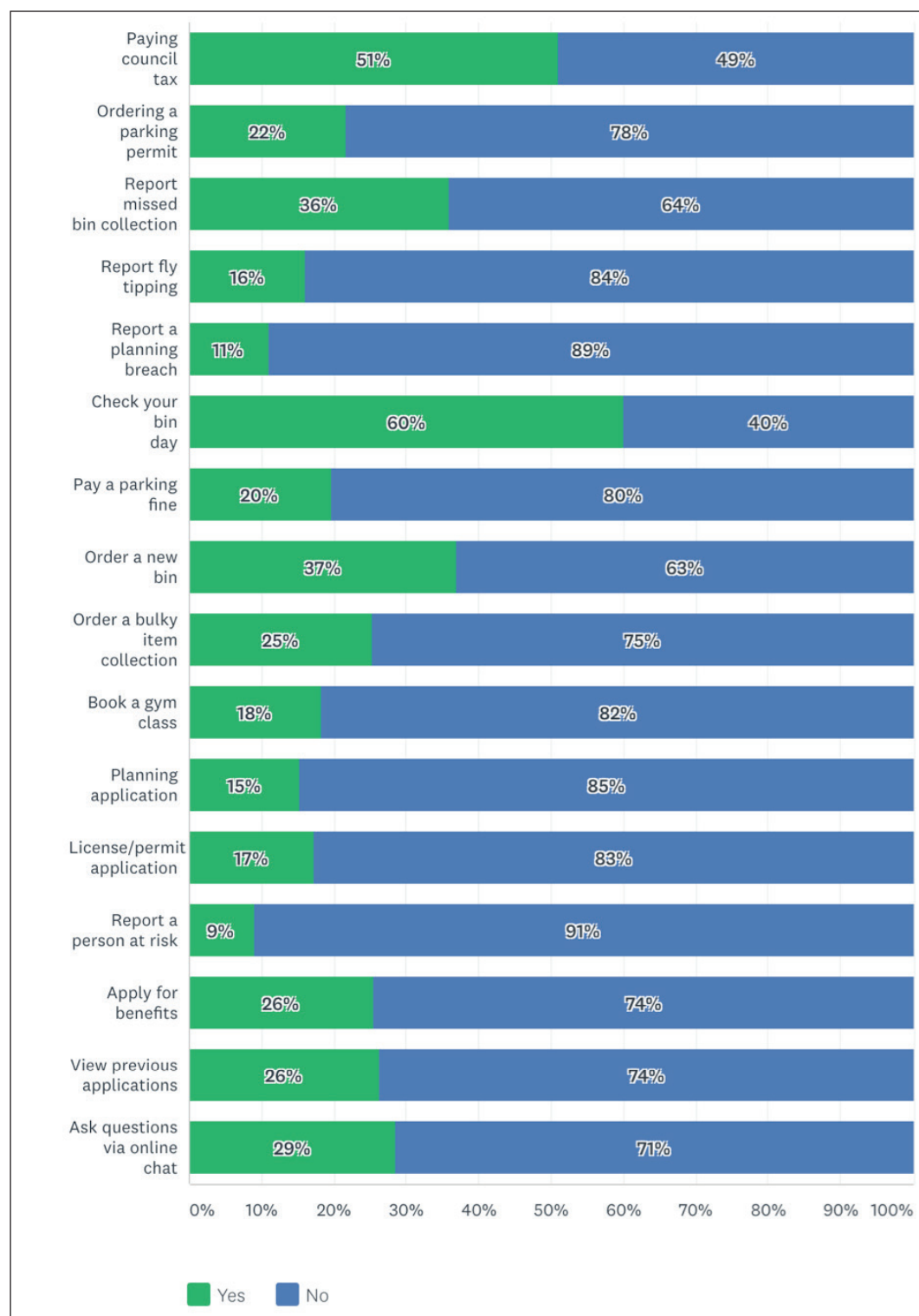
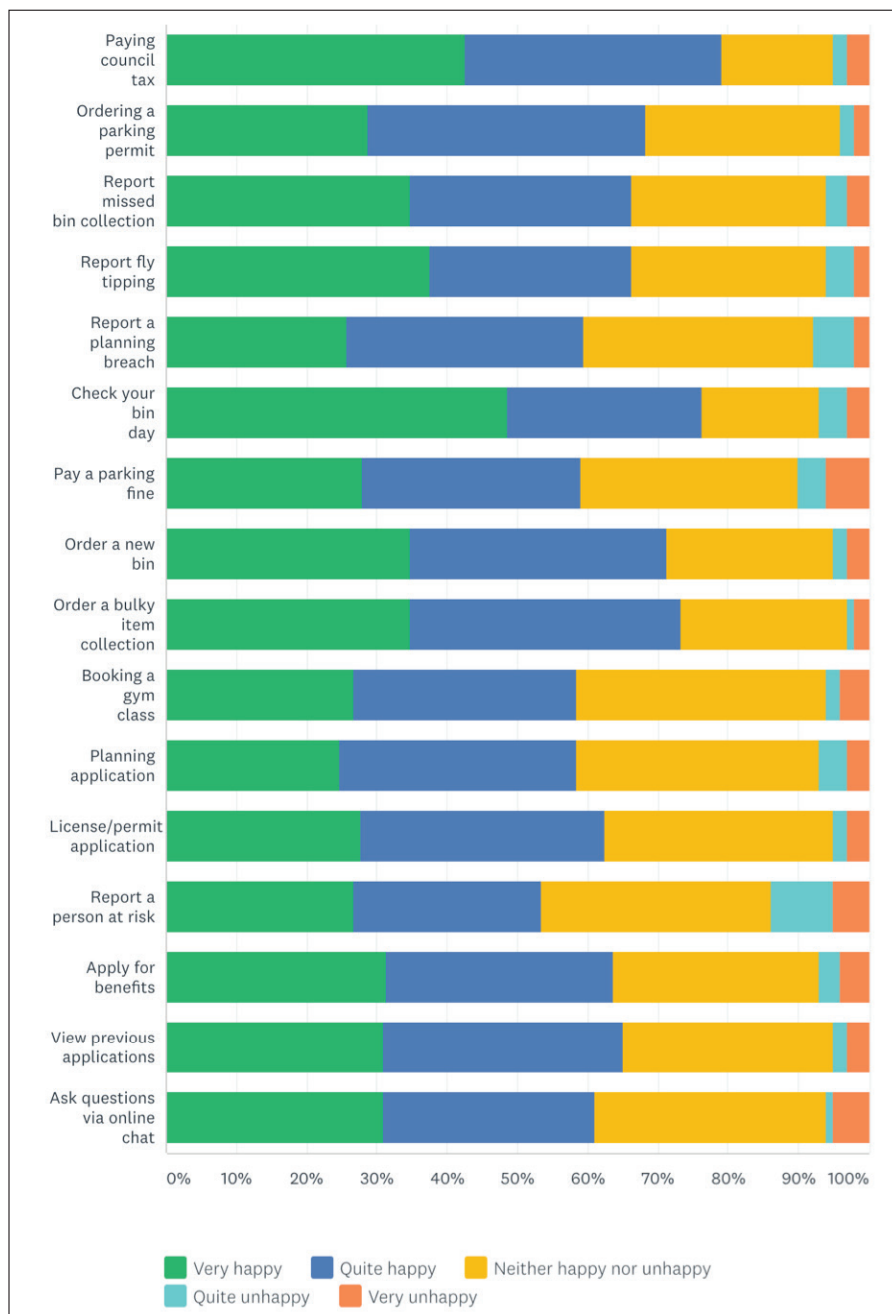


Figure 7 - Which of the following activities have you done via your council's website or app?



Clearly, people's answers to these questions depend on whether they've actually had to do each of the things in our list so with that in mind we also asked them how happy they would be in principle to do each of those things online (see Figure 8).

As you can see, over 50% of respondents are either very or quite happy to conduct all of these activities online. Indeed, the numbers of people who would be actively unhappy to conduct these activities online is less than 10% in every case except reporting a child or vulnerable adult at risk.

Figure 8 - How happy in principle would you be to do each of these activities online?

We asked people to tell us why they would prefer not to conduct particular activities online. In the case of reporting vulnerable people several respondents commented:

*"I do not think it is appropriate to report someone at risk, I would want to speak to someone to explain the situation fully and find out what the next stage is."*

*"I think anything that involves reporting a child or vulnerable adult should be conducted over the phone so that the appropriate questions and conversations can be had, and the situation can be investigated or reported with all relevant details."*

*"Anything to do with children is probably best done on a more personal level."*



# Conclusion

The key message for UK local authorities is that they must move beyond basic online services and adopt integrated technologies that allow more complex and sophisticated processes to be developed. They must push past the point of transaction to enable automated workflow and technology support through end-to-end processes, automating both the front and backend and integrating with third party systems where needed, across far more of their services areas.

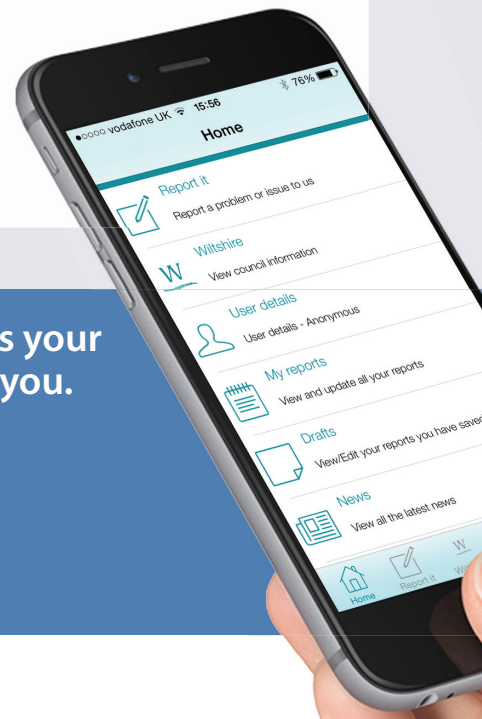
Whilst we're obviously keen to evangelise the use of technology for the effective delivery of public services, we also think it is prudent to highlight some areas to be wary of and to acknowledge some of the unique challenges that exist for public service generally and local authorities specifically. As our research clearly shows, there are some areas of local authority operation where consumers are rightly concerned about the implications of online self-service. These include areas such as the identification and support of people at risk, vulnerable adults, and children's services.

This leads us onto a second related point. We have heard of local authorities that aspire to adopt the 'Amazon model' of online self-service. Whilst we understand the sentiment, we feel a more nuanced approach is required. Local authorities do not have the luxury of choosing their customer base as commercial operators do. A local authority must service all its customers regardless of the level of dependency on public service, and this should never be forgotten. The digitisation of large areas of service delivery must not be at the expense of the most vulnerable and dependent local authority clients.

We see digitisation as a way of freeing up resource in order to ensure that it is available to offer those with the greatest need the level of support that they require through channels that they can readily access. Often this is not a self-service interface. Some things need the human touch, offering discretion and compassion that a web site or app can never deliver.



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