



ACCESS STILL DENIED?

**A progress report on provision of
offline access to council services
across Greater London**

July 2025



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Introduction

Two years ago, Age UK London published '*Access Denied: accessing council services without the internet*'. That report showed almost a third (31%) of councils in London at that time didn't offer a way to apply for Housing Benefit or Council Tax reduction without using the internet. This lack of offline provision caused huge difficulties for offline older Londoners, excluding them from accessing vital support and services to which they're eligible and entitled, and deepening social and economic divisions. Digital-only provision risks excluding the very people who depend most on council support, creating a vicious cycle of exclusion and unmet needs.

Since the publication of *Access Denied* in 2023, Age UK London has been campaigning for better provision for access to council services and benefits for older Londoners who do not use the internet. We recently repeated our research and discovered improved provision in all areas that we investigated:

- 10% of councils don't offer any offline access to all services we asked about, down from 17% two years ago
- Half as many councils don't provide offline access to Council Tax & Housing Benefit only – 16% down from 31% two years ago
- A fifth of councils don't provide offline access to Blue Badge applications, down from a quarter two years ago

We are very proud that our campaigning work in this area, and that of our local campaign groups, has made such a difference. However, while we are pleased by these improvements, there are still gaps in provision. We understand that Councils across London are facing huge financial challenges, but we have seen from these findings that improvements can and have been made.

The progress this report reveals shows that, even in a time of financial constraints for local authorities, it is possible to create offline access to services to ensure that those who do not use the internet are not excluded.

The research should be seen as a celebration of the councils who have introduced systems to enable offline older Londoners to access vital services and support, and a call to action to those who have yet, to do so.

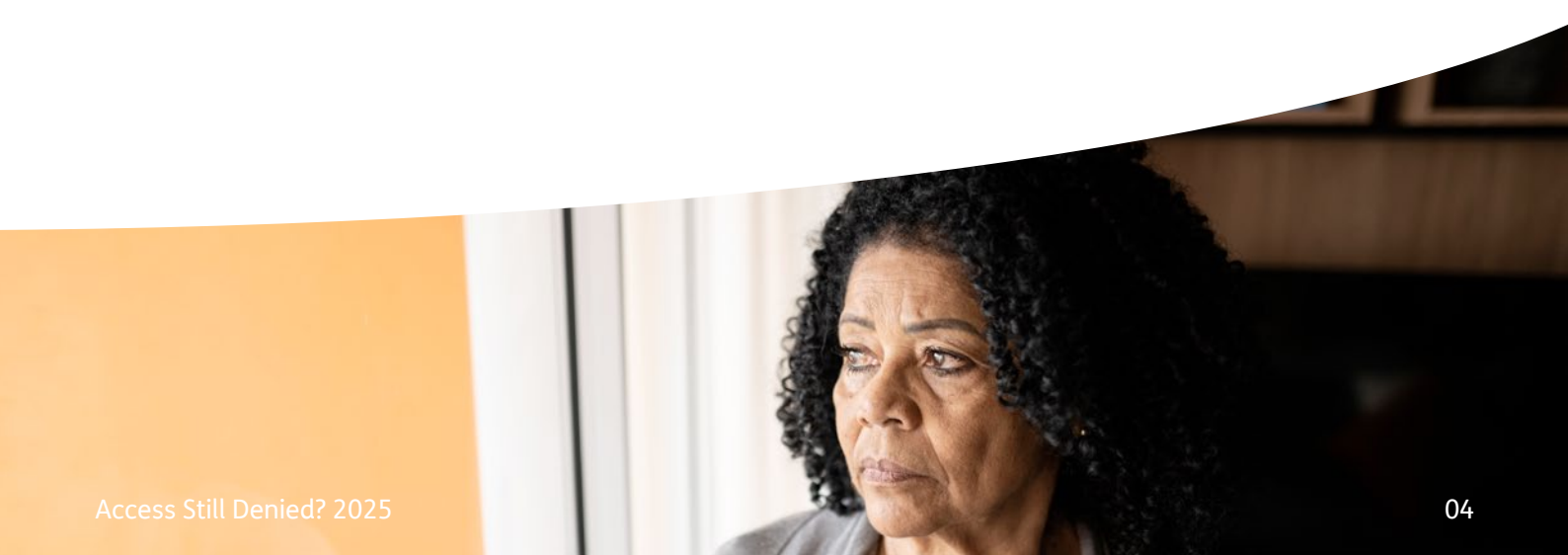
Our Research

Having initially published the results of a Freedom of Information (FoI) request in 2023, which had been sent to all local authorities across Greater London asking how their older offline residents accessed their council services, Age UK London wanted to see whether any progress had been made since then.

We decided to repeat the research, and over the winter of 2024 we sent the same questions to all 32 London councils and the City of London Corporation that we had asked previously:

1. How can residents of the borough apply for Housing Benefits, Council Tax Reduction, Council Tax Discounts and Blue Badges? Please confirm whether the following options are available: via your website; by phone; in person or by visiting a council building; or using a printed form?
2. Does your organisation provide face-to-face assistance to residents of the borough to complete forms for Housing Benefit, Council Tax Rebates, Council Tax Discounts and Blue Badges.
 - If face-to-face assistance is available, where is this available?
 - Please provide all locations
3. Where can residents of the borough without online access find telephone contact details to departments in your organisation that provide information about Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reduction, Council Tax Discounts and Blue Badges?
 - Provide all locations e.g. libraries, council offices etc.?

Following receipt of responses from 31 of the 33 councils in total, Age UK London also carried out a mystery shopping exercise where older Londoners contacted a small number of local authorities who reported offering in-person support when accessing services. This helped us to ascertain what support was available in practice to those who do not use the internet.



Our Findings

Of the 33 local authorities in London that we sent Freedom of Information requests to:

- 31 responded and two did not, although not all the 31 answered every question posed
- Of the 31 that responded, 3 (10%) don't provide any access to all services we asked about (council tax reductions/Housing Benefit and Blue Badges) down from 17% in 2023
- Of the 31 that responded, 5 (16%) don't provide any offline access to Council Tax reductions & Housing Benefit only, down from 31% in 2023
- Of the 29 that responded to this particular question, 6 (20%) don't provide offline access to Blue Badge applications, down from 25% in 2023

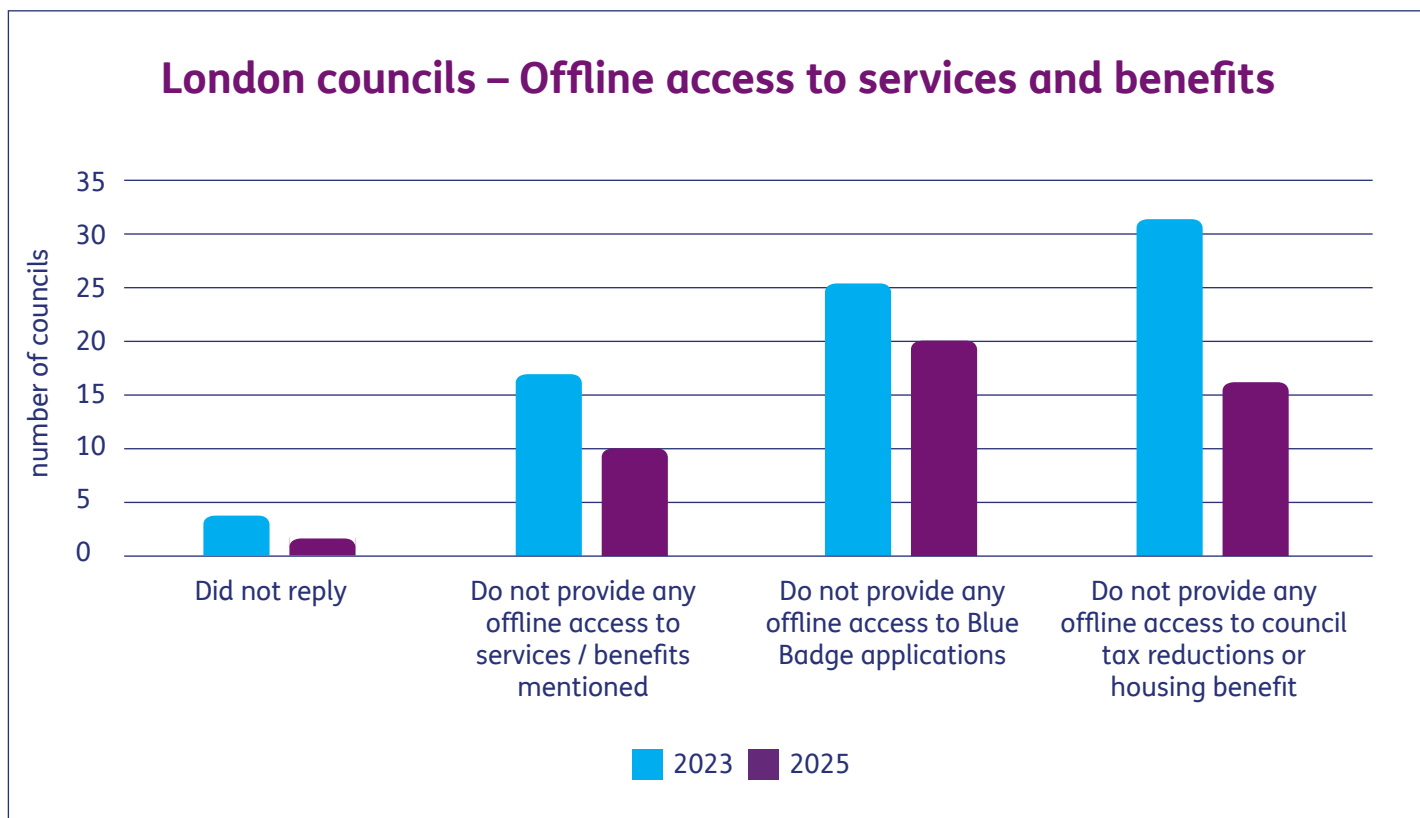
Of the 31 local authorities that responded, 10% do not offer either a way to access any of the services or benefits we mentioned without using the internet. This is a considerable improvement compared to 17% who reported not providing offline access to them back in 2023. As happened in 2023, several councils said it was possible to apply offline using a paper form but the first step in this process was downloading an application form from their website, requiring online skills as well as access to a printer.

We also revealed a significant improvement in the proportion of councils who do not offer offline access to council tax reductions or Housing Benefit – a reduction from 31% in 2023 to 15%.



We saw a smaller reduction in the proportion of councils who do not permit offline applications for Blue Badges, from 25% to 20%. Local Age UKs in London frequently report that the older people they support experience difficulties applying for Blue Badges, both for the first time and renewals, and this is compounded by there not being an offline alternative in a fifth of London boroughs.

These reductions in the number of councils offering online only access to services and benefits demonstrates that it is possible to move from online-only systems to one that offers an offline option for those who are not able to use the internet.



Equal access remains a legal and practical obligation as part of every council's Public Sector Equality Duty.

Mystery Shopping

“It’s like the world moved on and left people like me behind, if you’re not online, you don’t exist”

Once the 31 responses to the Freedom of Information requests had been received by Age UK London from the 33 local authorities across the capital, a mystery shopping exercise was undertaken. This allowed older residents’ experiences of engaging with their local authority to be captured, and helped ascertain what support was available in practice to those who do not use the internet.

Mystery shoppers either called the council or visited one of the libraries in their borough and explained that they were calling on behalf of a relative or friend who wanted to apply for housing benefit or council tax reduction but did not use the internet.

Overall, the feedback from our mystery shoppers was more positive this time round compared to two years ago. However, several older Londoners told us about the challenges they faced with automated telephone systems; that they were either ineffective in resolving the problem that they had or not being put through to the correct person within a department who would be able to respond to their query.

“I got no help at all. I was sent around and around in circles by the phone system. I never managed to speak to anyone at all.”

“The phone system told me that I could go to the website to use their benefit calculator to see if I was eligible for council benefits which was of no use to a person who is offline!”

“I got an immediate response from a robot asking me to speak and then such a long list of numbers I was very confused - the robot finally told me how to speak to a real person but that took almost 10 minutes of listening to lots of long lists. To be fair when I finally got through, the real person was very patient and helpful.”



Feedback From Local Age UKs

One London local Age UK told us:

‘Our clients frequently report difficulty completing online applications to their local authorities for these benefits. Digital-only and digital-first approaches exclude many and confound more. There is often a discrepancy to the access and support advertised by local authorities as available and the reality of the support our clients find.

*Despite councils making improvements in how they meet access requirements and investment in their front-line teams, training of customer service staff is often lacking and the information provided inaccurate. Use of badly designed online web forms, hard to navigate websites and the absence of publicly available emails or phone numbers to chase enquiries, request updates or ask for support, mean **people come to us to unravel applications in a state of frustration and confusion.***

This is a preventable demand for us where our skilled caseworkers are often admin support to a poorly designed system. There should be varied ways to access these applications, catering to all abilities and access needs, multiple formats and easily understood guidance available to all in a format they can understand. Those that need support should be provided with it. Digital exclusion needs to be considered in terms of the Equality Act 2010.’

“ Digital only and digital first approaches exclude many and confound more.”

Another London Age UK reported how digital-only systems exacerbated the problems experienced by a couple facing homelessness:

“An older offline couple in private rented accommodation, both in their 80s, due to lose their accommodation because of the landlord’s change of circumstances. They went to their council’s offices but were told that all applications for housing support had to be made online. They were given a badly photocopied scrap of paper at the civic offices with crucial information missing, and the link to an online form that didn’t work.

Not being computer literate and without an email address, neither one of them were able to set up an online account with their local council. A member of the local Age UK staff ended up using their email address. This meant each time the council officer responded or needed any extra information, there was a complicated coordination that had to take place between the Age UK staff member, the older couple and the interpreter exacerbating the already precarious predicament that the couple were in as they faced homelessness.

Although they eventually were told that they weren’t eligible for council housing and were assisted by their local community to find alternative private rented accommodation. They still needed to let the council know that they had changed their address for council tax and housing benefit purposes. Again, they went into the council offices but were told that this also could only be done online. They asked for help as they had no way of engaging online. They were refused assistance and asked to leave the premises. Their local Age UK stepped in yet again supporting them through the many challenges they had to face due to being digitally excluded.”

“Honestly, it makes you despair sometimes, how can people be let down so badly.”



Recommendations

Age UK London wants all older Londoners to have equal access to council services and for councils across London to offer straightforward and accessible ways for those who do not use the internet to be able to access their services.

We call on councils in London who do not already do so to:

- Offer non-digital options so that their residents who are not online can access their services and claim benefits that they are eligible for, including Housing Benefit, Council Tax Reductions and Blue Badges.
- Assess the impact that providing services online has for different groups protected by the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty, including older people.

We recommend that all councils in London:

- Along with offline options, they should provide websites and online systems that are easy to use for all, at all levels of digital skills, and that are accessible to people with disabilities
- With an increasingly ageing population, ensure council front line staff receive Age Friendly training
- Offer training courses themselves or make appropriate referrals for their residents who want to learn to use the internet

Age UK London endorses the recommendations of Age UK's 'Offline and Overlooked' campaign, and in particular the following:

- All public services, including the NHS, council services and other nationally provided public services, must offer and promote an affordable, easy to access, offline way of reaching and using them.
- The Government must make sure local government receives enough funding to provide offline services.



About Age UK London

Age UK London is a charity that campaigns for an age-friendly London. Working with older Londoners themselves, we campaign for specific change to improve the lives of those over 50 living in the capital and ensure that their experiences, needs and contributions are heard and taken into account by decision makers.

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