

Age UK London

Access denied: accessing council services without the internet

January 2023

TOWN HALL

MIND THE
DIGITAL GAP

London
ageUK

Contents

- 3 Introduction
- 4 Our research
- 5 Our findings
- 6 Mystery shopping exercise
- 7 Recommendations
- 8 References

Mind the Digital Gap

Age UK London's Mind the Digital Gap campaign is calling for:

- decision makers and public service providers to not exclude those who cannot or choose not to use the internet
- action to tackle barriers that prevent older Londoners who want to get online from doing so



Introduction

“I feel completely excluded from life by all the digitisation.”

There is an assumption that the COVID-19 pandemic was a catalyst for many non-internet users getting online. While this is true for some, there are many older Londoners who do not use the internet at all, either out of choice or because it's inaccessible or unaffordable to them. Research by Age UK London in 2021 showed that there are more than 200,000 Londoners over the age of 75 who do not use the internet at all. This is a cause for concern for those who do not use digital technology and as a result can feel they are being left behind or excluded from society.

Age UK London is calling for urgent action to address the profound challenges of digital exclusion that affect the daily lives of thousands of older Londoners, especially when trying to access local council services.

We are pleased to see a growing consensus amongst high-level London decision makers that not using the internet should not be a barrier to accessing public services. The London Recovery Board's A Fairer City report published in 2022 included as one of its actions “Make digital services accessible and provide alternatives for people without digital access”.¹

Accessing services delivered by their local council is a task where older Londoners tell us being offline, or low in confidence in using digital technology, continues to cause problems. In many London boroughs the only way to access certain council services is by applying through their websites. This can be challenging for everyone, but more so for those that have never used the internet or lack skills or confidence in doing so.

This report shares some insights into just how accessible London local authority services are to people who are not online and proposes recommendations to improve the situation.

Our research

In July 2022 Age UK London sent Freedom of Information requests to all London local authorities asking the following questions:

1. How can residents of the borough apply for Housing Benefits, Council Tax Rebate, 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 Rebates, Council Tax Discounts and Blue Badges? Provide all locations e.g. libraries, council offices?

Following receipt of the responses Age UK London also carried out a mystery shopping exercise where we contacted 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.



Housing
Benefit



Council Tax
Rebates



Council Tax
Discounts



Blue
Badges

Our findings

Freedom of Information requests

Summary:

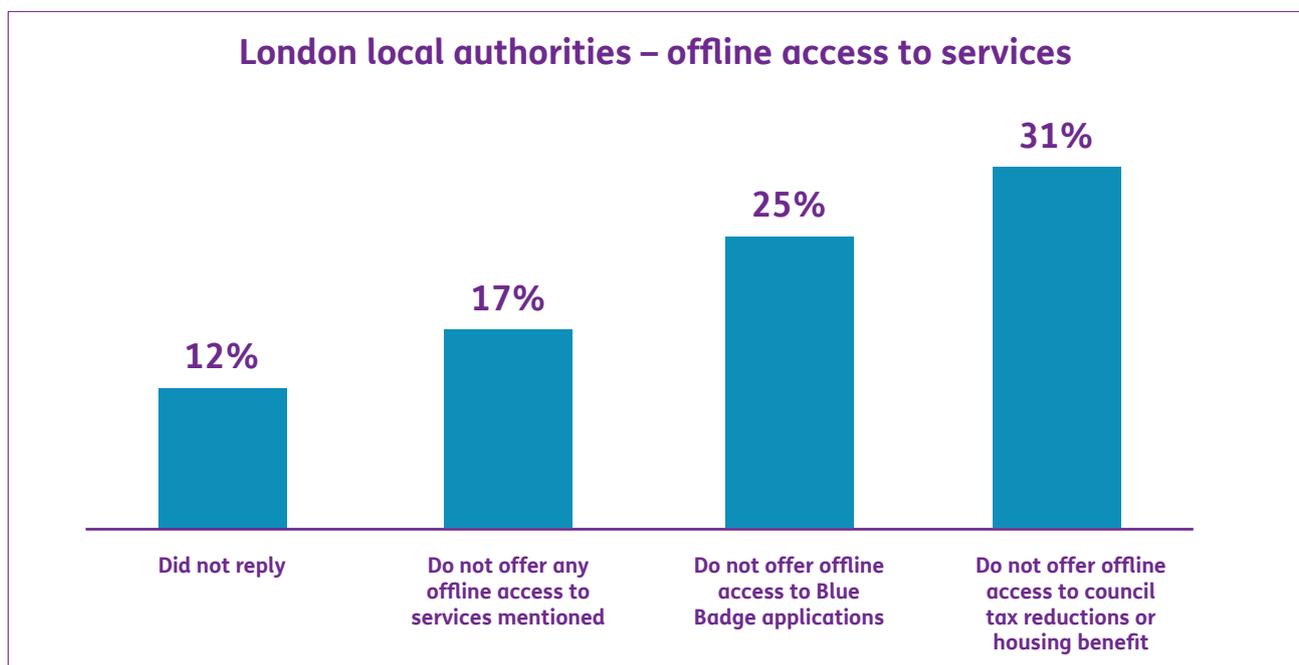
Of the 33 London local authorities we sent a Freedom of Information request to:

- Four did not reply, 29 did
- Five, or 17% of respondents, do not offer any offline access to the services we named
- Eight, or 25%, do not offer offline access to Blue Badge applications
- Nine, or 31% of respondents, do not offer offline access to council tax reductions or housing benefit

Of the 29 local authorities that did respond, 17% do not offer either a way to access the services offline, or any support. 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 access to a printer too.

Almost a third of the local authorities who responded told us that they do not offer a way to apply for council tax reductions or housing benefit offline. A quarter told us they do not offer offline support to apply for a Blue Badge.

The lack of an offline method to apply for benefits to supplement a low income is of particular concern given the increasing cost of living. Being on a low income may itself be a contributing factor to why some older people do not have access to the internet. Research by Age UK London published last year showed that the reason 19% of older Londoners don't use the internet more is because they don't have access to broadband, or to good enough digital equipment.²



Mystery shopping exercise

Following receipt of the responses to the Freedom of Information requests to all London councils, we carried out a mystery shopping exercise with twelve local authorities who had reported that they offered offline support to accessing the services we asked about. This provided first-hand evidence of council residents' experiences and whether offline support was genuinely available. It also identified issues and practices that offline council residents come up against on a regular basis.

Mystery shoppers either called the council or visited one of the libraries in the 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.

In just under half of all cases, the mystery shoppers were not able to obtain the information they sought about how it would be possible to apply for either housing benefit or council tax reduction without using the internet. In two instances, the answers received over the telephone directly contradicted the information conveyed in the response to the Freedom of Information requests – that it was possible to apply for one of the services in question offline.

Over half of the mystery shoppers reported a negative experience. Two of the most common contributors to this were the length of time they had to wait to hold on the telephone and a lack of knowledge about whether it was possible to apply for services offline, either from staff at council call centres or libraries.

“I called up and was on hold for 45 minutes and the messages, while I was waiting, gave no option for any offline service so I didn't know whether I would get any help after my long wait.”

Mystery shoppers also report problems relating to the quality of information they received. A number of mystery shoppers were repeatedly directed to the council website despite clearly stating that they were asking how to access the service in question without internet access.

“I was told I had to have an online account because without an account they can't send any forms out.”

Some councils offered offline support to access services but presented this as an 'optional extra' rather than a basic element of their provision which all residents are entitled to receive.

“The only place that will help in-person is at the reception desk of the Civic Centre. They are apparently very happy to help if they're not busy; but emphasize only if not busy.”

It also proved frustrating that in some boroughs where the council does give support - either themselves or by funding local partners e.g. through the local Age UK Information & Advice service – this is not always known or signposted by council staff.

Recommendations

Age UK London wants 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 recommend that councils in London:

- Ensure that everyone can access their services without needing to rely on others
- Offer non-digital options so that their residents who are not online can access their services and claim benefits that they are eligible for, such as Housing Benefit or Council Tax Reduction
- 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
- Offer training courses themselves or make appropriate referrals for those who want to learn to use the internet
- Assess the impact that providing services online has for different groups protected by the Equality Act and Public Sector Equality Duty, including older people

Age UK London supports the campaign work undertaken by Age UK calling on national government to ensure local councils have sufficient funding to meet their statutory requirements, including the proper administration of benefits for older people.

References

- ¹ https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/mol_lrb_structural_inequalities_report_pp6.pdf
- ² <https://www.ageuk.org.uk/bp-assets/globalassets/london/documents/campaigns/mind-the-digital-gap-report.pdf>





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.

Age UK London, Crown House, 27 Old Gloucester Street, London WC1N 3AX (postal only).

Website: www.ageuk.org.uk/london

Twitter: [@AgeUKLondon](https://twitter.com/AgeUKLondon)

Email: campaigns@ageuklondon.org.uk

Registered charity number 1092198. Age UK London is a company limited by guarantee, registered in England and Wales number 4407861.