

A background image of a call center with several agents wearing headsets. A semi-transparent diamond pattern is overlaid on the left side of the image.

Rethinking communications

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Why local councils must adapt
to meet residents' expectations.

Executive Summary

76% of local residents were dissatisfied with the outcome of complaints and 61% are dissatisfied with the overall service.

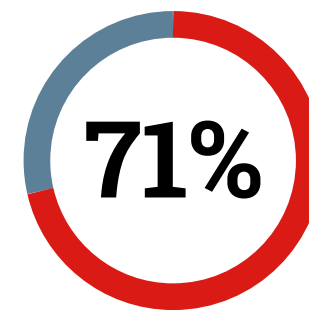
According to the Local Government Association (LGA), residents' satisfaction with local councils is falling.

The LGA study revealed that 76% of local residents were dissatisfied with the outcome of complaints and 61% are dissatisfied with the overall service.

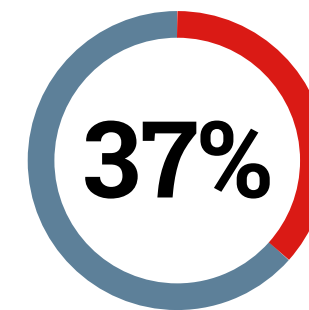
Ratings also found that most residents don't feel their complaints are fully understood by their local council.

At 8x8, what we wanted to understand was why residents are dissatisfied, what the consequences of this are and how technology is supporting councils in improving this.

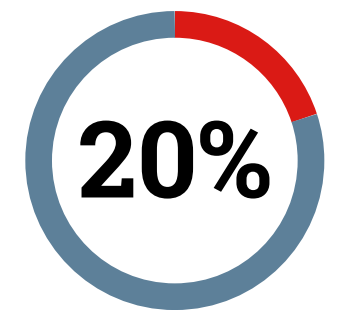
Our research polled the opinions of 2,000 residents and revealed:



of residents said they expected customer service levels from their local authority to improve in line with council tax increases.



have been unable to obtain critical information from their local council because of poor service.



have missed a council tax payment because they couldn't get the information they needed.

Research findings

Residents and the “expectation economy”

Half of UK citizens have contacted the customer service team at their local council in the past, with those aged 35-44 (59% of respondents) most likely to have been in touch. In the last 12 months, those who contacted their council spoke or wrote to them twice on average.

Those aged 25-34 are most likely to have contacted their local council on multiple occasions (49% of respondents vs 44% across all ages), with those aged 16-24 the next most likely. This could indicate that younger generations are more demanding and expect quicker responses than other age groups, potentially because they are used to disruptive services such as Uber, or messenger apps – where they can immediately get a response. After all we live in the expectation economy where technology empowers us to be better informed, but it also makes us less patient and more demanding than ever before.

Question:
How many times have you contacted the customer service team at your local council in the last 12 months?

Contact with local council



Those aged 25-34 are most likely to have contacted their local council on multiple occasions (49% of respondents vs 44% across all ages), with those aged 16-24 the next most likely.

Lengthy call waiting times

The clear majority (85%) of residents said they have experienced good customer service from their local authority.

Yet, when residents were dissatisfied with the standard of service, it affected their overall opinion of their council. When asked about the kinds of organisations they were most likely to lose patience with, regarding customer service, public sector organisations were rated near the bottom of the list (21%) – behind telecoms and utility firms (33%) and retailers (24%).

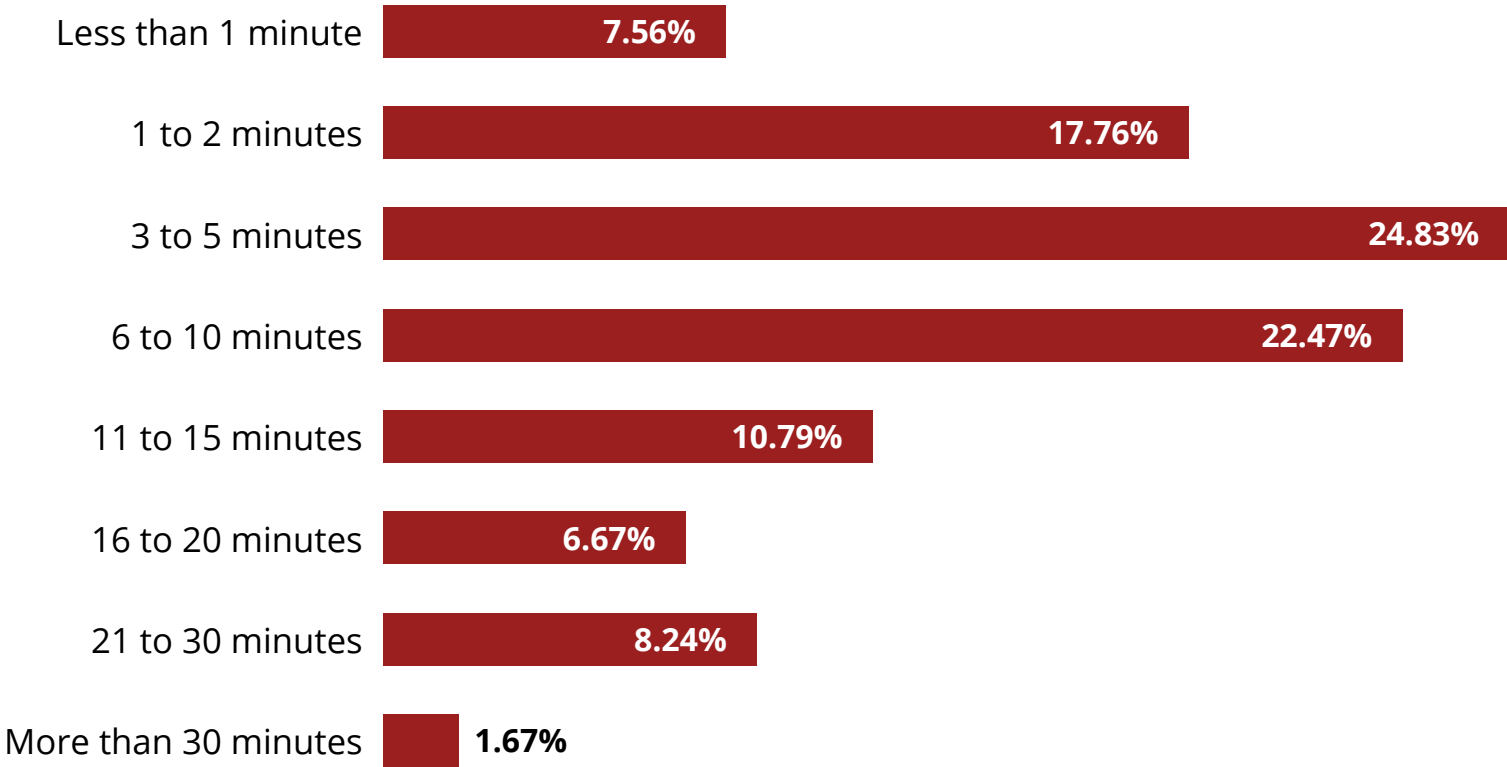
One of the key reasons was the length of time it takes to reach the right people within the customer service team. Our research found it took people seven minutes on average to get through to their local council, after speaking with at least two different people to get through to the right department. One in five (21%) residents interacted with three or more customer service agents before they reached the correct person.

Despite some citizens experiencing lengthy call waiting times, others could get through to their council much more quickly - with 18% speaking to someone within one to two minutes on average, and 25% between three and five minutes.

Those aged 25-34 wait the longest on average to reach their local council’s customer service team, nearly 9 minutes on average. This suggests millennials have more patience in this situation or they distract themselves with their smartphones or social media services while waiting on the line.

Question:
Thinking about the last time you have called your local council; how long did it take to get through to someone that could help?

Average reported wait time





Passed around the houses

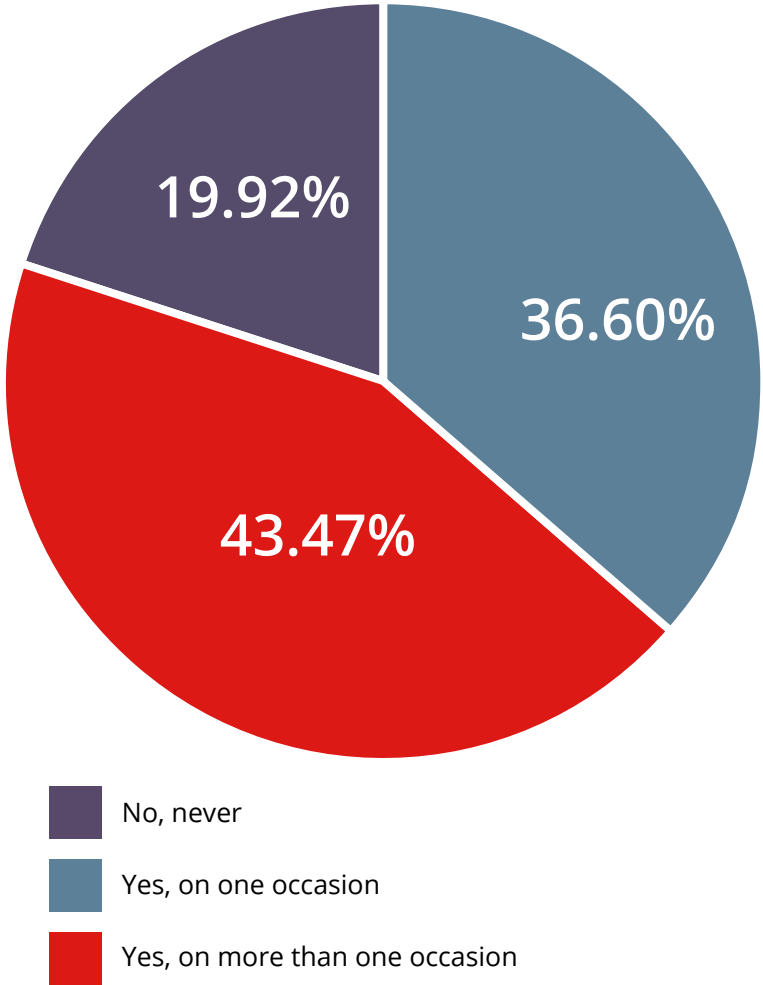
Not only do residents have to wait a long time to speak to someone, they only resolve their query after speaking with at least two different people. One in five (21%) residents interacted with three or more customer service agents before they reached the right person.

While this is common, the 16-34 segment are most likely to report being passed around multiple agents before having their query answered, 49% of this group have experienced this issue compared to 43% of the general population. This could mean that those aged 16-34 are less tolerant of being passed between agents frequently.

This could be attributed to customer service agents not having the right knowledge to hand, or even access to the knowledge management systems, or experts that can easily provide the right answer, to residents.

Question:
When speaking to the customer service team at your local council on the phone, have you ever been passed between multiple people or departments to get an answer?

Transferred to multiple departments



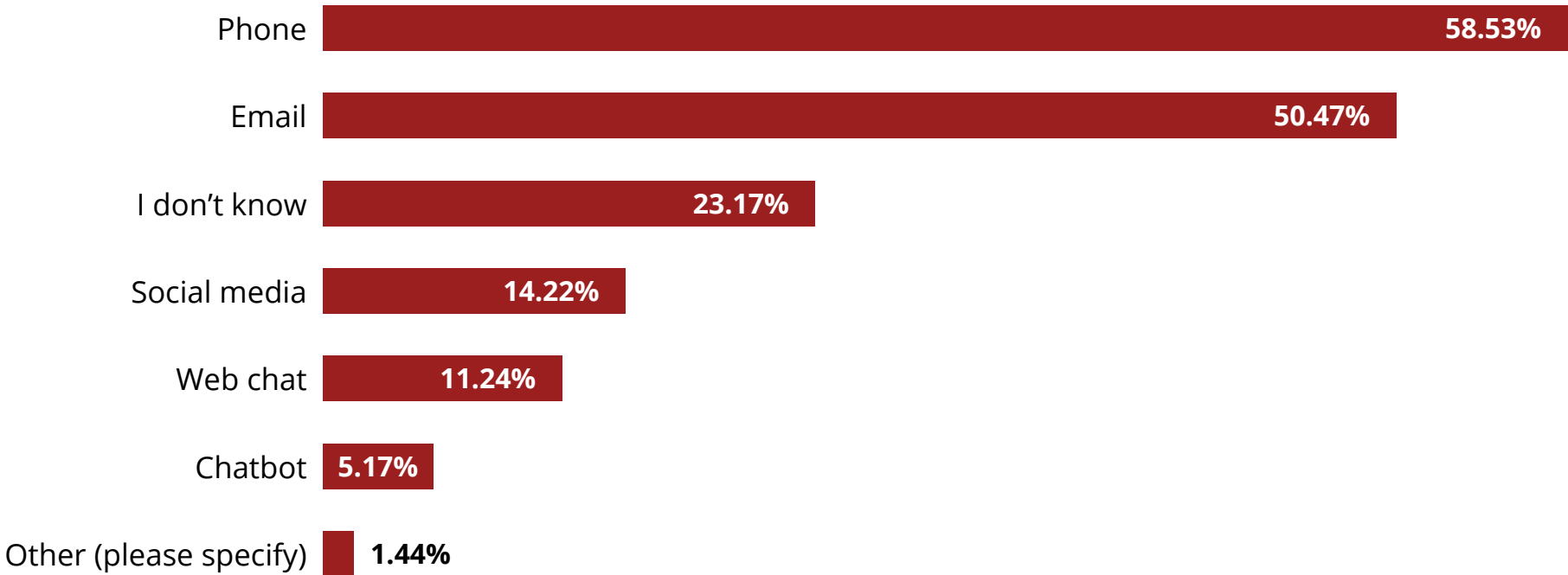
Popular ways to contact local councils

Residents feel restricted in the way they can engage with their council. The phone is still the most popular communications channel, with 58% of the public reporting they contact their local authority in this way. Half of all residents also use email to get in touch with their local authority, but just 14% by social media and only 5% have a chatbot available.

Interestingly, just 6% of citizens in Northern Ireland state that their councils offer social media as a method of contact, compared to 21% in the North East. This is a significant difference and suggests that either residents are unaware they can contact their council via social media in Northern Ireland or that councils need to actively promote new communications channels.

Question:
What customer service channels does your local council offer for you to contact them on?
(Tick all that apply)

Customer contact channels available



Delays accessing vital information

Our research found that over a third of residents (37%) have been unable to obtain critical information from their local council because of poor service. We have noticed regional differences, with one in five (22%) citizens in Northern Ireland stating they haven't been able to get hold of information compared to 49% in Greater London. These statistics suggest there is more need for council services to improve in the Greater London region.

Citizens across the board report that delays in reaching the right department resulted in significant consequences. One in five missed a council tax payment, 17% missed benefits payments and 14% signed up for the wrong benefits.

The main cause is that, despite trying to contact the relevant department for the right information on their query, residents were left with unanswered questions or were not given helpful responses in time. This not only causes series financial implications for residents', but also impacts the local authority's cumulative cashflow.

Each of the these consequences has potential wider impacts, that includes an individual's credit rating, environmental damage, eviction action from a landlord, crowd control issues, inability to pay for household essentials.

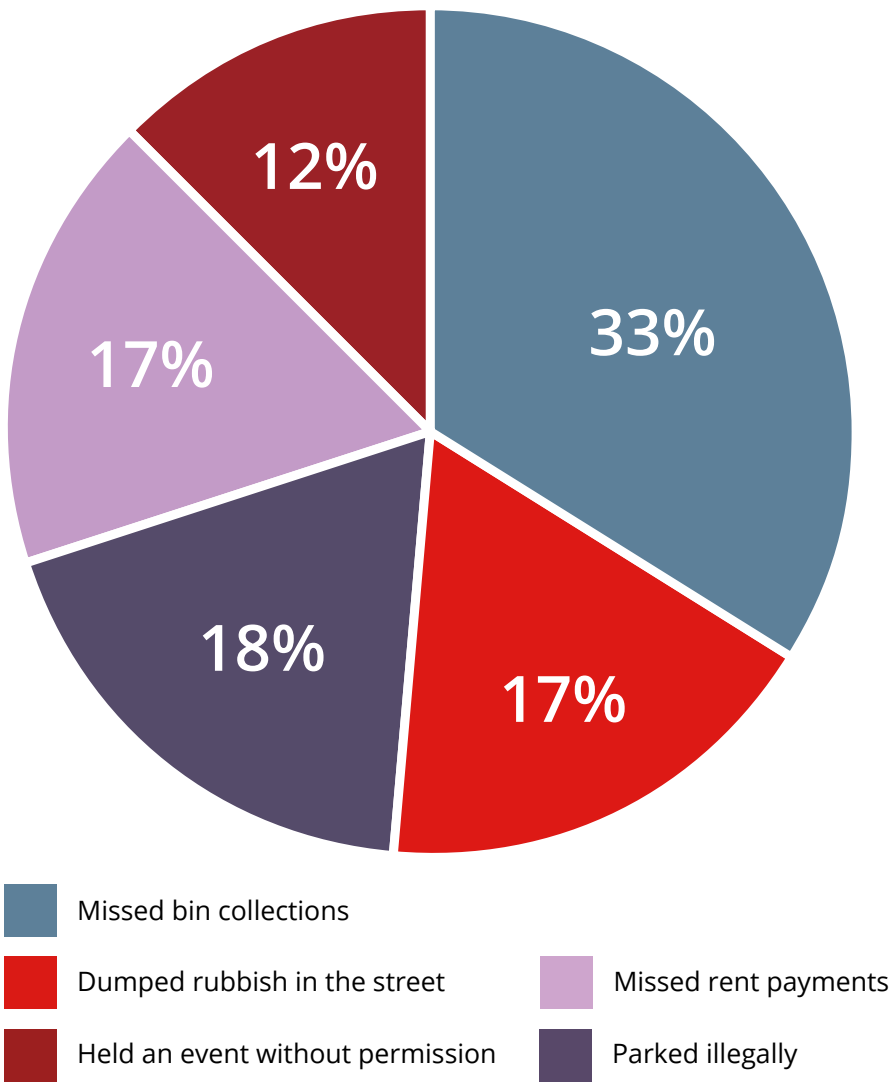
These knock-on effects are the result of residents unable to speak to the customer service team quickly, or not getting the right information when they do reach someone.

Customer service agents may be held back from offering the best service, due to legacy communications and contact centre systems. Tools that don't provide context as to why a resident is calling or not having a knowledge base system that harnesses insights, documents and guides, stops advisors from providing better service levels to customers.

This could also prevent agents from, abilities to reach the relevant experts or specialists within the organisation using existing communications technology, or not having instant messaging tools integrated into the contact centre.

How poor service affects citizens

Knock-on effects of poor council service also include:





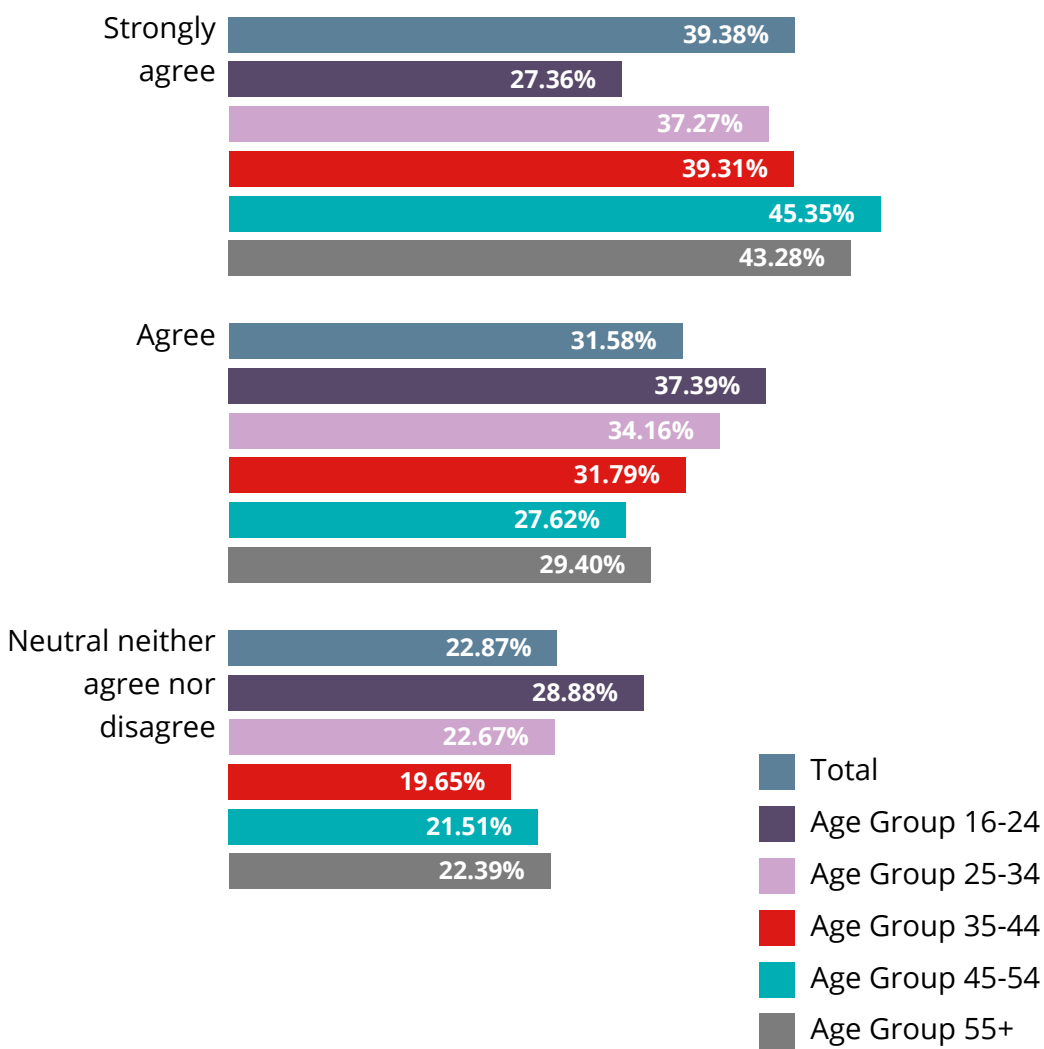
Council tax rises inflate residents' expectations

Demands on local services are greater than ever, and we found that residents expect better customer service from their local council in line with council tax increases. More than two-thirds (71%) expect improvements to the customer service provided by their local council as a result of their council tax rising.

There is also a marked difference between the generations, with those aged 45+ more strongly agreeing that service levels should increase in line with council tax rises (44%) than those aged 16-24 (27%).

Question:
To what extent do you agree that local council customer services should improve because taxes are going up?

Citizen expect better services for higher taxes





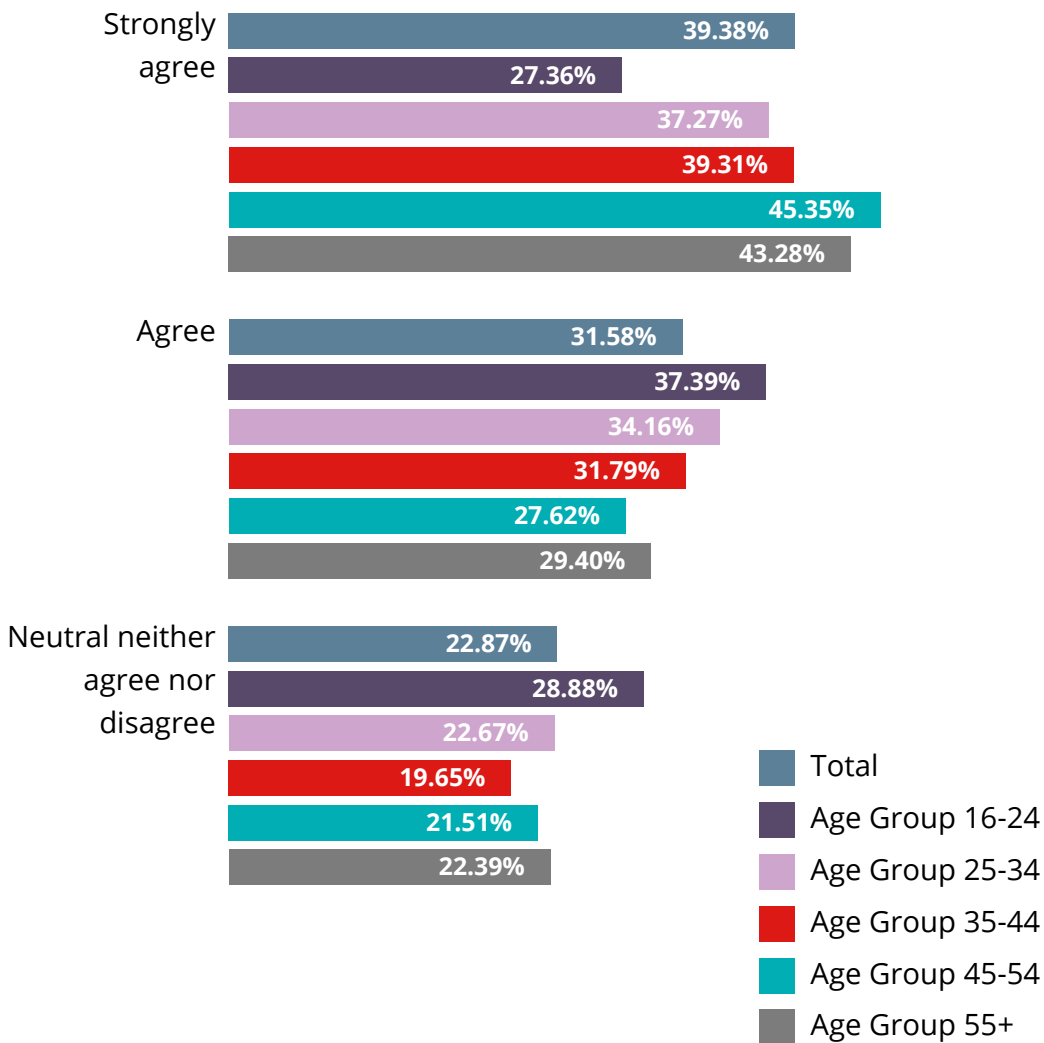
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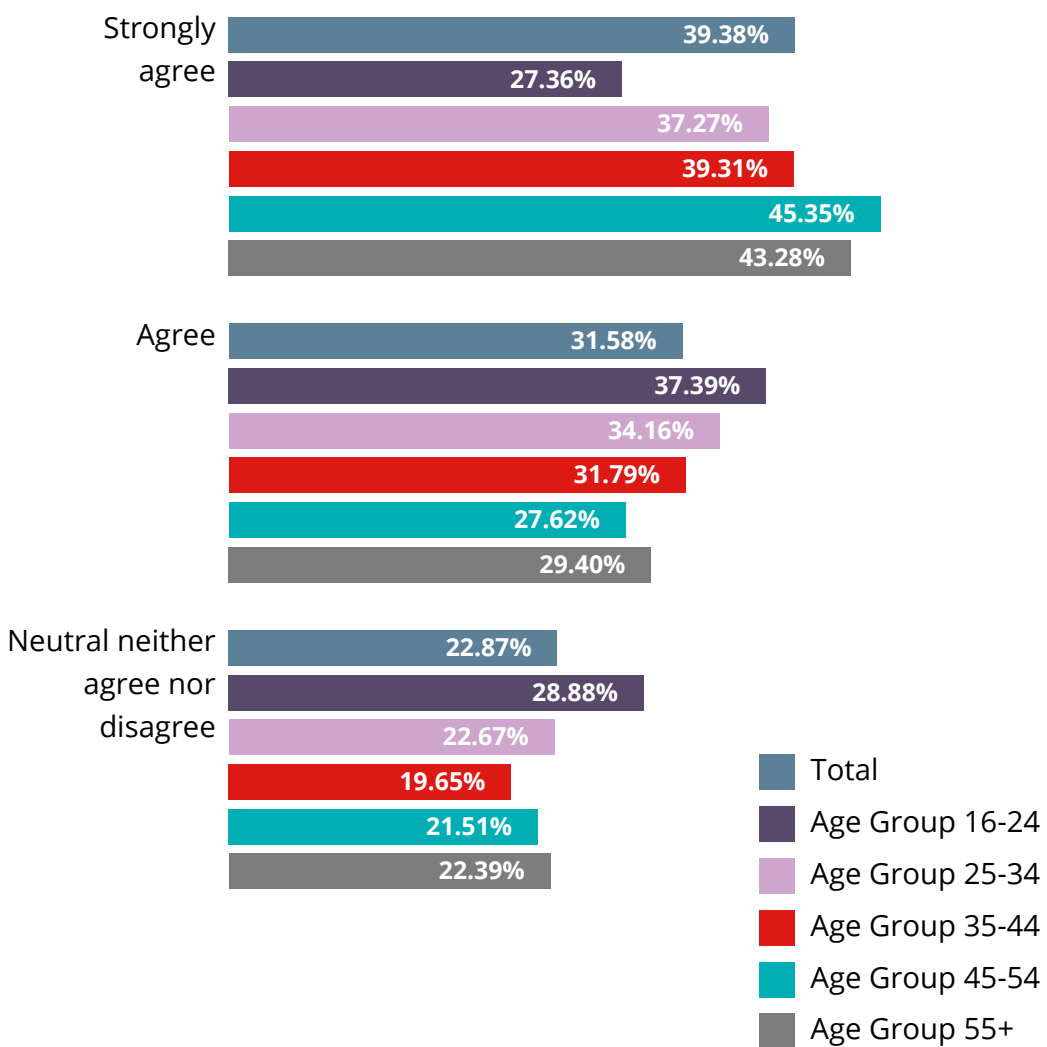
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Human communications or chatbots?

People value their queries being answered immediately, without being passed between multiple agents or having to contact the council again (35%). Councils with legacy communications naturally find it difficult to keep up with these expectations.

Nearly half (44%) of residents expect more digital communication channels like webchat or social media from their local council to get a quicker and easier response to queries.

Phone and email are the most popular channels for residents to contact their local councils.

However, it is promising to see other modern communications tools being provided for customer service purposes. Research shows that more people aged between 25-34 and 35-44 than any other age group were aware that their local council offers social media as a means to contact their customer service teams. On top of this, more residents aged 16-24 than any other age group identified Chatbots as a method of contact. These results show that residents are seeking alternatives to the traditional phone call.



Residents value being able to speak to their local council customer service team (39%) and having queries resolved quickly (38%) – these two elements form the basis of a good customer experience.

Councils can do more to increase awareness of modern communication technologies, which reduce costs, enhance service levels, and improve citizen outcomes.

Growing interest in modern communications

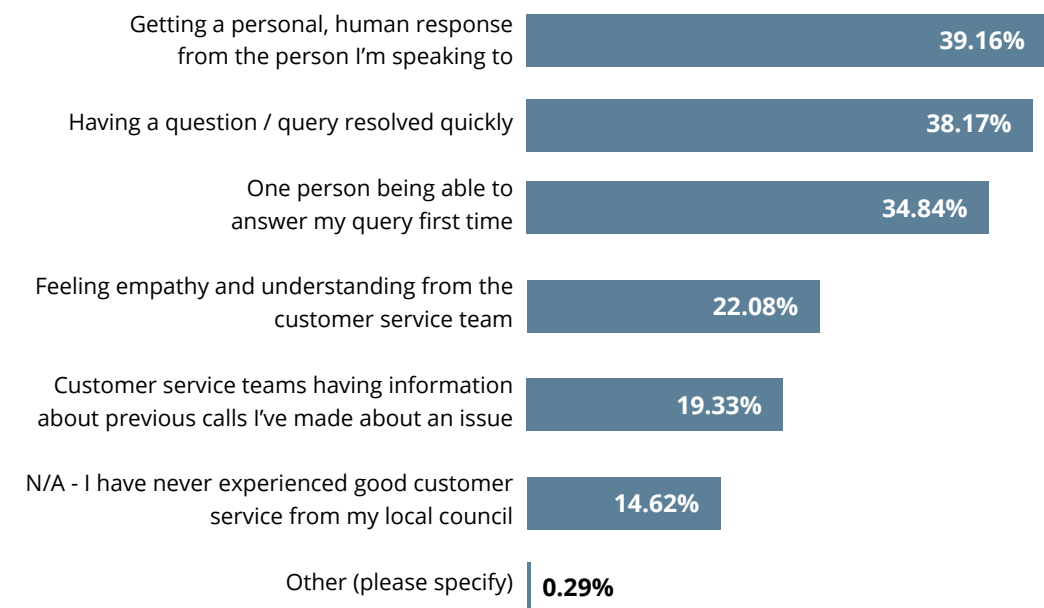
When asked what customer service channels residents would like their council to offer, webchat and email were most popular.

Delving further into these figures, we saw that citizens aged between 25-34, 35-44 and 45-54 were most in favour of webchat over other channels and age groups. As expected, the youngest generation were most interested in social media as a tool to contact customer service – almost a third (29%) of those aged 16-24 would like this as an option.

Finally, those aged between 16-24 and 25-34 were the age groups that most favoured bringing in Chatbot customer service, which suggests they are the most comfortable generations discussing local services with a bot instead of a person. The North East was the region most in favour of this form of communication being introduced to their local councils (21%) while the region least interested was Northern Ireland (4%).

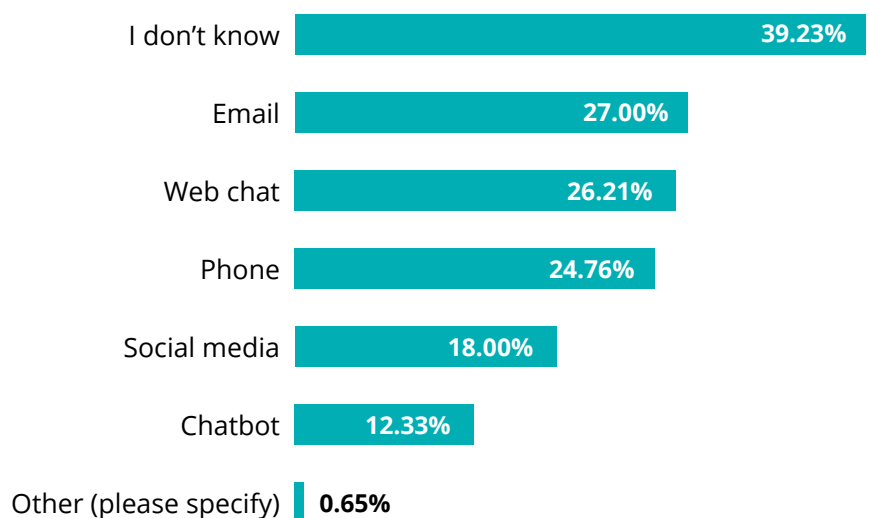
Question:
Thinking about a time when you have experienced good customer service from your local council, what made it good? (Tick all that apply)

What residents' value from customer service



Question:
What customer service channels would you like your council to offer, that it doesn't already? (Tick all that apply)

Preferred customer service channels



Meeting residents' expectations amidst budgets constraints



By Mary Ellen Genovese, MD of European Operations, 8x8

It's encouraging to see that most local residents have experienced great service from their local council. Residents also expect the human touch – helpful, friendly, knowledgeable customer service agents who can answer a citizen's query quickly and easily, are highly appreciated.

However, our research reveals this isn't always the case.

Over a third (37%) of UK citizens have been denied critical information from their local councils because they couldn't reach the right department. Our research reports residents missing council tax or rent payments, dumping rubbish in the street or applying for the wrong benefits.

This has severe implications for residents, and local authorities miss out on vital revenue or are forced to allocated additional resources to correct the problem.

Improving customer service levels is a top priority for local authorities today but it shouldn't fall to just one department to find a solution.

Many councils are actively seeking new and innovative ways to improve customer service as part of their wider digital transformation strategies.

Aylesbury Vale District Council (AVDC) is one example of a forward-thinking council that has introduced cloud communications technology to deliver public services at greater quality while costing less. You can read more about this below.

The benefits of bringing in new technology are clear: customer service teams are given the tools they need to excel in their roles and citizens receive the service they expect.

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How Aylesbury Vale District Council transformed its customer service with cloud communications

If any council could be said to be punching above its weight, it's Aylesbury Vale District Council (AVDC). The local authority has pioneered cloud technology in fresh ways to transform how public services are delivered in greater quality while costing less. With solutions and expertise from 8x8, the council now has a telephony system that supports its innovative agenda.

Aylesbury Vale District Council provides public services to over 180,000 residents in the towns and rolling countryside of north Buckinghamshire. However, this local authority could be described as anything but 'sleepy' as it leads transformation in the way services are delivered by local authorities in the UK.

Faced with 74% reductions in Government grants over 10 years, the council decided to rethink its operations and embrace tech disruption, looking for innovative ways to create value propositions to engage citizens. It became the first council to move all IT systems to Amazon's Web Cloud, saving on infrastructure, software and staffing. It's also encouraged close to 60,000 out of a potential 75,000 households to sign up for its award-winning Aylesbury Vale "MyAccount" facility which enables residents to access council services online. This alone has freed up more than 900 staff hours and made thousands of residents reachable, instantly.



Faced with 74% reductions in Government grants over 10 years, the council decided to rethink its operations and embrace tech disruption

The challenge: **Unstable, complex and costly telephony**

Aylesbury Vale's 10-year strategy was to move all applications off premise and into the cloud — making the council 'infrastructure free'. Telephony was next on the list.

Around 75 staff handled calls about council tax, benefits waste and other topics but the legacy telephony system was unstable, complex and costly to upgrade and maintain. It had other drawbacks too - it relied on physical handsets that kept users desk-bound; it lacked reports and meaningful metrics such as calls taken and agent performance, and conference calls were via an 0844 number that was expensive for people dialling in.

"For us, the customer experience is everything — and the old telephony technology couldn't deliver," explains Andrew Grant, the council's Chief Executive. "Our vision was to adopt a business approach within local government that liberated services and made them agile and higher quality by using the cloud and artificial intelligence.

The council discussed the challenges with 8x8 and quickly found common ground. "We wanted someone who could understand our goals, identify a strong return on investment and assist with cultural changes, deployment, training and ongoing maintenance," says Andrew Grant. "The team at 8x8 were confident that the transition was possible within our budget. They liked our vision and we appreciated their can-do attitude and ambition."

The solution: **Completed years ahead of schedule**

8x8 met the council's needs with its flagship product, the 8x8 X Series. This ground-breaking platform provides two essential components. The Virtual Contact Centre is now used by customer relationship teams to handle inbound enquiries more effectively. Meanwhile, the Virtual Office provides phone numbers that can be used by every staff member at council offices and by home workers. The council can also run auto attendants, call queues, ring groups, call pick up groups and conference calling through the system.

8x8 successfully moved a 400 user phone system (including eight contact centres) to a hosted voice system over a weekend without loss of communication. The solution was then upgraded in 2018 during election time, also with minimal downtime. In fact, integration with the council's CRM took just two hours. Taken as a whole, the X Series implementation was finished two years ahead of schedule.

"We've developed the solution and added more features over time," explains Andrew Grant. "All our agents and staff use it now — and we have the 8x8 app on our mobile phones. We now have customer journey mapping enabled, so it's possible to open customer cases on the screen before answering the call, which helps us to improve the customer experience dramatically."

The benefits: **Outstanding savings and service innovation**

Aylesbury Vale is now the only local authority in the UK with such an extensive cloud framework in place.

- 8x8 has played a critical role in AVDC generating over £10m in technology savings and additionally generating new income after moving to cloud-based systems.
- AVDC has been able to reduce headcount by 10% over the past two years.
- Implementation of 8x8 X Series has enabled 30% reduction in overall IT spend.
- The automation within the telephone system is saving AVDC £40,000 annually.
- 8x8 X Series adds extra communications capabilities to the "MyAccount" channel enabling AVDC to create new revenue streams.
- The deployment of 8x8 X Series was very smooth. Overall implementation was finished two years ahead of schedule.
- By being able to provide better customer experience, customer satisfaction scores are high – reaching 90%.





Methodology

To create this paper, 8x8 commissioned independent market research company Censuswide to interview a nationally representative sample of 2,000 UK adults.

Unless otherwise stated, all statistics referenced relate to this survey.

Each respondent was asked to complete an in-depth questionnaire about their experience of contacting the customer service team at their local council.



8x8, Inc. communication solutions help businesses transform their customer and employee experience. With one system of engagement for cloud voice, video, chat and contact centre and one system of intelligence on one cloud communications platform, businesses can now communicate faster and smarter to exceed the speed of customer expectations. For additional information, visit www.8x8.co.uk, or follow 8x8 on LinkedIn, Twitter, and Facebook.

