

Local Council Websites: The Devil is in the Detail

A usability study of the
leading UK local council
websites



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Introduction

The market opportunity

There are now an estimated 51.4 million Internet users in the UK¹, representing nearly 82% of the population and access to online information has never been easier.

With the massive and impending government cuts, there has never been more pressure than now for councils to reduce costs and get residents self-serving online. Indeed, with 64% of web users having already made an online purchase², many web users are clearly comfortable with transacting over the Internet.

Whilst it can be difficult to measure the monetary value of web traffic directly, it's clear there's an appetite amongst councils to capitalise on this user interest. Councils are also aware of the growing trends of the online population of the UK – more and more users are coming online to seek out information on the Internet³.

However, the drive to embrace transactional capabilities prematurely without considering the user experience can mean that important services could be let down by poor usability.

About this report

Since 2007, Webcredible has investigated the usability of the top 20 local council websites in the UK (based on the Socitm's review of all council websites, 'Better Connected').

This year Socitm has introduced a new 4-rank system based on stars, in addition to their top 20 list. The 2010 Better connected study reported that 24% are 3-star sites, nearly half (46%) are 2-star and the rest (27%) 1-star sites⁴.

Last year, with an average usability score of 59.9%, the top 20 local councils were providing a reasonable online experience to their users, although there was still much room for improvement. This year, Webcredible has re-investigated against the same essential usability criteria (with some minor changes) to see what improvement (if any) has been made with this year's Socitm top 20 council websites.

Evaluations of the 20 websites were conducted throughout June and early July 2010.

Who is this report for?

This report is aimed at anyone involved with local government – communication managers, marketing managers, Internet managers and web developers. Although our analysis is focused on local councils, the guidelines are highly transferable to other information and transaction-based websites. The report assumes no prior usability or technical knowledge.

Methodology

Webcredible analysed 20 of the UK's leading local council websites in June and July 2010. The 20 essential guidelines devised for previous council website studies have been updated slightly to bring them in line with users' higher expectations of usability.

Each website was evaluated against these 20 best practice guidelines and assigned a score of 0 to 5 for each guideline, with 5 being the maximum. With 20 guidelines in total, websites were assigned a total Usability Index rating out of 100.

The guidelines against which we benchmarked the 20 local councils were:

Site and homepage priorities

1. Prominent contact us link with phone number and hours of operation
2. Clear text resizing controls at top of the page
3. Clearly marked home link on every page
4. A-Z of services easy to locate and easy to use
5. Homepage lists key tasks that are easy to locate and understand

Site supports key user tasks

6. It's easy to pay council tax online
7. It's easy to find your local councillor
8. It's easy to view planning applications
9. It's easy to find information about recycling and bin collection

Transactional capabilities

10. Form fields clearly labelled, laid out and marked as required/optional
11. Error handling on forms is useful and clear
12. Response time is indicated on enquiry forms
13. Progress indicator present with clear numbered and named stages
14. Main call to action is easy to spot and well labelled

Navigation and orientation

15. Site offers a simple site map that's easy to find and use
16. It's easy to know where you are within a given section
17. It's easy to get back to where you were
18. Navigation style is consistently applied and simple to understand
19. Search understands common mistakes and abbreviations
20. Search results are simple to interpret and useful

Results

Executive summary

This year, the top 20 local council websites received the following scores, out of 100:

Council	Website	Total score
South Tyneside	www.southtyneside.info	70
South Holland	www.sholland.gov.uk	68
Chichester	www.chichester.gov.uk	66
Bath & North East Somerset	www.bathnes.gov.uk	63
Cambridgeshire	www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk	63.5
Worthing	www.worthing.gov.uk	62.5
Richmond	www.richmond.gov.uk	61.5
East Sussex	www.eastsussex.gov.uk	60.5
North Yorkshire	www.northyorks.gov.uk	60.5
Brent	www.brent.gov.uk	60
Salford City	www.salford.gov.uk	58
Newcastle upon Tyne City	www.newcastle.gov.uk	57
Buckinghamshire	www.buckscc.gov.uk	57.5
South Ayrshire	www.south-ayrshire.gov.uk	55.5
Allerdale	www.allerdale.gov.uk	54
Gloucestershire	www.gloucestershire.gov.uk	54
Exeter City	www.exeter.gov.uk	53.5
Sefton	www.sefton.gov.uk	50.5
York City	www.york.gov.uk	50.5
Oxfordshire	www.oxfordshire.gov.uk	48.5
Average score		58.7

Compared to last year's results, this year there's a slight downward trend. Last year's average score of 59.9 has decreased to 58.7 this year. This perhaps represents stagnation in council site usability, with our averages being 56.6, 59.9 and 58.7 over the past 3 years.

With 10 websites scoring 60% or more, and all but one scoring over 50%, it's clear that this year's Socitm top 20 are providing a reasonable user experience for their local residents. However, the potential benefits and cost savings of getting their users online can only be realised if local councils consistently deliver a first class user experience.

There's been some improvement this year on the transactional ability of the sites with an improved average score of 3.6 for how online forms are laid out and labelled.

This work is unfortunately let down once the forms are submitted with most still scoring badly for error handling, issuing users with a reference number and communicating clear response times and next steps. Clear follow up is key to a consistent user experience.

This year the scores relating to navigation are slightly lower than last year (3 or less out of 5 for each of the key navigation and orientation guidelines 16-18). This is disappointing as a lot of rich functionality is hard to navigate to and orientate from once there.

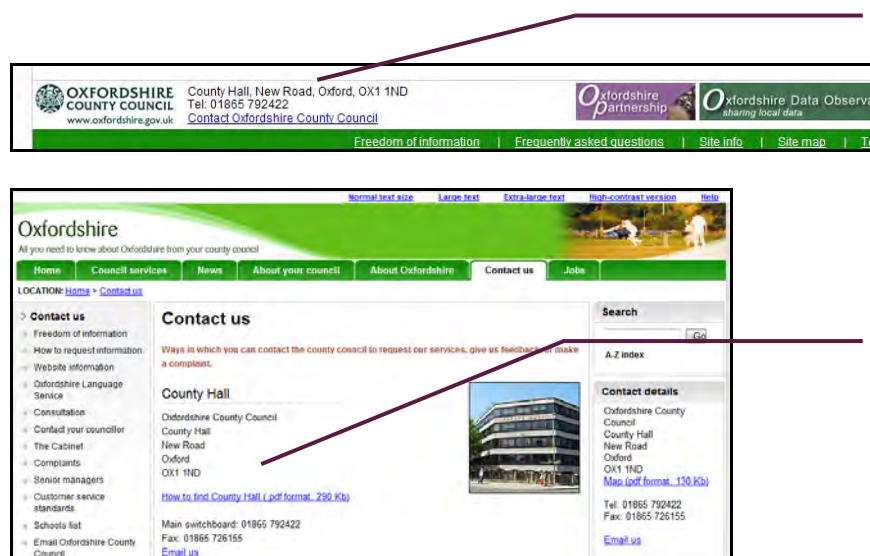
Please consult the Appendix on **pError! Bookmark not defined.** for a full breakdown of scores.

1. Prominent contact us link with phone number and hours of operation

Average score: 3.1 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.7]

According to our 2008 survey, 70% of web users generally don't carry out council transactions online⁵. Typically, users come to a council website to find information only. Many users are opting to use the phone and face-to-face as their preferred means of contact.

As such, it's essential that users can easily find the contact details and opening hours of their local council on each web page, particularly on the homepage.



South Holland's homepage demonstrates near best-practice, with a clear and useful 'Contact Us' panel... Moving this further up the page (above the fold) would have got it full marks.



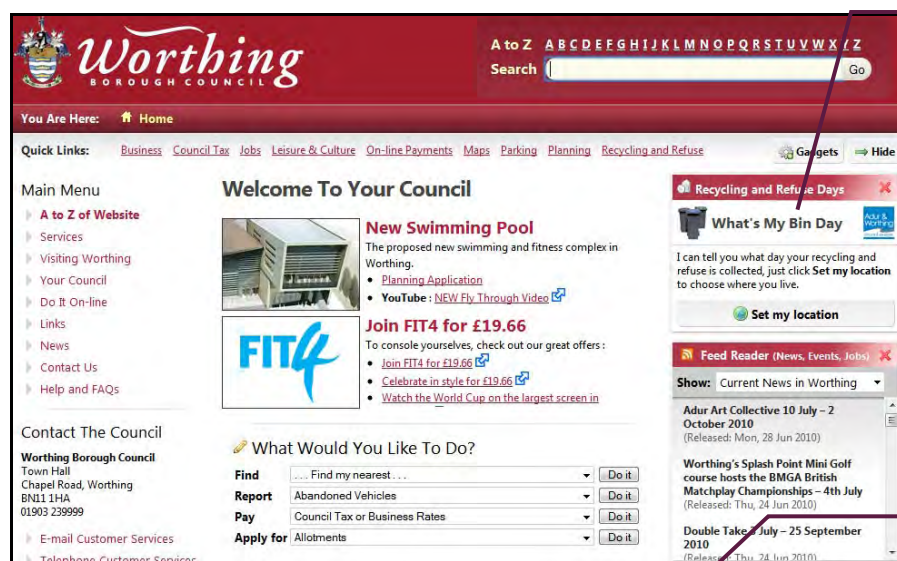
Overall most websites have a clear 'contact is link near the top of the page which takes users to phone numbers and opening hours, and 16 out of 20 websites scored 3 (out of 5) or higher. This is slightly lower than last year where all 20 websites scored 3 or more.

2. Clear text resizing controls at top of the page

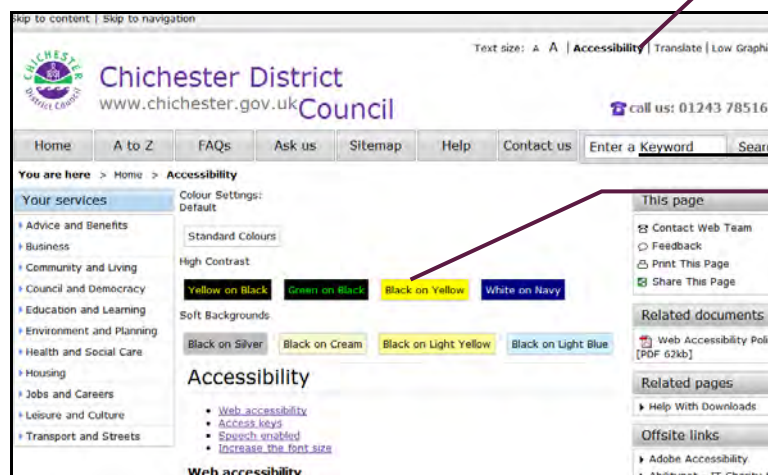
Average score: 2.2 (out of 5) [Last year: 1.8]

Many users don't know how to change the text size of a page using their browser controls. A good solution to this problem is to provide text resizing controls on the actual web page itself.

Many elderly users, and especially users with low vision, will struggle to find text resizing controls unless they're clearly promoted at the top of the page.



Worthing Council has no visible accessibility features at all.



Chichester Council has clear text size controls at the top of the page.

Additionally a wide range of colour schemes are available from the Accessibility page to help people with visual impairments and dyslexia

With so many elderly users coming online to find local information, it's surprising that more council websites aren't doing more to embrace this important guideline.

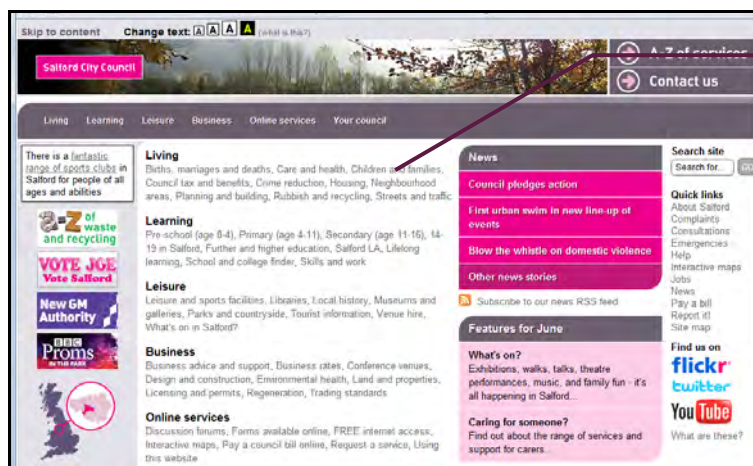
Like last year, the accessibility of the council websites tested was generally poor with half of the sites only scoring 1. The overall average was only 2.2.

3. Clearly marked home link on every page

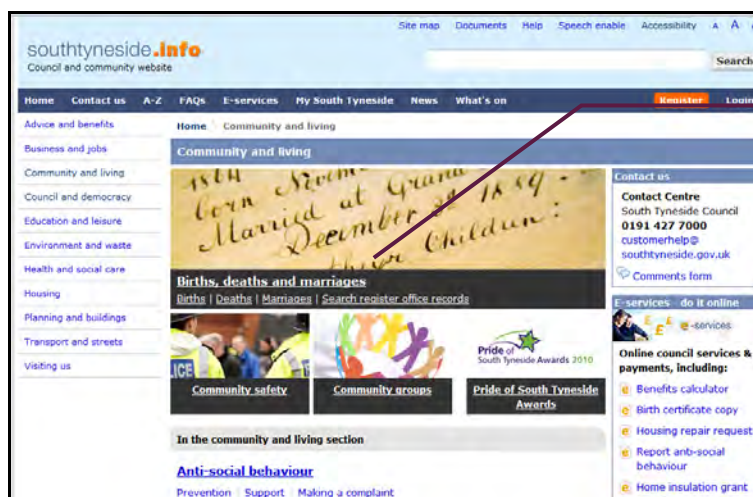
Average score: 4.0 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.7]

Users often struggle to orient themselves as they navigate through large, complex council websites. Web users have grown accustomed to getting back to the homepage by clicking a 'home' link at the top of the navigation. This is one of the most important navigation aids that users rely on. During usability tests users often feel comforted knowing that however lost they get, they can find their way back home easily.

It's essential that a clear 'home' link is provided in the top left area so users can easily find their way back to the homepage, with just one click.



Salford Council website doesn't have an explicit Home link in the navigation bar - yet this is where most people expect to find it.



South Tyneside Council's website has everything in place: a clickable logo, a prominent Home link in the navigation bar and home link in the breadcrumb trail.

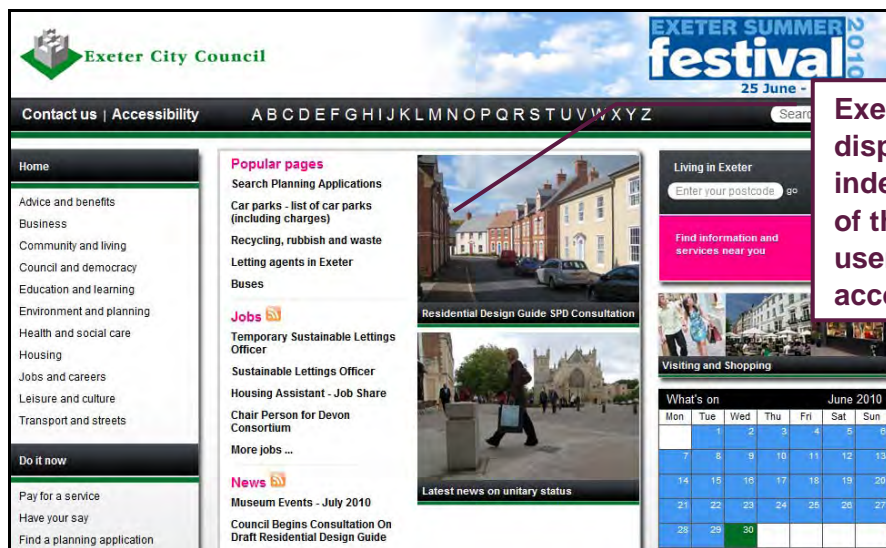
Although we've seen a slight improvement on last year (from 3.7 to 4 out of 5), 9 of the 20 sites scored 3 out of 5, which still shows room for improvement given how important it is for users to be able to go the to the homepage.

4. A-Z of services easy to locate and easy to use

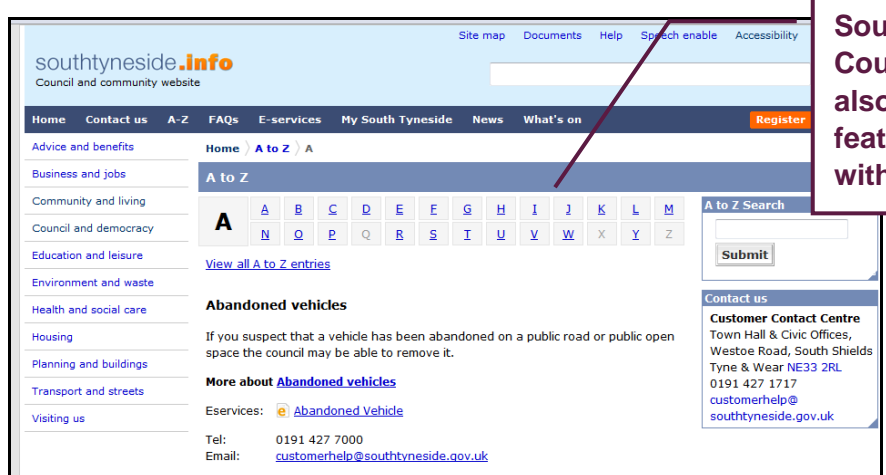
Average score: 3.9 (out of 5) [Last year: 4.3]

Most of the 20 websites recognise the importance of giving users an A-Z list of available services. In an improvement from last year, all 20 place the A-Z control above the fold and near the top of the page, where users can easily find a quick route to support their information needs.

By spelling out the full A-Z list users can focus their efforts immediately with their first click.



Exeter City Council displays the full A-Z index across the top of the site where users can easily access it.



South Tyneside Council's A-Z page also has a search feature for searching within the A-Z.

Most sites are doing well on this, with no site scoring less than 3, which is good. The best designs have the full A-Z index on the home page, greyed-out letters where there are no listings (e.g. X and Z) and allow users to search within the A-Z pages when they get there.

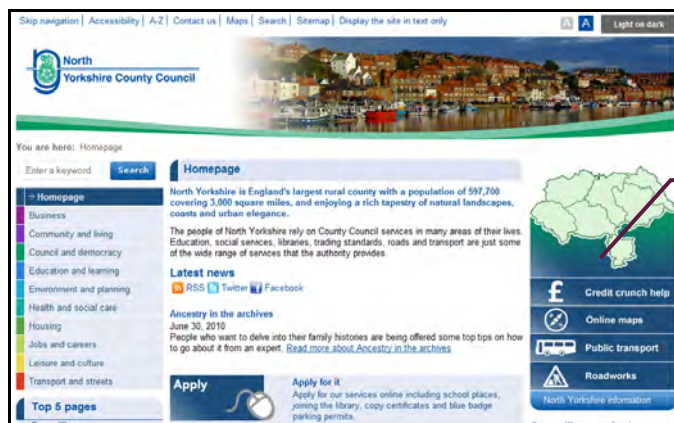
5. Homepage lists key tasks

Average score: 3.6 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.6]

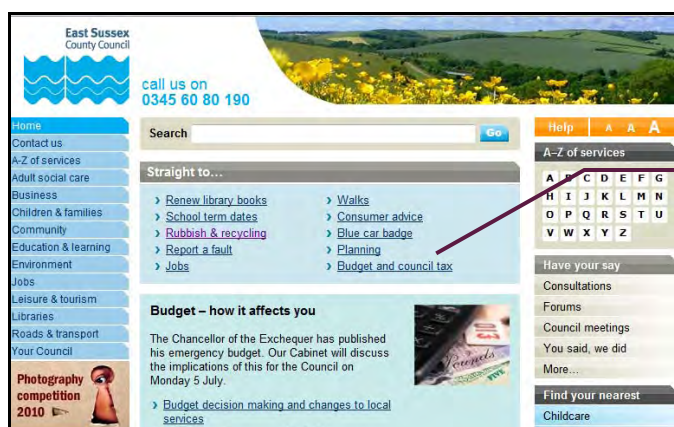
Any council homepage should clearly promote the key tasks available to users above the fold. The following are examples of common tasks that users are likely to want to perform on a council site:

- Pay for council tax
- Find local councillors
- View current planning applications
- Find information about recycling and bin collections

Users often don't scroll on long pages so it's crucial that key tasks are promoted above the fold on the homepage.



North Yorkshire's homepage is dominated by background information and news.



East Sussex Council lists the top tasks in the upper half of the homepage – in users' central line of vision.

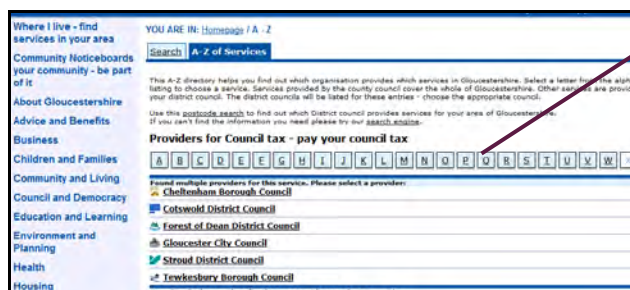
Most sites do quite well at supporting key tasks on the homepage. Many lost points for not having these key tasks in the central area of the page where users can easily find them.

6. It's easy to pay council tax online

Average score: 2.3 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.0]

As local councils realise the potential of supporting key user services through online transactions, the need for good usability is greater than ever. The ability to pay your council tax online (or indeed make any online payment) should be supported by a number of guiding principles:

- There should be a clear call to action on the council tax content section with a link to 'pay your council tax online' presented prominently
- Users shouldn't be required to register or login to pay their council tax online
- Concerns about paying online should be allayed through supporting content
- The context of paying for council tax should be maintained throughout the user journey
- The forms should be designed with good transactional capabilities (see guidelines 10, 11, 13 and 14)



Gloucestershire County Council lists local councils but doesn't say whether they provide online payments.



Newcastle Council's payment form is easy to find from the homepage. Users also don't need to register to pay.

Despite most websites providing the option to pay council tax online, the average score of 2.3 out of 5 is disappointing given the strong desire for electronic transactional government.

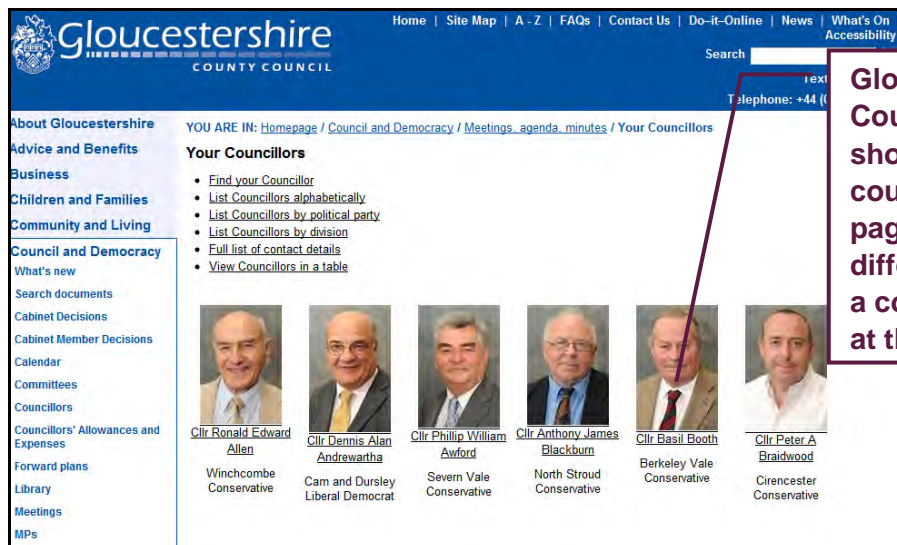
It's much less common for users to register to pay their bills online, which is good. It can be tricky, though, to find out how to pay your council tax within some County Council websites – easier-to-find links to District Council sites should be provided.

7. It's easy to find your local councillor

Average score: 4.6 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.4]

Being able to find out who your local councillor is, which political party they're in and their contact details is another key task that users should be able to perform online. The ability to find your local councillor should be supported by a number of guiding principles so users are able to:

- Find out in which ward councillors live to aid discovery
- Locate their councillor through various criteria, such as name, ward, postcode, political party etc.
- Get their councillor's full name, phone number, email and a photo.
- Obtain surgery location and times easily and quickly



Gloucestershire County Council shows all its councillors on one page and provides different ways to find a councillor via links at the top of the page.

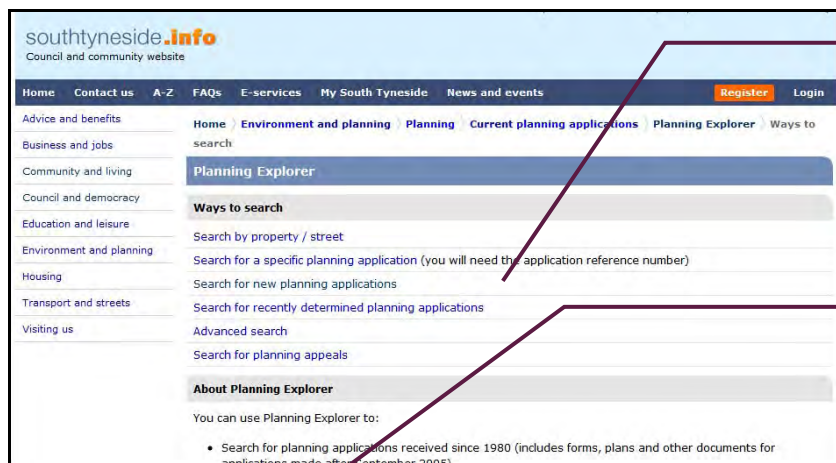
13 out of 20 councils scored a full 5 marks, which is excellent. No sites scored less than 3 points which is an improvement on last year when 6 councils scored below 3 points. Most councils make it easy to find councillors from the homepage and provide a variety of ways to find out who your councillors are, such as browsing by name or ward, or searching by postcode.

8. It's easy to view planning applications

Average score: 3.9 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.6]

Another key user task is the ability to view the latest planning applications online. If you're contemplating a move into a new neighbourhood you may rely on planning information to guide your decisions. The ability to view planning applications online should be supported by a number of guiding principles:

- There should be a clear call to action on the planning content section with a link to 'view submitted planning applications' presented prominently
- Users should be able to get a list of applications quickly by searching on postcode, location and/or dates
- Users shouldn't be required to know very specific information (for example reference numbers) to be able to get results
- The results of a planning application search should be simple to interpret
- A map that shows planning application information should be easy to read and have simple controls



ERROR: No map tabs to show.

South Tyneside Council allows users to find planning applications using a variety of methods.

Oxfordshire County Council's interactive map for finding applications is unreliable often resulting in error messages.

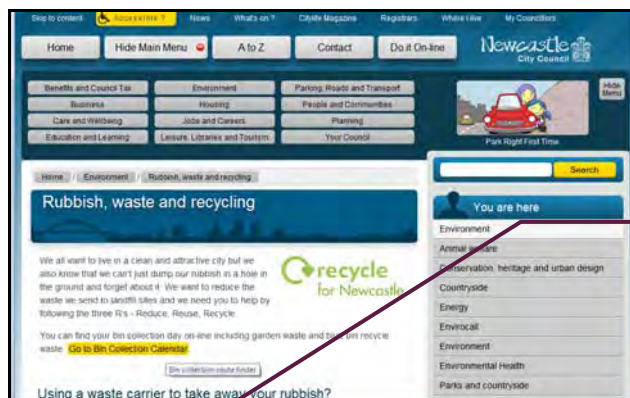
Most sites allow quick access to their planning applications, which reflects a relatively high score of 3.9. However, the quality of the search tools varies across councils. Some sites use 3rd party portals which can disorient users because the main site navigation is lost. The best sites allow users to both browse applications (for example, applications received in the last week) and search by various criteria.

9. It's easy to find information about recycling and bin collection

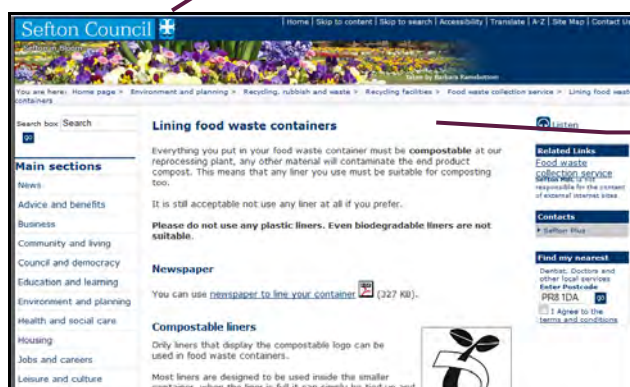
Average score: 4.0 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.8]

Another key user task is the ability to find out about recycling options and when bins are going to be collected. The ability to find this information should be supported by a number of guiding principles:

- There should be clear calls to action from the refuse section and homepage to find out about bin collection and recycling schemes
- Recycling information should be simple to understand and easy to scan for the key facts
- Advice should include what to put and what not to put in a particular bin
- It should be easy to report missed collections and request replacement bins



Newcastle City Council has the bin collection calendar available on the 'Rubbish, waste and recycling' landing page.



Some information is buried within the Sefton Council website (see the breadcrumb trail).

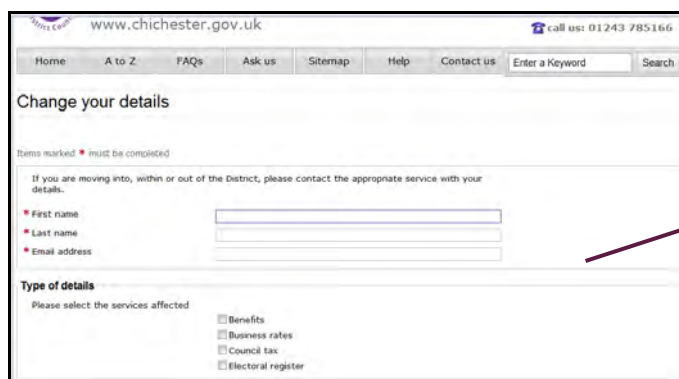
Councils generally provide comprehensive information about waste collections and recycling. The best sites prioritise content, making it easy for users to find out their bin collection days and how to order new bins.

10. Form fields clearly labelled, laid out and marked as required/optional

Average score: 3.6 (out of 5) [Last year: 2.8]

Users are keen to fill forms in with the minimum of fuss and time. One way to facilitate this is to design the forms with the following principles in mind:

- Use succinct and clear labels rather than text-heavy instructions
- Position the labels so that they're clearly associated with the relevant fields
- Organise the form so there's a logical progression from top to bottom
- Avoid more than one column of fields
- Show which fields are required and which are optional (e.g. by displaying an asterisk next to required fields and explain what the asterisk means)



The screenshot shows the 'Change your details' form on the Chichester.gov.uk website. The form has a header with navigation links (Home, A to Z, FAQs, Ask us, Sitemap, Help, Contact us) and a search bar. The main content area is titled 'Change your details' and includes a note: 'Items marked * must be completed'. Below this, there are three text input fields for 'First name', 'Last name', and 'Email address', each preceded by a red asterisk. A section titled 'Type of details' asks the user to 'Please select the services affected' and lists four options: 'Benefits', 'Business rates', 'Council tax', and 'Electoral register', each with a checkbox.

Chichester groups related fields and clearly indicates which ones are required (click trail).



The screenshot shows the 'Countryside Access Comment Form' on the Oxfordshire website. The form has a header with navigation links (Home, Contact Services, News, About Oxfordshire, Contact Us, Do it Online, Jobs). The main content area is titled 'Countryside Access Comment Form' and includes a section 'What do you want to comment on?' with four radio button options. Below this, there are several text input fields for 'The area of Oxfordshire', 'The name of the nearest town or village', 'The number of the path (if you know it)', 'The grid reference (if you know it)', 'How were you using the path?', 'The date you used the path', 'Please describe where this path goes from/to (e.g. "The wobbly wheel pub to the church then on to Whittington")', and 'Can you describe where the actual point is? (e.g. "At the second gate after the Wobbly Wheel" - by the old oak tree)'. The text is small and the layout is cluttered.

Oxfordshire's site has small text and a poor layout. It's not clear which fields are required or optional (click trail).

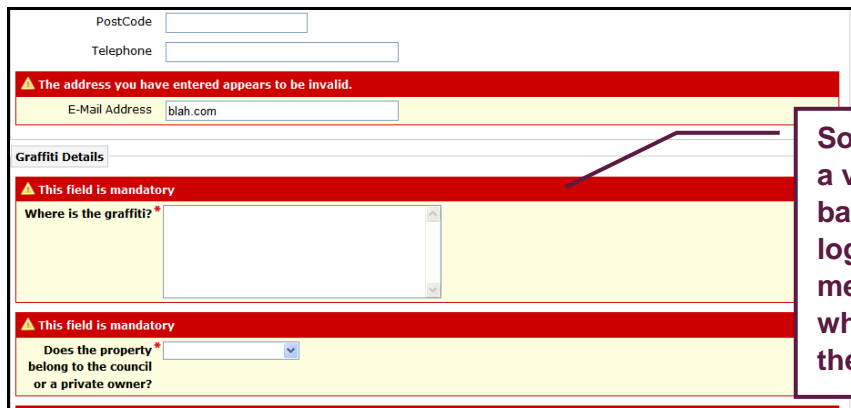
Whilst most councils appreciate that form labels need to be understandable, some still provide too much text and layouts that may confuse. In addition, several forms still don't make it clear which fields are required and which optional.

11. Error handling on forms is useful and clear

Average score: 2.4 (out of 5) [Last year: 2.2]

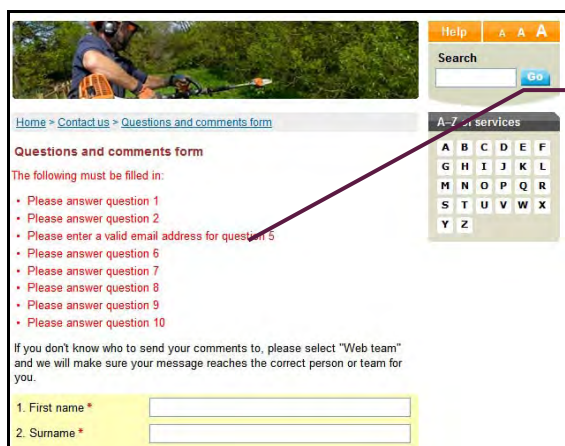
Users often make errors when completing online forms. Error handling is an essential yet often overlooked part of any online form process. If users have made an error on a form they need to be informed immediately that there's a problem. This written description should be presented at the top of the page, so it's the first thing they see after submitting a form.

In addition to instantly informing users that errors have been made and what the solution is, a helpful message should be provided next to each erroneous item. If the error occurs in a form item below the fold then when users scroll down they'll be unable to see the error summary at the top of the page. Likewise, if the error summary is provided in a pop-up then there's no reminder as to what the error was when the pop-up is closed.



The screenshot shows a form with several fields and error messages. At the top, there are fields for 'PostCode' and 'Telephone'. Below them, a red banner with a yellow triangle icon contains the message: 'The address you have entered appears to be invalid.' Below this, there is a field for 'E-Mail Address' with the value 'blah.com'. Further down, there is a section titled 'Graffiti Details'. Below this, there is a red banner with a yellow triangle icon containing the message: 'This field is mandatory'. Below this, there is a field for 'Where is the graffiti?' with a dropdown menu. Below this, there is another red banner with a yellow triangle icon containing the message: 'This field is mandatory'. Below this, there is a field for 'Does the property belong to the council or a private owner?' with a dropdown menu.

South Tyneside has a very clear red banner, border, error logo and clear message to indicate what's wrong with the form.



The screenshot shows a form with a header image of a person working on a tree. Below the header, there is a search bar and a 'Go' button. Below the search bar, there is a list of links: 'Home', 'Contact us', and 'Questions and comments form'. Below the links, there is a section titled 'Questions and comments form'. Below this, there is a list of questions that must be filled in: 'Please answer question 1', 'Please answer question 2', 'Please enter a valid email address for question 5', 'Please answer question 6', 'Please answer question 7', 'Please answer question 8', 'Please answer question 9', and 'Please answer question 10'. Below the list of questions, there is a note: 'If you don't know who to send your comments to, please select "Web team" and we will make sure your message reaches the correct person or team for you.' Below the note, there are two fields: '1. First name' and '2. Surname'.

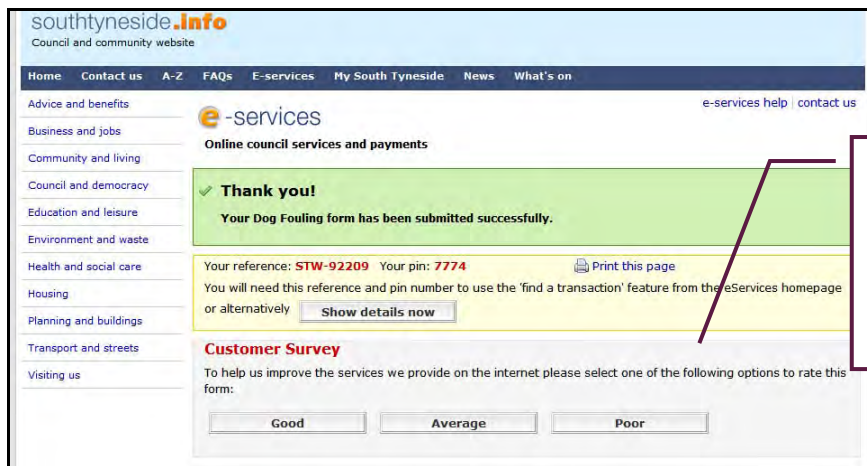
East Sussex list the errors at the top of screen but only labels them with the question number so it isn't immediately clear which fields are missing.

11 out of the 20 council sites scored 2 or less out of 5 for this guideline. It's frustrating for users to have to hunt for badly positioned errors and decipher poorly worded error text when using forms. With an average score of just 2.4 out of 5 this is only slightly better than last year.

12. Response time is indicated on enquiry forms

Average score: 1.2 (out of 5) [Last year: 1.8]

Providing users with clear feedback about how long they can expect to wait for a response to an enquiry is crucial for managing their expectations. Providing response times also increases user trust in the online forms.



southtyneside.info
Council and community website

Home Contact us A-Z FAQs E-services My South Tyneside News What's on

e-services help | contact us

e-services
Online council services and payments

✓ **Thank you!**
Your Dog Fouling form has been submitted successfully.

Your reference: **STW-92209** Your pin: **7774** [Print this page](#)
You will need this reference and pin number to use the 'find a transaction' feature from the eServices homepage or alternatively [Show details now](#)

Customer Survey
To help us improve the services we provide on the internet please select one of the following options to rate this form:

☐ Good ☐ Average ☐ Poor

South Tyneside has a clear thank you and reference number, but no response time.

12 out of 20 council sites scored 0 or 1 out of 5 for this guideline, a surprising and disappointing result. Managing users' expectations is key to engendering a sense of trust with the audience.

13. Progress indicator present with clear numbered and named stages

Average score: 1.5 (out of 5; last year: 1.6)

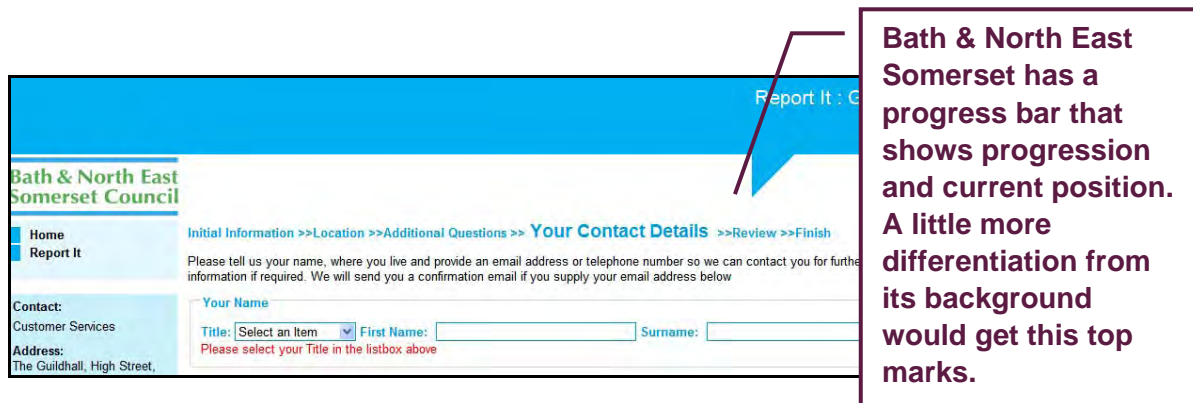
Category: Transactional capabilities

When it comes to setting expectations within any online transaction, a progress indicator is a great way of feeding back to users where they are, where they've been and where they're going.

The progress indicator should:

- Be very easy to spot
- Use easy-to-understand language
- Highlight users' current location
- Have the appearance of a process flow

Sites scored marks for forms that didn't require progress indicators as long as it was clear that the form could be completed in one simple stage. If forms had separate sections or were complex enough to have benefited from progress indicators, no marks were awarded.



Bath & North East Somerset Council

Home Report It

Initial Information >> Location >> Additional Questions >> **Your Contact Details** >> Review >> Finish

Please tell us your name, where you live and provide an email address or telephone number so we can contact you for further information if required. We will send you a confirmation email if you supply your email address below

Your Name

Title: First Name: Surname:

Please select your Title in the listbox above

Bath & North East Somerset has a progress bar that shows progression and current position. A little more differentiation from its background would get this top marks.

Most websites scored 2 or below for this guideline. There were a couple of notable exceptions who have made good attempts but on the whole this is disappointing. As council sites strive for greater uptake of online transactions, the importance of this guideline will become increasingly significant.

14. Main call to action is easy to spot and well labelled

Average score: 1.9 (out of 5) [Last year: 2.5]

The main call to action at the bottom of transaction forms should be easy to notice, target and click. The affirmative call to action (for example 'search' or 'accept') should always be placed to the right hand side (even if a reset or cancel button is provided). Users intuitively expect to click on the right to indicate their affirmation.

Questions and comments form

Please choose the appropriate recipient from the list below, if you are unsure who to send your comments to then select "Don't Know" and we will make sure your message reaches the correct person or team for you.

Please note all fields marked with an asterisk * **must** be completed.

Name: *

Email address: *

Type of message: *

☒ Comment
☐ Complaint
☐ Enquiry

Who to send to: *

Subject: *

Message: *

East Sussex's main call to action is clear, unambiguous and visible.

It isn't immediately clear from the design on this Salford Council form which one of the grey buttons is the main call to action.

Richmond has grouped all the buttons together with the key call to action, 'Next', being the smallest in the centre and with no differentiation.

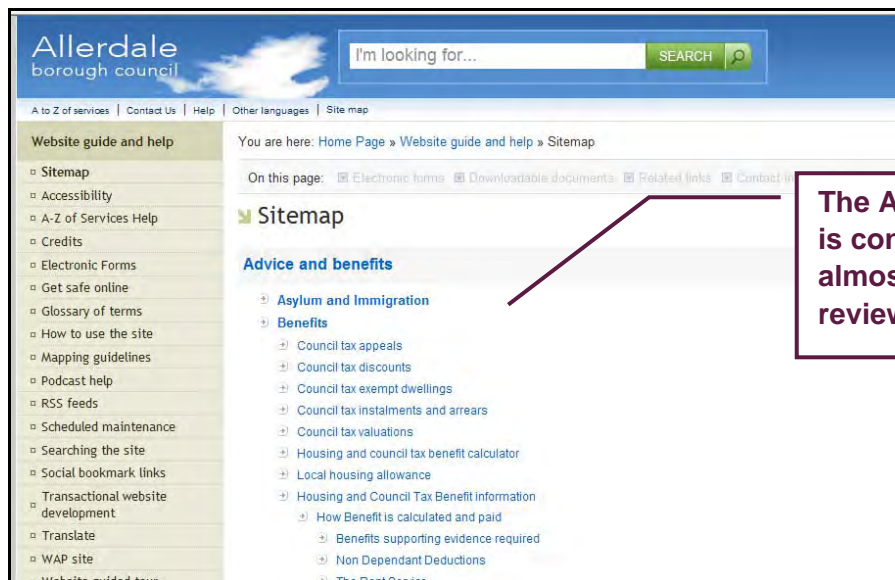
Many sites scored poorly for this guideline with 16 out of the 20 sites scoring 2 or less out of 5.

15. Site offers a simple site map

Average score: 2.7 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.5]

Users will often try to get an overview of what a site has to offer by looking at the homepage. If users decide to look at a site map then they're potentially lost so it's important that the site map is called 'site map', with a clear link to it on each and every page.

A site map should be kept short to give users an overview of the site's main areas quickly. The idea of a site map is to let users visualise the overall structure of the site to take in the map as a whole.



11 out of the 20 sites scored 4 marks this year for having easy access to a good site map. Unfortunately 4 of the sites still have no site map.

16. It's easy to know where you are within a given section

Average score: 2.8 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.4]

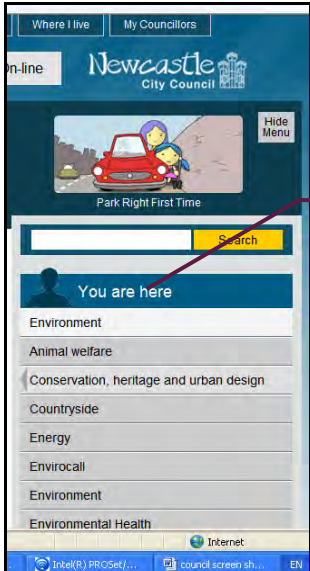
Giving users the tools to know where they are within a section of a site relies on a number of orientation cues. When these orientation cues are missing then users have to play guessing games to establish where they are and what other information is available.



It's clear where you are (section and page) from the left navigation.

The Chichester site has a clear breadcrumb trail.

The screenshot shows the Chichester District Council website. The left navigation menu includes links for Appeals, Council tax charges, **How do I pay?** (highlighted), Payment difficulties, Pay online, and Who has to pay?. The breadcrumb trail at the top of the main content area reads: Advice and benefits > Council tax > **How do I pay?**. The main content area is titled 'How do I pay?' and provides information about Council Tax payment methods, including Direct debit, By telephone, Debit cards, By post, Online, and Online banking.



Newcastle has a clear 'You are here' section on the page.

The screenshot shows the Newcastle City Council website. The 'You are here' section is prominently displayed, showing the user's current location within the site hierarchy. The breadcrumb trail reads: Environment > Animal welfare > Conservation, heritage and urban design > Countryside > Energy > Envirocall > Environment > Environmental Health.

Many of the sites are routinely making good use of breadcrumbs, consistent link text and page titles to help orientate their users, but on the whole the scores were disappointing with no sites scoring full marks.

17. It's easy to get back to where you were

Average score: 3.0 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.7]

Aside from the use of the browser 'back' button, good websites often provide users with a clear journey back to where they were. This is normally achieved through a clear link to the previous page in the navigation area or a 'back' button.

This guideline is particularly important for council sites which typically have deep hierarchies where users can easily (and often do) get lost. Making it easy for users to work their way back up the hierarchy is key to achieving this.

The East Sussex site provides an alternative means of getting back to where you were via the breadcrumb.

The site consistently provides a clear route back to where you were via the primary navigation control.

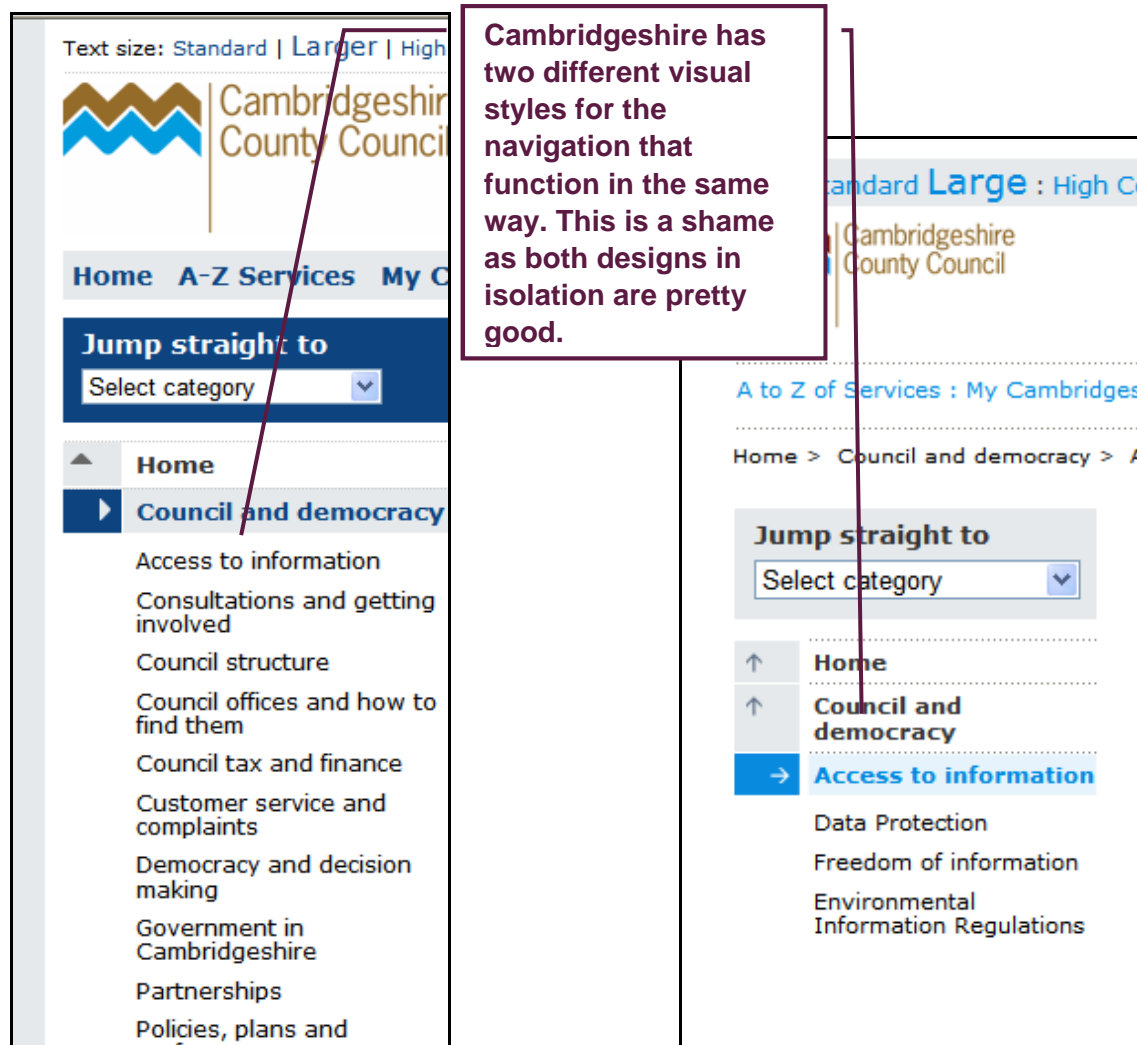


Many council sites rely solely on users clicking on breadcrumb links to get back to where they were. This doesn't always work especially if users arrive at a page via a search engine result or through a direct link from the homepage. With 16 out of 20 sites scoring less than 3 out of 5 and below this is clearly an issue that needs to be addressed.

18. Navigation style is consistently applied and simple to understand

Average score: 3.0 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.1]

Users rely on a clear set of navigation controls to move around a website. When the navigation controls appear below the fold or unexpectedly within the content area of the page they often struggle to find the link they're looking for. It's essential there's a clear separation between the navigation and content areas of a web page with the primary navigation controls within easy reach above the fold.



Scores varied from one extreme to the other with 6 out of 20 sites scoring 2 or less out of 5, and 6 sites scoring over 4. It's disappointing that not all council sites have grasped the importance of providing clear, well-placed navigation controls to help their users get around easily.

19. Search understands common mistakes and abbreviations

Average score: 2.2 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.1]

Anticipating common errors and supporting users in achieving their goals provides a good user experience. Similarly, a council search function should be forgiving of common spelling mistakes by proactively making suggestions.

If users get no search results they could potentially leave the site with the belief there's no relevant content there. A good search engine should anticipate common spelling errors and abbreviations like 'rd' for 'road' to return results.

Search Results

Use our [Advanced search](#) or see our [help page](#) for tips on refining your search.

Spelling suggestion: [council tax](#)

164 results found, sorted by relevance.

1-10 [Next](#)

[Council Tax](#)

73% Council **Tax** - London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Council **Tax**

Last Modified: 03 Jun 10 Size: 19.4KB

[Housing and Council Tax benefits](#)

69% Housing and Council **Tax** benefits - London Borough of Richmond upon Thames Housing and Council **Tax** benefits

Last Modified: 12 Apr 10 Size: 17.5KB

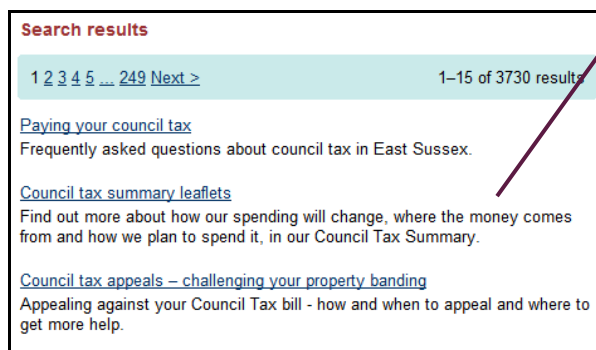
Richmond Council's search engine kindly corrects a spelling mistake for a common search term.

11 sites out of 20 scored 4 or 5 out of 5, showing that this year many local council sites are doing a great job anticipating common spelling errors and abbreviations made by their users. However, with an average score of 3.1, there are clearly some sites that perform poorly for this guideline.

20. Search results are simple to interpret and useful

Average score: 2.3 (out of 5) [Last year: 3.1]

It's important that search results have meaningful titles and summary descriptions to help users interpret matching pages. Many sites just return URLs and the first few lines of the page content, which users find difficult to relate back to the search terms they've entered.



Search results

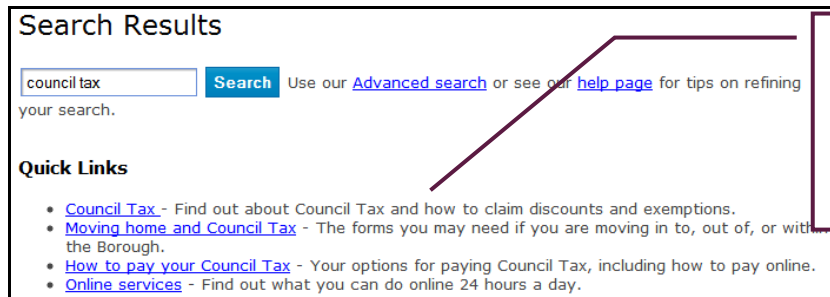
1 2 3 4 5 ... 249 Next > 1-15 of 3730 results

[Paying your council tax](#)
Frequently asked questions about council tax in East Sussex.

[Council tax summary leaflets](#)
Find out more about how our spending will change, where the money comes from and how we plan to spend it, in our Council Tax Summary.

[Council tax appeals – challenging your property banding](#)
Appealing against your Council Tax bill - how and when to appeal and where to get more help.

On the East Sussex site, each description is in clear English, not simply an extract from the page content. This helps users determine whether the result is relevant.



Search Results

council tax Use our [Advanced search](#) or see our [help page](#) for tips on refining your search.

Quick Links

- [Council Tax](#) - Find out about Council Tax and how to claim discounts and exemptions.
- [Moving home and Council Tax](#) - The forms you may need if you are moving in to, out of, or within the Borough.
- [How to pay your Council Tax](#) - Your options for paying Council Tax, including how to pay online.
- [Online services](#) - Find out what you can do online 24 hours a day.

Richmond Council provides a few highly relevant 'Quick Links' on the search results page.

The majority of sites scored 3 or below for this guideline, demonstrating much room for improvement. A common problem is that search results that are cluttered and difficult to scan quickly for relevant links. Using a Google powered search doesn't necessarily alleviate this, yet is popular amongst the sites tested.

In addition, very few sites offer tools to help users refine their search results, making it difficult to move towards a successful outcome.

Conclusion

With so much of the UK population online, the opportunity for local councils to increase their audience contact – especially with hard to reach groups – is huge. Usability will undoubtedly prove to be a key factor in the success of the online channel, particularly when it comes to transactional support for key user services.

Compared to last year's average score of 59.9%, this year's sample has performed slightly worse against our guidelines. There is still significant scope for improvement, for example error handling, calls to action and progress indicators to support users when transacting online are still weak in many instances.

The usability guidelines presented in this report represent just the start to achieving excellent usability and an outstanding user experience. The use of usability guidelines is essential, but they should always be used in conjunction with usability testing on a regular basis. Usability testing involves analysing typical site visitors completing typical tasks on your website (see www.webcredible.co.uk/testing for more).

For more information on other general usability guidelines that should be conformed to, visit www.webcredible.co.uk/articles or book a place on a Webcredible usability course at www.webcredible.co.uk/training.

References

1. Internet World Stats (www.internetworldstats.com/europa.htm#uk)
2. Office of National Statistics (www.statistics.gov.uk/pdfdir/iahi0809.pdf)
3. Office of National Statistics (www.statistics.gov.uk/cci/nugget.asp?id=8)
4. Socitm Better connected 2010
(www.socitm.net/downloads/file/506/better_connected_2010-full_report)
5. Webcredible local council poll 2008
(www.webcredible.co.uk/user-friendly-resources/polls/council2.shtml)

Appendix: Full results

The full list of websites audited, and the score they achieved for each guideline is as follows:

Local council	Guideline number																				TOTAL
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	
Allerdale	4	0	3	5	5	2	4	3	2	2	2	1	2	2	4	4	5	2	0	2	54
Bath & NE Somerset	2	4	3	4	2	4	5	4	3	3	4	0	4	3	4	4	3	4	1	2	63
Brent	3	1	4	4	2	4	3	5	4	5	3	2	2	2	4	2	2	1	5	2	60
Bucks	3	1	5	3	5	0	5	4	4	4	3	2	2.5	1	2	3	2	4	0	4	57.5
Cambs	2	4	4.5	4	3	2	5	4	4	3	3	1	2.5	3.5	4	3	3	2	3	3	63.5
Chichester	4	5	5	4	3	3	4	3	3	5	4	1	0	1	4	3	3	3	5	3	66
East Sussex	4	3	5	5	5	0	5	3	3	4	2	0	1	4	0	3.5	4	5	0	4	60.5
Exeter City	3	1	4	4	5	4	4	4	3	2.5	2	2	0	2	2	2	3	3	1	2	53.5
Gloucs	4	3	5	4	5	1	5	3	3	2	1	3	0	1	0	2	3	3	5	1	54
Newcastle upon Tyne	3	1	3	3	2	5	5	4	5	2.5	0	2	3.5	2	0	3	4	4	3	2	57

North Yorkshire	2	4	3	3	2	3	5	3	4	4	2	0.5	3	2	4	3	3	3	4	3	60.5
Oxfordshire	2	4	3	4	3	2	5	2	5	2	2	0.5	0	1	2	3	3	3	0	2	48.5
Richmond	3	1	5	3	3	4	5	5	5	4	3	1	3	0.5	2	2	2	2	5	3	61.5
Salford City	3	4	3	3	2	2	5	4	5	2	2	2	0	3	4	4	3	4	1	2	58
Sefton	3	1	3	4	2	4	4	5	4	5	3	2	0	0.5	4	2	2	2	0	0	50.5
South Ayrshire	3	1	3	4	5	5	4	5	3	4	2	0	0	1.5	4	3	3	3	0	2	55.5
South Holland	4.5	1	5	4	4.5	4	4	5	5	4	2	1	0	1	4	4	4	4	5	2	68
South Tyneside	3	3	5	5	5	4	5	5	5	4	5	2	4	2	4	2	2	3	0	2	70
Worthing	3	1	5	4	3.5	4	5	3	5	5	2	0	3.5	1.5	0	3	3	3	5	3	62.5
York City	3.5	1	3	4	4	4	5	4	5	4	1	0	0	2	2	2	2	2	0	2	50.5
TOTAL	62	44	80	78	71	61	92	78	80	71	48	23	31	37	54	58	59	60	43	46	
Average score	3.1	2.2	4.0	3.9	3.6	3.1	4.6	3.9	4.0	3.6	2.4	1.2	1.6	1.8	2.7	2.9	3.0	3.0	2.2	2.3	58.7

About Webcredible

Webcredible is a user experience consultancy, offering a range of usability, accessibility, design & training services based around your specific requirements:

User-centered design

- Information architecture
- Interaction design

User research

- Usability testing
- Interviews & focus groups
- Persona creation

Accessibility

- Accessibility testing
- Accessible web design

Training & mentoring

- Usability & accessibility courses
- Online copywriting courses
- Web development courses

Webcredible is widely regarded as one of the most innovative and respected user experience consultancies in the UK. Our 200+ research articles and reports have been re-published on 100s of websites and we receive 250,000 visitors to our website each month.

We believe in taking a proactive approach with clients, whilst maintaining a regular open line of communication. We believe that we are being paid for our expertise and as such always take the initiative and offer our recommendations for any course of action. We are:

- **Focused on client needs** – Our aims are to optimise conversion rates for companies and ensure public sector organisations effectively disseminate information.
- **Passionate** – The team here at Webcredible loves what they do and we only recruit staff passionate about usability and accessibility.
- **Approachable** – We're friendly and jargon-free. Consultants, despite being highly educated and experienced, only communicate in a user-friendly manner.

Clients include Airmiles, Asda, BBC, eBay, EDF Energy, Filofax, I Want One Of Those, JD Sports, Laura Ashley, Liz Earle, Lloyds TSB, More Th>n, Sony and T-Mobile.