

How well are housing services presented on local authority websites?

This year's *Better connected* survey of all local authority websites tested how easy it was for site users to find answers to questions about a range of council services. In the area of housing services, the survey focussed on **finding out how to apply for housing**.

Scores for individual councils for this and other tasks, and instances of good practice, will be described in the *Better connected* 2013 report. Overall, reviewers found evidence that a range of difficulties would be encountered by people using council websites to complete this task. Use of jargon was a particular problem.

Apart from the inconvenience to customers, failed web enquiries cause councils unnecessary cost. The reason for this is that frustrated web users will turn to the council's phone or face-to-face facilities to answer their enquiries, and these cost the council significantly more to support than their website.

Members of *Better connected*'s 12-strong team of experienced local authority website reviewers made the following comments about the difficulties they encountered in completing this task:

Reviewer # 1:

Most sites point to external housing trust websites for this information. Some do this well and others do it badly. Often information about eligibility is in some big 'pdf' that you have to download and look through. The basic eligibility criteria can be summed up in a few bullet points, so I don't see why this shouldn't be put on web pages with the application form – this would save everyone time and trouble.

Reviewer # 2:

Most councils give good information about how to apply for a place on the Housing Register and the criteria they apply, along with either an online pre-assessment form or an application form but the warnings that few are likely to succeed are very off-putting. My experience may be particularly bad because most of my councils are London boroughs.

Reviewer # 3:

Our questions were very straightforward and most sites did well.

Reviewer # 4:

Overall, reasonably well signposted but actually explaining how the list worked and if there were any restrictions for applying didn't tend to be clear or easily found.

Reviewer # 5:

Eligibility should be much clearer – housing sections should surely focus strongly on this, and they almost never do (it is buried away in lists or in more technical documents). Some authorities appear to use the fact that they have transferred out housing stock as an excuse to offer poor information on their own site – not good enough.

Reviewer # 6:

The main issue here is jargon. Links often used the jargon name e.g. "Home Choice" without explaining what this is or putting it in any context. I found very few examples of who can and cannot be put on the housing register. Councils should make more effort to use plain English terms.

Reviewer # 7:

Most councils relied on a rather lengthy and daunting housing allocations policy document to provide information about eligibility criteria. The better councils provided information on the key points, including the banding system. On some sites there was an air of 'We don't own any houses' - so go to the housing association. There is also an assumption that people understand jargon like 'choice-based lettings' and 'affordable' housing!

Reviewer # 8:

Sites were riddled with localised terminology and names for organisations you were assumed to know about - "Home Choice" or equivalent. Often no clear information about eligibility, although I was impressed when councils went that extra mile to make it clear what sort of demand exists for housing, helping to manage people's expectations. Some even offered self-assessment tools, which was excellent.

Reviewer # 9:

Some councils required all sorts of evidence of identity or entitlement to be provided to them as part of the registration process or it would be stated that this would need to be provided before any offer of a home could be confirmed (the latter seems reasonable but why is the former so critical?). The quality of the choice-based lettings (CBL) websites seemed to vary quite a lot. Some councils have their own CBL website whereas others serve multiple councils. The way individual councils described these sites varied significantly too. Some tell you to go 'there' to do 'that' in plain terms, others dress it up in lots of regulation or 'stuff we think you really ought to know' which is then repeated on the CBL website, suggesting that the council person has not read the CBL content and considered the user journey.

Reviewer # 10:

The council may be dealing with people in very dire circumstances and may be trying to access information on mobile phones with slow connections. It needs to be succinct and totally centred on customer need but it was generally muddled and often mixed policy information alongside top housing tasks. 'Pdf's should be totally avoided in this area - just clear and simple information. Some awful jargon and unclear information also encountered.

The survey questions:

There were 11 questions about finding out how to apply for housing covering things like: 'Does the service landing page link me directly to this task?' 'Is there an explanation about whether I am eligible for a council house?' 'Can I find a list of social landlords with contact details?'

The survey also explored how easy it was to find information using a Google search, or by using search and navigation tools, like the A to Z, within individual council sites.

Reviewers were asked to assess whether relevant pieces of information and pages for the 'finding out how to apply for housing' task linked together to make a smooth, coherent journey, how effectively the task was promoted within the site, and whether any sites might be recommended to other councils as examples of good practice?

More about *Better connected 2013*

Better connected is the annual survey of all 433 UK local authority websites, now in its 15th year. The survey is published by the Society of IT Management (Socitm), the professional association for IT and digital managers working in local public service organisations. The main survey is carried out by a team of reviewers using a structured survey with 225 questions.

The *Better connected* report for 2013 will be published on 1 March on Socitm's website, and can be accessed free of charge by any employee of a council that subscribes to Socitm *Insight*. More than 75% of councils subscribe to Socitm *Insight*, you can access a list of subscribers at http://www.socitm.net/info/214/socitm_insight/91/. Non-subscribers can buy a copy of the printed report, available from https://www.socitm.net/forms/form/83/better_connected_2013_snapshot_of_local_authority_websites.

Socitm provides a range of services to help local authorities improve their websites. See <http://www.socitm.net/info/165/services/31/> for further information.