Building Control discovery
User research report
March 2024

Contents

Background

We were asked to:

Supply a user researcher to provide the following services for the discovery project into Local Authority Building Control:

- Lead user research activities with internal and external users
- Hold workshops for defining research questions and doing collaborative data analysis
- Model insights gained from user research into user needs, user profiles and input into user journey mapping activities
- Work with a team across three councils to get a holistic understanding of user needs and help develop recommendations for improving the Building Control service

Approach

What we did

Over a total of **14 weeks** we conducted approximately **2500 minutes of research** over **35 sessions** with 16 building control staff and 10 customers across three local authorities. These included:
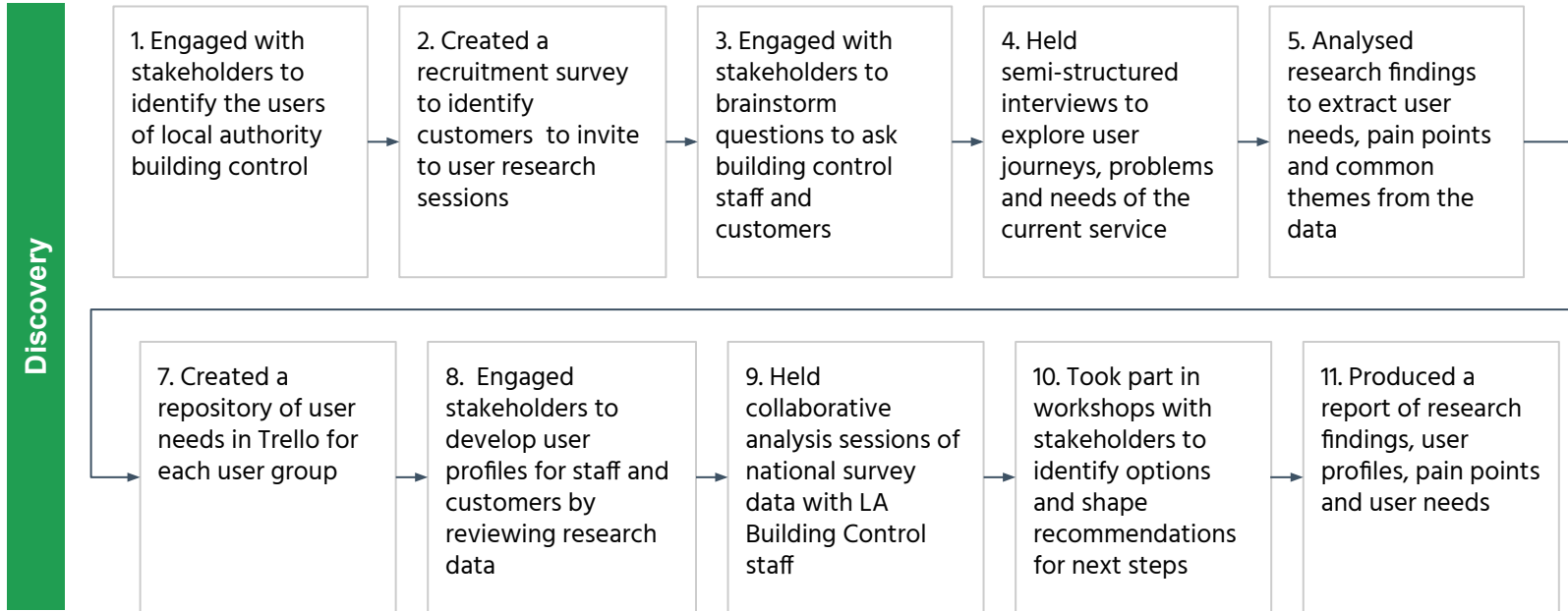
- **26 semi-structured interviews**, one-to-one or in small groups of up to 2 participants
- **9 workshops (4 remote and 5 in person workshops)**

We spoke to a range of users involved in building control: technical support officers, surveyors, structural engineers, managers, IT support, homeowners, commercial customers and local authority customers. We explored the user's journey through building control, user needs, pain points and opportunities for improvement.

Following this research, additional interviews have been conducted with builders by Lambeth Council. The findings have been reported separately and complement the findings of this research.

Our activities

Discovery

1. Engaged with stakeholders to identify the users of local authority building control

2. Created a recruitment survey to identify customers to invite to user research sessions

3. Engaged with stakeholders to brainstorm questions to ask building control staff and customers

4. Held semi-structured interviews to explore user journeys, problems and needs of the current service

5. Analysed research findings to extract user needs, pain points and common themes from the data

7. Created a repository of user needs in Trello for each user group

8. Engaged stakeholders to develop user profiles for staff and customers by reviewing research data

9. Held collaborative analysis sessions of national survey data with LA Building Control staff

10. Took part in workshops with stakeholders to identify options and shape recommendations for next steps

11. Produced a report of research findings, user profiles, pain points and user needs

Our methods are consistent with [government best practice](#).

Our findings

Overview of findings - local authorities

The technology used to manage building control cases is problematic for all users particularly around the lack of integration of digital applications into the case management system, document management and communications with all parties involved.

Although, there has been positive feedback on the inspection app and some of the modules used, overall the system is part of a large and complex platform of modules where there is lack of support and technical documentation in addition to performance issues and added costs. Different software configurations are used for different councils that have common user needs and processes. Support from existing supplier is inadequate and there is lack of improvement of the software to meet current and emerging needs.

As a result, local authorities:
- are not able to keep up with demands placed by regulatory change
- do not benefit from having a common solution that meets their needs
- face increased costs of using expensive and complex software

Local authorities - High level findings

- Cross channel customer contact isn't captured and addressed consistently   - Lambeth Council

  - E-mail to surveyor cannot be seen by tech support if a booking is requested by the customer

- Many invalid applications are received which do not progress to surveyor or sent back to the customer - Lambeth Council

  - This results in poor customer experience and likely loss of revenue

- Application files are emailed to BC to be re-keyed into the case management system (CMS) as there is no implementation of digital forms that integrate with case management automatically - BANES Council, Bracknell Council

  - Manual, error-prone and time consuming process

- Payment engine, web application form and CMS generate different case numbers - Bracknell Council

  - Manual work required to reconcile payments and link the application and payment to the case file

Forms are too expensive to buy from the current system provider!

BANES C

We use a different system to the current system for our forms
Lambeth C

Local authorities - High level findings

- The existing system is not working well and does not have the functionality needed to manage easily BC files relevant to each case - All Councils

  - Manual work required to file and update documents in an error-prone process (add case reference, change date etc)

  - Surveyors cannot access files easily using the surveyor app on site

  - Once a week someone will find a corrupted file they cannot view e.g. structural calculations

- Lack of structured data (e.g info contained in PDFs, files not categorised with metadata)

  - This impacts the ability to generate data for MI reporting and to find files easily

It is a good system but document management is the biggest failing!
BANES C

Corrupted files can cause a massive issue if we ever go to court
BANES C

It's a problem for us too!
Lambeth C

It's a file dump not a file mgmt system! You cannot create sub-folders
BANES C

Local authorities - High level findings

- Overall good feedback on the use of the app for site inspections - BANES council, Bracknell council

  - Issue with site notes getting stuck in the cloud and requiring IT support to locate them (online/offline sync)

- Different software configurations are used for different councils that have common user needs and processes

  - Expensive software, councils do not benefit from having a common solution

- Support from existing supplier is inadequate.There is lack of iteration and improvement of the software

  - Risk the software does not improve and councils continue to struggle and not be able to keep up with change

Software is available to do notes on site and to share them but we have not been able to implement that in our process
Lambeth C

The problem is having a system which everybody uses correctly and it is updated nationally
Lambeth C

Overview of findings - customers

New customers have a lack of understanding of the local authority building control service. Often it is the architect or builder who will make the choice of which building control provider to choose, local authority or approved inspector.

Customers have difficulty choosing the right application type for their needs and it has been reported that, when they do, they often choose the wrong application type, for example building notice instead of full plans, in order to keep costs to a minimum.

Customers are unable to track the progress of their application. They call the council to get an update from the technical support officer or the surveyor. When they are requested to provide information they do so via email which generates additional work for building control staff to file the document manually against the case.

As a result, local authorities spend time and effort serving information up to customers that is already held in their system but not shared. There is a desire from all customers (and their agents) to be able to self-serve online as their case progresses and to be able to provide information easily.

Building Control users

User groups

There are **six main user groups** for building control. These are:

1. Local authority building control staff responsible for serving customers and ensuring works comply with building regulations
2. Customers who use building control services (homeowners, commercial companies, local authorities)
3. Architects / designers who design plans for new buildings, alterations and extensions to existing buildings
4. Engineering professionals who create specifications and calculations for building structures
5. Developers / builders who carry out the building works
6. Project managers who manage the work so it gets completed on time and budget

User groups 3, 4, 5 and 6 often act as agents interacting with Local Authority Building Control on behalf of the customer.

User profiles

Based on our research we have developed profiles for two key user groups:

1. **Local authority building control staff**
   - Technical support officer
   - Surveyor
   - Structural engineer
   - Manager

2. **Customers**
   - Homeowner
   - Commercial customer
   - Local authority corporate estate

User profiles - Local authority building control staff

- **Technical support officer:** first point of contact for customers
- **Surveyor:** inspects works to make sure building regulations are followed
- **Structural engineer:** checks structural calculations for compliance with regulations
- **Manager:** responsible for increasing market share and for the effective operation of building control teams

User profile: Technical support officer

❝We are the first point of contact for building control we don't want to sound stupid!❞

Education
- LABC tech support diploma
- On-the-job training
- Level 3 qualification

Devices

Goals
- Stay on top of incoming contacts
- Be able to deal with queries confidently
- Offer a great customer service
- Attract more customers to the council

Needs
- All files, inspection materials and communications to be linked to cases so nothing gets missed
- To book site inspections so that surveyors can focus on their work
- To know how regulatory changes affect customers so they can offer advice.

Tools
- E-mail
- Telephony system
- Case management system (CMS)
- Document management system (DMS)
- Finance / invoicing system
- Payment system

Pain points
- Manual input of information (e.g. re-keying applications, renaming and saving documents)
- Hard to search and find information easily
- Customers lack a clear signpost from Planning to Building Control

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User profile: Surveyor

Education
- LABC Diploma Level 5
- Higher National Certificate
- RICS, CABE membership

Devices

> *"Jobs about dangerous structures or enforcement don't come in the app and I may miss them"*

Goals

- Ensuring building works are safe
- Consulting with fire and water services
- Advising customers regarding the building regulations

Needs

- View and check applications / plans
- View site visits and locations in the diary
- Record notes and photos from site visits
- Easily communicate with customers and view comms history
- Access all tasks and workflow status across devices
- Receive continuous professional development in line with industry and regulatory changes

Tools

- E-mail
- Telephony system
- Case management system (CMS)
- Document management system (DMS)
- Maps, drawing software (e.g Bluebeam)

Pain points

- Cannot see all tasks on mobile app when working onsite or travelling
- IT systems are dated clunky and slow
- Unable to find the most up to date information easily
- Unable to access drawings when offline and onsite

User profile: Structural engineer

"Jobs often have many drawings. I cannot find easily the structural drawings because our system is a dump of files!"

Education
- Civil engineering degree (BEng)
- Internship in Local Authority Building Control

Devices

Goals

- Ensuring structural calculations comply with part A of building regs
- Assessing dangerous structures to minimise risk to the public
- Working effectively with surveyors/ architects/engineers

Tools

- E-mail
- Telephony system
- Case management system (CMS)
- Document management system (DMS)
- Maps

Needs

- Access all tasks and workflow status across devices
- View all information about a case in one place
- Record structural calculation notes
- Compare different drawing files easily
- Understand if regulatory changes affect his work

Pain points

- Cannot find easily all information and communication history in one place
- Manual work to download case files into hard drive as they are difficult to use on DMS
- Relies on email for workflow and communications with others

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User profile: Manager

Education
- BSc in Building Control
- LABC Diploma Level 4

Devices

"We lack the right technology which everybody uses correctly and it is updated nationally to meet our needs"

Goals

- Streamline operations and tools used
- Support staff to perform their role
- Increase local authority (LA) building control market share
- Promote LA excellence in building control

Needs

- A stable IT system to manage all cases and documents
- A reliable and consistent experience across devices for staff and customers
- Management information (MI) reports to help improve performance
- Guidance and support to implement regulatory change

Tools

- E-mail
- Telephony system
- Case management system (CMS)
- Document management system (DMS)
- Finance / invoicing system, HR system

Pain points

- Staff not having access the right tools to manage cases and documents
- Staff waste valuable time uploading documents and linking them to cases
- Reconciliation of invoices with payments is a manual and error prone process
- Lack of budget and resource to manage regulatory change

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User profiles - Customers

- **Homeowner:** commissions building works for a property they want to live in
- **Commercial customer:** commissions building works for a property they want to rent out or sell for profit
- **Local authority corporate estate:** commissions building works for properties owned by the council

Segmentation model - Homeowner customer

We identified a segmentation model of homeowners based on data from our research

	Knowledge	Experience	Availability	
High	• Engineering background • Architecture • Construction	• Commissioned multiple building works before • Has experience of building control	• Retired • Not working • No other responsibilities • Has availability	➜ **Empowered**
Medium	• Background in related discipline to engineering, architecture, construction	• Commissioned some building works before • Has some experience of building control	• Working part time • Has other responsibilities • Has some availability	➜ **Engaged**
Low	• No background in engineering, architecture, construction or related discipline	• Has not commissioned building works before • No experience of building control	• Working full time • Has other responsibilities • Limited availability	➜ **Disengaged**

User profile: Homeowner customer - disengaged

"My agent submitted the application two weeks ago so I expect regular inspections by the LA but I do not know the details"

Knowledge: Low ⬤———— High

Experience: Low ⬤———— High

Availability: Low ⬤———— High

Devices:

Goals

- Get the home renovation/extension completed as specified, on time and on budget
- Get BC certificate signed off by the local authority

Needs

- To know what their responsibilities are for building regulations
- Visibility of how the building control application is progressing
- To be able to call the council if there are blockers for building control approval
- Wants a third party body to raise concerns with

Information sources / Influences

- Architect (agent)
- Builder
- Friends and family
- Google search

Pain points

- Relies on the agent and builder for building control progress updates
- Has no visibility of local authority communications with agent and builder
- Agent had a bad experience with planning application
- Does not know what to do if things go wrong

Commercial customer

At a high level, commercial customers can be split based on the size of projects they commission and their complexity. They employ staff to work with building control services.

Knowledge	Experience	Project size	Complexity	
• Engineering • Architecture • Construction • Project management	• Manage many large projects over the years • Experience of building control	• Large projects • Multiple teams and roles per project for building control	• Complex buildings • Pushing the boundaries of construction	➔ **Large scale developer**
	• Manage several small to medium sized projects • Experience of building control	• Medium to small projects • Small to medium sized teams across building control projects	• Standard buildings	➔ **Medium to small scale developer**

User profile: Commercial customer - Large

"NHBC has a system whereby they issue you conditions and ask you to submit information to their portal. It's all documented and you can track it."

Role: Project Manager Director

Education: Architectural Engineering degree (Beng)

Devices:

Goals

- Deliver the project as planned (low rise and high rise buildings)
- Fulfill compliance with building regulations
- Work in partnership with the local authority and BSR

Needs

- Visibility of how the BC application is progressing across all sites
- Notifications of any blockers and next steps
- Records of site visits and notes all in one place
- Tracking of conditions (met/ outstanding)
- Ability to share files easily

Information sources

- LA and BSR building control officers, websites
- Approved documents GOV.UK
- BSA Act 2022
- British Standards - Construction
- NHBC standards

Pain points

- Tracking and discharging of BC conditions
- No easy way to share documents (there can be many)
- LA building control staff unavailability causes delays
- Lack of LA flexibility to comply with building regulations

User profile: Commercial customer - Small

I want to be able to work with knowledgeable surveyors across all my sites

Role: Property developer Director

Education: Architectural Engineering degree (Beng)

Devices:

Goals

- Create great eco-friendly buildings
- Deliver the project as planned
- Fulfill compliance with building regulations

Needs

- To work with skilled surveyors who understand the local area and have historic knowledge of buildings
- To be able to share information easily with BC
- To be kept up to date with BC cases
- To be able print documents off for offline use

Information sources

- LA BC officer and website
- Approved documents GOV.UK
- NHBC standards
- Trusted partners
- Google

Pain points

- Lack of understanding / flexibility from LAs of some of the materials and buildings they are used on
- Inconsistency between surveyors across LAs
- Poor experience with planning leads to a perception issue for LA building control

User profile: Local authority customer

"We need to work in partnership with the council's BC team. We rely on their service"

Role: Project Manager, LA corporate estate

Education: History and Sociology degree, PRINCE2 certification

Devices:

Goals

- To ensure new buildings, alterations and refurbishments are completed on time
- To have confidence that the works meet the building regulations

Needs

- To get pre-application advice
- To have a dedicated point of contact from the council
- To be able t share information easily with BC
- To get a quick service and receive added value from the BC team

Information sources

- LA BC officer and website
- Approved documents GOV.UK
- LA internal systems
- NHBC standards

Pain points

- Delays with busy LA building control teams
- Lack of surveyor availability
- Lack of timely surveyor communication and visibility of inspection notes and actions to take

Some things are working well...

What's working well - Customers

In our research, customers reported areas that work well for them with regards to their experience of Local Authority Building Control services they have used.
These are:

- Customer support (in some councils)

- Pre-application advice

- Surveyor availability for site visits

- Knowledge of buildings in the local area

What's working well - Customers

Quotes:

" Builder said they needed to break ground that day only the council were able to do it quickly, to say that's okay."

– Homeowner Customer 1, Lambeth

"My expectations were met by the council. I would call them on the day and they could call in"

– Homeowner Customer 3, BANES

"Local authority teams understand how we do things and were able to provide resources"

– Commercial Customer 2, Lambeth

"We get lots of pre-app advice for free... there is always someone available to help"

– LA Commercial Customer 1, BANES

"There were no problems, the inspector talked to the builder - who had to do some work to get the certificate - and was very nice to us"

– Homeowner Customer 4, BANES

"I was quite happy to have their qualified inspector come round and make sure everything was being done correctly"

– Homeowner Customer 6, BANES

"With building control you had a partner who is helping you. My experience with two inspectors was excellent"

– Homeowner Customer 3, BANES

What's working well - Building control staff

In our research, building control staff reported areas that work well for them with regards to their role and day to day responsibilities. These are:

- Working together with colleagues in the building control team to serve customers

- Having the opportunity to get together with staff from other councils to learn from the way they work and share best practice

There was some positive feedback about the system used around two features:

- Mobile application for inspections used by surveyors on site (available at some councils)

- The Kanban and traffic light features of the existing back office system, which provides a list of tasks and their status

Conversely, staff complained about many aspects of the back office system not meeting their needs.

What's working well - Building control staff

Quotes:

"My team works well!"

– Team lead, BANES

"People and solving problems together!"

– Tech support officer, Bracknell Forest

"We are all working closely and that's quite good. I may ask tech support to open a drawing and ask what size of steel this is supposed to be when I am on site "

– Surveyor, BANES

"Surveyors are happy with the app!"

– Manager, BANES

"We have a pretty positive experience with the mobile app "

– Manager, Bracknell Forest

"[Existing back office system] workflow shows tasks using a colour coded system"

– Manager, Lambeth

"It's good to have an overview and see what's coming up for workflow management"

– Surveyor, Lambeth

"Bracknell showed us how to plot large developments using the map feature"

– Tech support officer 1, Bracknell Forest

A lot of things are not working well…

Staff pain points

Our research has identified 8 pain points for building control staff:

1. Manual input of applications into the case management system

2. Manual filing of documents into the document management system

3. Manual reconciliation of payments

4. Lack of transparent and joined up communications

5. Difficult to extract data for reporting

6. Lack of software improvement to address mobile working and keep up regulatory change

7. Different software configurations used across local authorities

8. Lack of customer feedback to improve the service

1. Manual input of applications into the case management system

Full plans application

Entering the application in the system

1. Manual input of applications into the case management system

Quotes:

"We spend most of our time registering applications. For some applications you can do cut and paste, for some you cannot!"

– Technical support officer 1, Bracknell Forest

" Forms are too expensive to buy from the current system provider!"

– Manager, BANES

"It's a frustrating and monotonous job"

– Technical support officer 2, BANES

"We use a different system to the current system for our forms"

– Manager, Lambeth

"Everything you ask for there is a cost attached to it. We would like more automation for initial notices"

– Technical Support Officer, Lambeth

2. Manual filing of documents into the document management system

Summary:

Throughout the lifecycle of a building control case many documents are required to be provided by different parties so that the works can be assessed against the building regulations by building control staff. The files range from architectural plans, structural calculations, site photos etc.

These files are emailed to the building control inbox. Technical support staff need to download the files, name them and upload them to the case file. There can be different versions of files being shared in response to feedback from BC staff. These new versions will need to be named and saved against the case. The document management system lacks functionality so that files can be organised into sub-folders and staff often report corrupted files.

This results in a lot of manual work and time being wasted, potential errors of linking files to the wrong case and difficulty finding the right file. Corrupted files also need to be traced back and re-uploaded.

Who:

- Technical support officer
- Surveyor
- Structural engineer
- Manager

Local authorities:

- BANES Council
- Bracknell Forest Council
- Lambeth Council

2. Manual filing of documents into the document management system

Quotes:

"It's a file dump not a file management system! You cannot create sub-folders"

– Technical support officer 1, BANES

"Document management is the biggest failing!"

– Manager, BANES

" Corrupted files can cause a massive issue if we ever go to court"

– Technical support officer 1, BANES

" Document management is not convenient. We have issues opening different formats"

– Surveyor, Lambeth

"I spend most of my time uploading documents that come with applications e.g. naming and linking documents to the case"

– Technical support officer 2, BANES

"It is not easy to find information in DMS!

– Technical support officer 1 Bracknell Forest

" I download all the files I need into my hard drive and organise them because DMS is messy. Jobs can have many drawings!"

– Surveyor, BANES

"Document storage is often blocked due to council firewalls"

– Manager, Lambeth

3. Manual reconciliation of payments

Summary:

Customers can pay the building control fee online, over the phone and by bank transfer. There may be a set of invoices to pay throughout the works or a one-off charge upfront.

Technical support officers have to chase the finance team to see if invoices have been paid against the allocated cost code. Often they resort to receiving proof of payment from the customer.

For some local authorities the payment engine, the application form and the CMS generate different case numbers.

Confirmations of online payments are received by email and they need to be linked to the case manually to validate the application.

It is time consuming to reconcile the missing information and mistakes can happen which affect the progress of a case or result in loss of revenue.

Who:

- Technical support officer
- Manager

Local authorities:

- BANES Council
- Bracknell Forest Council
- Lambeth Council

3. Manual reconciliation of payments

Quotes:

"The CMS generates a different reference number to the payment system. it's about aligning all the systems into one with the same reference number."

– Manager, Bracknell Forest

"Opening the finance system to do reconciliation takes 5 minutes. It is incredibly slow"

– Technical support officer 1, BANES

"We do not get notified when a payment is sent by BACS"

– Technical support officer 1, BANES

"We receive an email confirmation when a customer pays online, we save it against the case in the system"

– Technical support officer 1, Lambeth

"Problem is with the Finance side of things – so difficult. Not sure if this is a system issues, or Lambeth, or local government generally"

– Technical support officer 2, Lambeth

4. Lack of transparent and joined up communications

Summary:

A key pain point reported in this discovery is that building control staff cannot generate communications to all parties involved using the workflow in the case management system.

Technical support officers and surveyors rely on manual email communications to liaise with different parties. Quite often the parties involved are the builder and the architect, leaving the customer and other building control staff, who may need to see how the case is progressing, out of the loop.

As a result, communications are disjointed, inefficient and time-consuming for a service where transparent communication with all parties is essential across the lifecycle of a case. We heard from customers the need to stay informed rather than relying on their agent or builder for updates.

In the absence of good communication with customers, under the new BSR regulations, the reputation of the council's building control service will remain in the builder's hands.

Who:

- Technical support officer
- Surveyor
- Structural engineer
- Manager

Local authorities:

- BANES Council
- Bracknell Forest Council
- Lambeth Council

4. Lack of transparent and joined up communications

Quotes:

"The customer needs to be on file. If we need to take legal action this will be against the customer not the agent...There is a lot of work needed to improve the channel process"

– Manager, Lambeth

"We tend to do everything by email"

– Technical support officer 1, BANES

"Anything that comes through the email inbox we send to surveyor and DMS... it is a lot of manual work"

– Technical support officer, Bracknell Forest

"Some builders are used to picking the phone up some it's the opposite, they don't ring us and they email us expecting us to see the email [for inspection bookings]"

– Manager, Lambeth

"The current system doesn't doesn't email out the inspection notes!"

– Surveyor, Lambeth

"It would be good to have a transparent portal when you know what is outstanding and you can communicate with the inspector… A lot of it has to be arranged with contractors because I'm not there all the time"

– Homeowner customer 1, Lambeth

5. Difficult to extract data for reporting

Summary:

Extracting data for reporting can be difficult because of the way in which existing back office systems are set up for Building Control. Multiple differing fields exist for the same data – which can mean for instance, errors are created by inadvertently pulling out duplicated data. There is lack of structured data in the system with information being captured and shared in PDFs which is a format that cannot be easily interrogated. Moreover, in many instances information is captured as free text, rather than structured data.

For example, the types of works required and the types of building control application received are not coded in structured lists and therefore questions raised cannot be answered easily.

As a result, data is not readily available to management for reporting to help facilitate conversations and timely decision-making.

Who:

- Manager
- Technical support officer
- IT support

Local authorities:

- BANES Council
- Bracknell Forest Council
- Lambeth Council

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5. Difficult to extract data for reporting

Quotes:

"We do not know what percentage of applications are from commercial customers vs homeowners. We'll need to find a way to extract the data"

– Manager, Bracknell Forest

"I run reports using Access. Some are done weekly and some monthly e.g. number of applications received, commenced, completed, number of visits done by surveyor"

– Technical support officer 1, BANES

5. Lack of software improvement to address mobile working and keep up with regulatory change

Summary:

Software used for building control tend not to be improved by existing suppliers. This is in spite of local authorities requesting improvements repeatedly.

Improvements requested are related to numerous unmet user needs around system workflow and the mobile app (e.g. ability to track and discharge conditions, ability to include dangerous structures tasks to the mobile app and access documents easily on site, ability to send out communications to all parties involved in a case etc.).

As a result, building control staff continue to struggle to provide the service, and are not able to keep up with changes introduced by regulatory reforms when required. Councils expressed the need to join up forces to leverage their collective experience in an effort to gain access to better software and modern processes for building control.

Who:

- Technical support officer
- Surveyor
- Structural engineer
- Manager

Local authorities:

- BANES Council
- Bracknell Forest Council
- Lambeth Council

5. Lack of software improvement to address mobile working and keep up with regulatory change

Quotes:

"The inspection app has bugs. Sometimes the site notes get stuck in the cloud. Our priority is to get a stable system"

– Manager, Bracknell Forest

"Six years ago we asked for the Onsite App to have a dangerous structure (DS) module and the silence from the supplier is deafening!"

– Technical support officer 1, BANES

"We gave them suggestions to improve the system but they are not listening"

– Manager, BANES

"The system is a bit dated, clunky and a bit slow. It does not update as quickly and rich diagrams are slow to open"

– Surveyor, BANES

"The document management system has not been improved for many years. They are not going to change it now"

– IT support lead, Lambeth

"DS is another example of ideas going into a black hole with not even as much as an update from the supplier. This is a much needed request from multiple authorities!"

– Technical support officer, unknown LA

6. Different software configurations used across local authorities

Summary:

The current back office IT system used is part of a platform which consists of different modules. At a high level, these are:

- Forms
- Workflow
- Case management
- Document management
- Inspection application
- Customer access

Implementations vary across councils. Lambeth doesn't use the inspection app, whereas BANES and Bracknell Forest don't use the forms. Staff report that the platform is complex, difficult to configure, and different modules are charged separately. As a result, local authorities do not benefit from a single, consistent and cost-effective implementation that meets their needs.

Who:

- Technical support officer
- Surveyor
- Structural engineer
- Manager

Local authorities:

- BANES Council
- Bracknell Forest Council
- Lambeth Council

6. Different software configurations used across local authorities

Quotes:

"I learn something new every week. It's like Lego but we don't have much guidance how to use it"

– IT support lead, Lambeth

"These things are not decided by the people who use them they are decided by IT!"

– Technical support officer 2, Bracknell Forest

"It's a massive multi-module system we would not know all the business processes"

– Technology officer, Lambeth

"It's complicated, offers too many things and there is no clear guidance!"

– IT support lead, Lambeth

"With local councils you get a high turnaround of staff...users don't know the system in its entirety to get the most out of it"

– Technology officer, Lambeth

7. Lack of customer feedback to improve the service

Summary:

Customer feedback is not collected for every building control case, and therefore customer satisfaction is not measured. This presents a missed opportunity for obtaining timely data to understand how the service is performing for its users. Some councils include a link to a feedback form when the building control certificate is emailed to the customer, which is good practice, but there seems to be lack of customer feedback data across the board.

Obtaining customer feedback is essential for helping to identify ways to continuously improve the service to meet customer needs in a market where local authorities compete with Approved Inspectors for providing building control services.

Who:

- Manager
- Technical support officer
- Surveyor
- Structural engineer

Local authorities:

- BANES Council
- Bracknell Forest Council
- Lambeth Council

7. Lack of customer feedback to improve the service

Quotes:

"We don't do a customer satisfaction survey because the IT system is not good enough. We need to do further improvements like the customer survey"

– Manager, Lambeth

" I don't think we get that many in these days to be honest"

– Technical support officer 2, BANES

Customer pain points

Our research has identified 4 pain points for customers:

1. Lack of understanding of the LA building control service

2. Inability to self-serve online

3. Lack of transparent and joined up communications

4. Lack of awareness of an independent complaints process

1. Lack of understanding of the LA building control service

Summary:

New customers have a lack of understanding of the local authority building control service. Often it is the architect or builder who will make the choice of which building control provider to choose, local authority or approved inspector. Customers have difficulty choosing the right application type for their needs and it has been reported that, when they do, they often choose the wrong application type, for example building notice instead of full plans, in order to keep costs to a minimum.

There is lack of transparency from local authorities around the benefits and risks for each type of building control application and how the fees are calculated for different types of domestic works. Moreover, the value of local authority building control service, the roles of the people involved and the process are not communicated consistently.

Who:

- Homeowner customer

1. Lack of understanding of the LA building control service

Quotes:

"One of the issues that frustrates customers is the limitation on advice that Building Control surveyors can offer. Surveyors cannot design the building for customers, but they can offer advice or refer them to the building regulations"

– Manager, Lambeth

"The homeowner does not want to pay the architect to produce the package for full plans building control"

– Manager, BANES

"The builder spoke to the council for building control. I did not know what were the rules"

– Homeowner Customer 4, BANES

"If there was even just a very short booklet that explains exactly what building control inspector does and what you can expect from them and the kind of standard of service you pay for, that would be useful"

– Homeowner Customer 1, Lambeth

"I'd like clear information on the LA website about the Building Regs and the application process"

– Homeowner Customer 2, Lambeth

2. Inability to self-serve online

Summary:

Customers are unable to track the progress of their application. They call the council to get an update from the technical support officer or the surveyor. When they are requested to provide information they do so via email which generates additional work for building control staff to file the document manually against the case.

As a result, local authorities spend time and effort serving information up to customers that is already held in their system but not shared.

There is a desire from all customers (and their agents) to be able to self-serve online as their case progresses and to be able to provide information easily rather than relying on telephone and email channels.

Some customers have experience of using digital systems to track their application and to provide required information to different parties. They have expectations for a modern IT system that is easy to use and holds all their case data in one place.

Who:

- Homeowner customer
- Commercial customer

2. Inability to self-serve online

Quotes:

"I was asked by a gentleman in BC to provide a structural drawing and I passed it onto the structural engineer. I called him to ask if he received the information"

– Homeowner Customer 5, Lambeth

"One thing that needs improving is discharging the conditions. They give you the condition letters and then you have to discharge those conditions by providing further information. That's where things get tricky...Our architects used a spreadsheet to track all 30 conditions"

– Commercial Customer 2, Lambeth

"NHBC has a system whereby they issue you conditions and then you submit information to their portal. Then they respond and either say, that's not acceptable and I want X Y and Z or condition approved"

– Commercial Customer 2, Lambeth

3. Lack of transparent and joined up communications

Summary:

Currently, communications are siloed and often the customer is kept out of the loop as the agent (often builder or architect) liaise with building control staff.

Although, many homeowner customers use agents for their building control case, they want to receive progress notifications with regards to the outcome of inspection visits, if there are actions that need to be taken or blockers or if things are moving well. This is also the case for commercial customers who employ teams to liaise with building control and want timely updates of progress made so that any issues that arise can be investigated based on evidence.

Who:

- Homeowner customer
- Commercial customer

3. Lack of transparent and joined up communications

Quotes:

"It has to be sent to me via email.. There are three parties involved so the service needs to communicate to everybody"

– Homeowner Customer 5, Lambeth

"I want the technical details of exactly what is required for the builder to address and surveyor updates to be informative"

– Homeowner Customer 2, Lambeth

"There was no other correspondence beyond acceptance of the building notice"

– Commercial Customer 3, BANES

"The inspector made a recommendation that was checked by the architects who then eventually agreed with him. I was present at all 6 inspections that's how I know"

– Homeowner Customer 6, BANES

"I am not so good with computers but I taught myself how to use them. I do things online primarily. I am 71 years old and I like to print something, for example so I can colour plans on paper"

– Commercial Customer 4, BANES

4. Lack of awareness of an independent complaints process

Summary:

Some customers have reported that there does not seem to be a process where they can file a complaint to an independent body when things go wrong with their building control case.

Signposting to the complaints procedure is not always clear on local authority building control websites and as a result customers can feel helpless.

Who:

- Homeowner customer
- Commercial customer

Quotes:

"I want an easy complaints procedure where you won't expect punitive measures if you do complain"

– Homeowner Customer 1, Lambeth

"I want a third party body to raise concerns with. I had a bad experience with builders working too close with Approved Inspectors and giving them lots of work"

– Homeowner Customer 2, Lambeth

User needs for Building Control

Overview of user needs

We have identified over **80 user needs** which have been validated by analysing interview data across different participants and identifying common themes. User needs have been organised by user group and step of the user's journey using a trello board.

There is a range of unmet needs for building control which support the case for an improved customer and back office system that reduces manual work and is responsive to regulatory change:

- A data led and single source of truth system from application to completion of a case
- Ability to work effectively across devices to support users on site
- Ability to generate automated and timely communications to all parties involved and to capture responses to actions

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User needs board

Thank you.

We're always here to answer questions
or to discuss the needs of your project.

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