Improving local authority building control

Discovery Report

March 2024

Bath & North East Somerset Council

Bracknell Forest Council
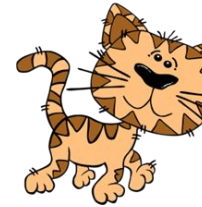
Lambeth

1. Introduction

Contents

The team

Officers from partner councils: Bath & NE Somerset, Bracknell Forest & LB Lambeth together with our Lead UR from Marvell Consulting

LB Lambeth   Catherine Neal (lead)
LB Lambeth   Stephen Barnes (lead)
LB Lambeth   Anthony Andrew (metrics)
LB Lambeth   Nitesh Pankhania (lead expert)
LB Lambeth   Christian Frivet (BC tech support)
LB Lambeth   Amy Tanner (project support)
LB Lambeth   Daleel Hagy (systems & metrics)
LB Lambeth   Kish Wright Twene (Service Designer)

Bath & NE Somerset   Phil Mansfield (lead expert)
Bath & NE Somerset   Kieran O'Neill (BC technical manager)

Bracknell Forest   Barry Flaven (lead expert**)**
Bracknell Forest   Teresa Pullen

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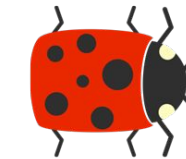Kish Wright-Twene
Service Designer
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BC Technical Team Lead
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Systems & Data Analyst
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Systems & Data Lead
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BC Technical Officer
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Context

Building Control is often overlooked when development projects are being undertaken. However it has a crucial role in public and building safety. The Regulations set out what must be followed in order to ensure that a structure is sound.

Council Building Control services must both compete against the private sector and, in addition, are also the last port of call when things go wrong. Moreover, council Building Control services must provide other functions, that fall outside of the Regulations service such as Dangerous Structures, which the private sector doesn't have to factor into their costs.

When we started we had an inkling of likely issues that would be experienced across the country based on our three partner's initial thoughts. These included:

- Fee income not being collected because of back-office failures

- Inefficient workarounds to maintain statutory registers' records
- Difficulties reporting income accurately owing to the way it is captured on existing back-office systems
- Workloads that are unclear from the manager view, such as cases laying open for years without an update
- Poor processes leading to, for example, running out of time to recover public funds
- Poor quality of data
- Adapting to regulatory changes arising from reform, such as the Building Safety Regulator and
- Supplier inertia in developing the tools to deliver these functions

Our Discovery set out to establish both:

1. If our early assumptions were also relevant to services across the country; and
2. what other major blockers were hampering council Building Control services.

2. Our approach: Understanding the Problem

Research, Collaboration, Engagement

Our working approach combined desk research, "**As Is**" **journey mapping**, **surveys, 1-to-1 interviews** and regular **collaborative workshops** with the three partners authorities and our User Researcher.

Other engagement included other Local Authorities, builders, developers and homeowners/applicants.

A partner project general **Trello board** was set up along with a Blog **Digital Building Control – Medium** to work in the open along with recorded **Show and Tells** and updates on social media sites such as **X** and **LinkedIn**.
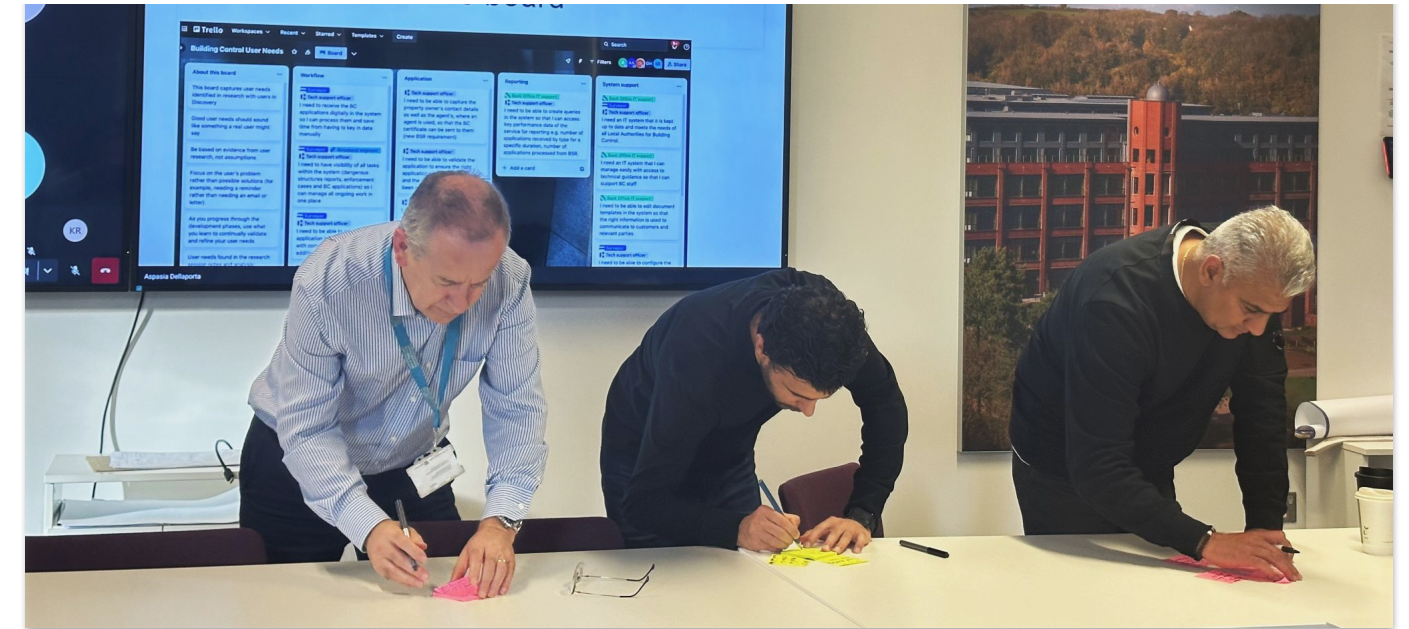
Research, Collaboration, Engagement

Our **road map** identified key areas we wanted to focus on, including developing **metrics, surveys, user stories, mapping the processes** and procuring a **User Researcher**.

At an early stage, we were unsure whether we needed to procure a Service Designer; although we decided against this, we engaged with one of **Lambeth's in-house Service Designers.** A beneficial move, as they made a huge contribution to the project**.** They worked on developing the **mapping of differing application types** as well as helping to identify and run Stakeholder and Assumption Mapping sessions.

The initial **"As Is" journey mapping** was an interactive, collaborative development with the partner Building Control teams. This was then plotted **onto a Miro Board**.

Ultimately - the work progressed on, with the help of our Service Designer, into a more **sophisticated electronic version**.
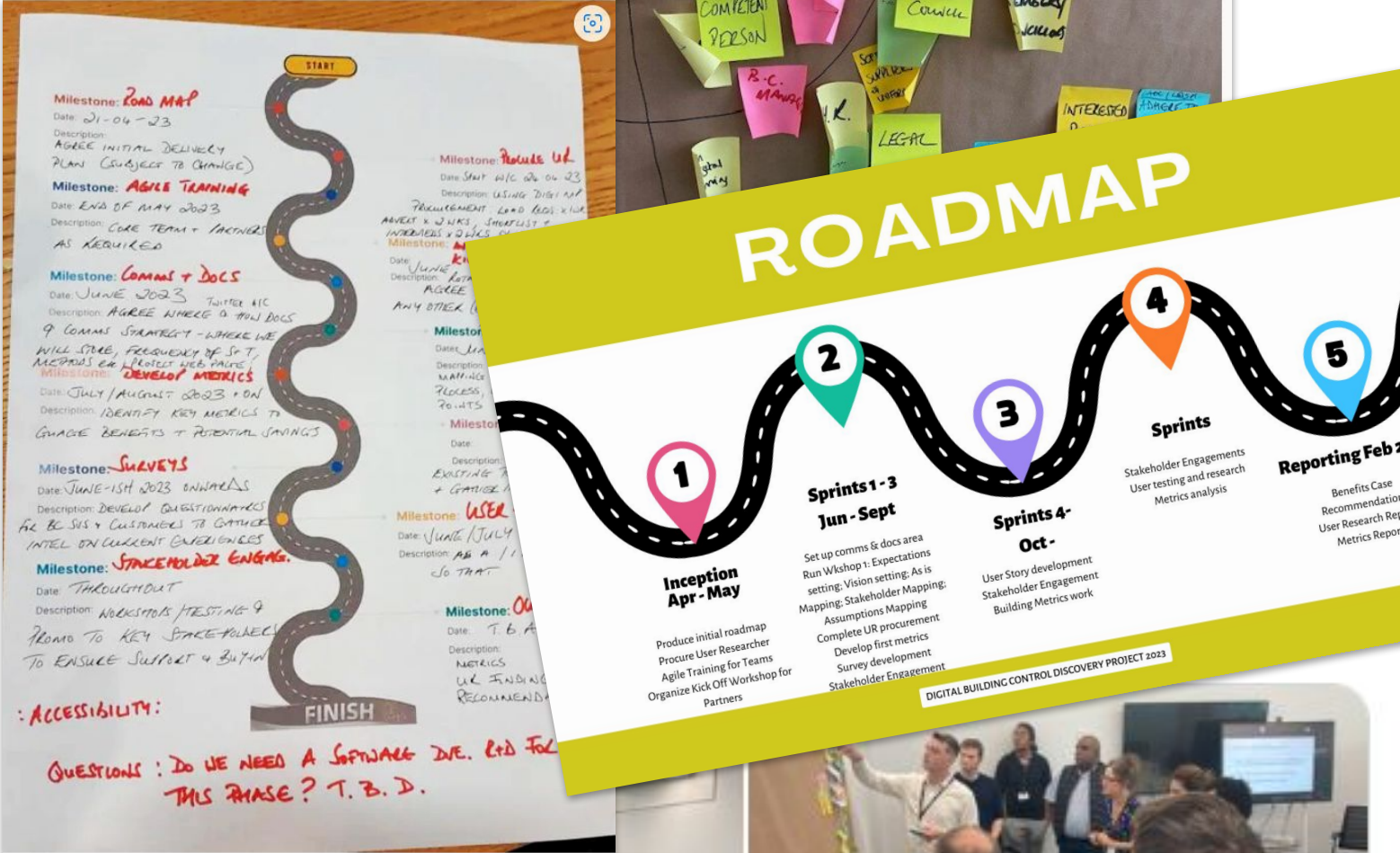
Mapping the service as it exists today
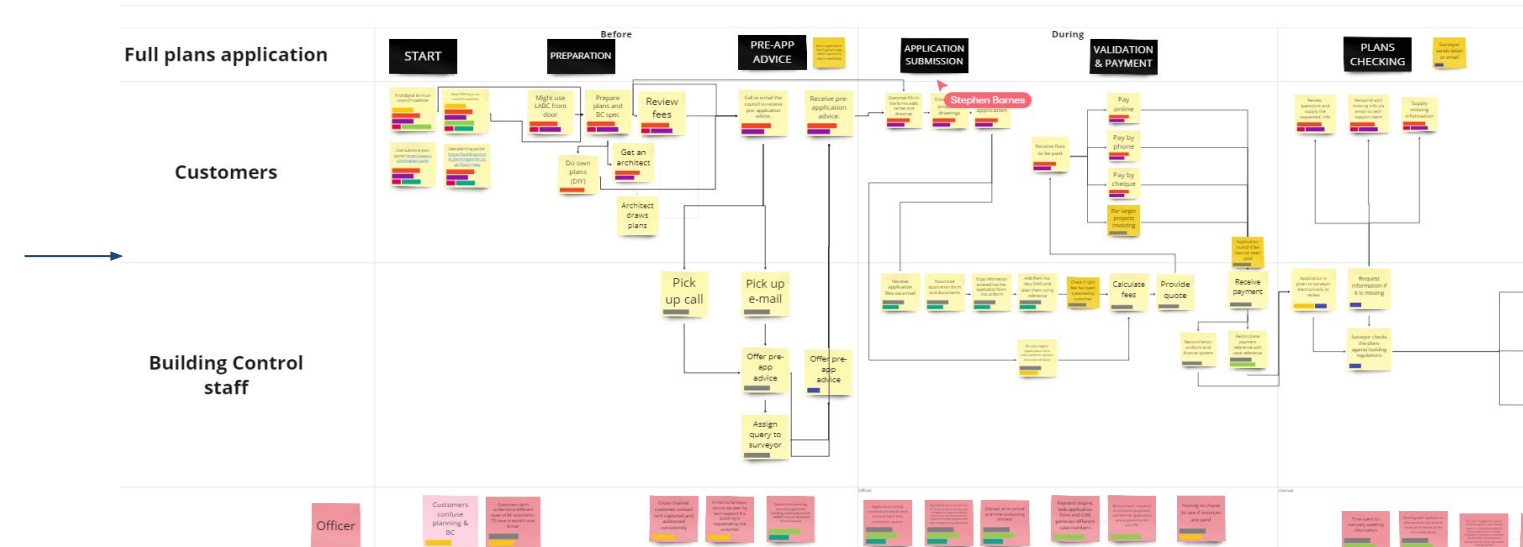
A key output from our workshops are the **maps of key processes for full plans and regularisation applications.**

Unlike other built environment functions of councils, we noticed there were almost as many similarities as there were differences in how councils dealt with the same type of application. Had we not had the breadth of expertise from the very different council partners involved in the project, we wouldn't have gained this insight.

Our As-is mapping gave us an understanding of differences and similarities between the three partners - and what best practice may look like. Common failures and pain points surfaced too - this was a useful stimulus for the Heads of Building Control to discuss nuances.

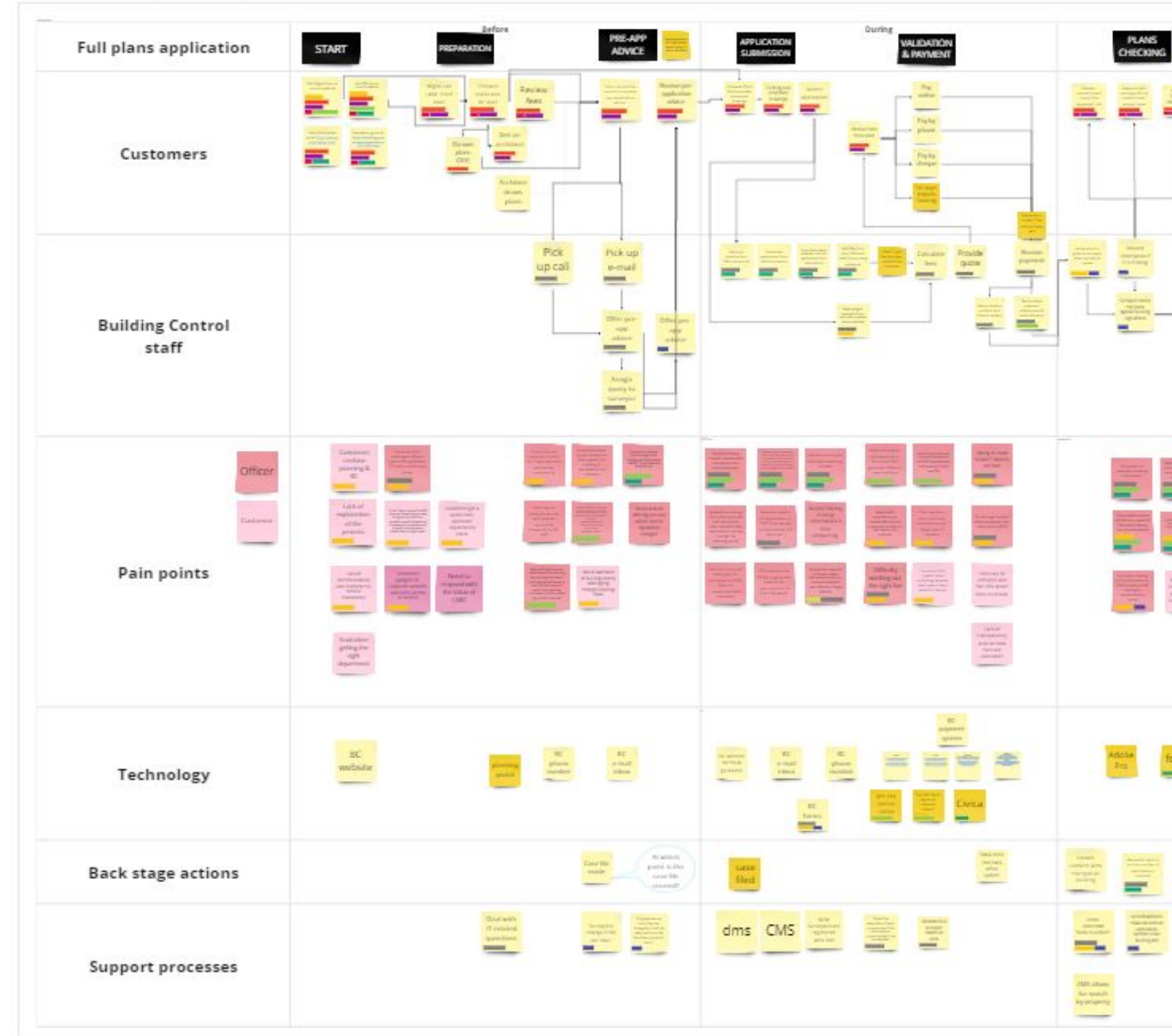This project asset is a 'blueprint' for designing new systems.

View the full blueprint, which include the mapped services here

We also added layers of interaction with the front and back office processes, the technology used and the pain points.

View the full blueprint, which includes the mapped services here

Service blue print full plans

3. Surveys: understanding the problem

Building Control Officers: What could be improved?

Surveyors and structural engineer responses

⊟**Improved back office**	**25**
Greater automation	1
Time recording system	1
User-centred design	3
Inter-operable with other systems	3
Adapting to change	4
Manage and search documents	6
Mobile working	7
⊟**Internal processes**	**11**
Knowledge / Resource share	1
Internal Governance	1
Time	3
Staff related	6
⊟**IT**	**8**
General improvement	1
Extracting data	1
New/better hardware	6
⊟**Customer Dashboard/Portal**	**1**
Data-led applications	1
⊟**Awareness**	**1**
Public understanding of process	1
Grand Total	**46**

We invited officers across England to share their views on BC processes and services, to get a **national perspective of problem areas** and to test our initial assumptions. This threw up some interesting responses.

We've broken down the results by role - so the table on the left shows surveyors' responses and the table on the right those from senior managers. The majority of responses **suggested improvements related to the back office system**. This was true across all roles.

Staff also wanted applicants to be able to self-service with tools for:

- submitting applications directly into the system
- tracking status of an application

Senior management responses

⊟**IT**	**4**
New/better hardware	1
Reliable	1
General improvement	2
⊟**Internal processes**	**5**
Improved processes	1
Staff related	4
⊟**Improved back office**	**14**
Time recording system	1
Reporting and monitoring	1
Mobile working	1
Adapting to change	1
Inter-operable with other systems	1
User-centred design	4
Manage and search documents	5
⊟**Customer Dashboard/Portal**	**3**
Concise data about application	1
Status tracking	1
Improved communication with customers	1
Grand Total	**26**

Building Control Officers: What could be improved?

We asked officers to tell us about processes where things go wrong the most. The following were key themes:

Communication Issues
Whether internally (between staff) or externally to customers, repeat problems surfaced - including missed voicemails, inaccurately booked inspections, and failures to pass information received from agents onto surveyors. A lack of understanding of regulations on the part of admin teams was seen as resulting in delays responding to customer queries.

Technology Problems
These included failures in reporting tools, lack of training on systems, and difficulties with accessing data on site inspections through mobile devices.

Process
Poor organization in the document management system (DMS). Some surveyors complained about a lack of a 'link' between checked plans and conditions, leading to workarounds and manual record-keeping.

Customer Service Challenges
Problems with 'DIY'ers - customers without professional representatives, who would express frustration with a lack of support through complex regulations. Surveyors expect to see more of this with regulatory changes.

Site Inspection Problems
These included wasted journeys where site visits had been booked but were not yet ready for inspections; missed and abandoned inspections due to difficulties accessing application information from the DMS.

Neighbour Disputes
Issues related to neighbour disputes were mentioned - indicating neighbours may not understand the remit of BC.

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 continuous i... software for building
7. Different software c... local authorities
8. Lack of customer fee... service

Building Control Officers: What could be improved?

Themes

Of the responses relating to systems and workflow, **92%** concerned the back office system.

24% of those comments highlighted that **better document management and search tools** were the biggest intervention that could help them to improve their work.

Almost **1 in 5** responses said the greatest single improvement would be a back office system that is **streamlined and user-centred**.

Specific suggestions

More granular ideas to improve back-office systems included:

- improved supplier responsiveness to adapt to changes in regulations

- improved access to documents whilst on site

- integration with other systems in use, such as email applications

- improved communication with applicants

What would most help you to improve your work?

Technical officer responses

⊟ **Improved back office**	**4**
User-centred design	1
Reliable	3
⊟ **Internal processes**	**3**
Digital maturity	1
Knowledge / Resource shar	2
⊟ **N/A**	**1**
Nothing!	1
⊟ **IT**	**1**
Supplier accountability	1
Grand Total	**9**

Building Control Officers: What could be improved?

Themes

Conversely, when asked what was currently good, a number of those officers who had been negative about the existing system, suggested the systems being used were functional - and even easy to use.

On the whole, responses from Surveyors, Heads of Service and other professional staff provided a more balanced overview, finding both positive and negative aspects.

Technical Support officers tended to emphasise positive attributes of the system, particularly ease of use and effectiveness (when working properly). Both sets acknowledged limitations, but Tech Support officers appeared to focus more on the system's strengths.

What is good about your back office system? (All roles)

|	
Easy to use	30.00%
DMS	20.00%
Easy to use when it works	6.67%
Onsite working	3.33%
Single source	3.33%
Shared info	3.33%
Cloud based	3.33%
Automated system	3.33%
Comprehensive	3.33%
Reliable	3.33%
Appearance	3.33%
Shows workload	3.33%
Access public	3.33%
System diary	3.33%
Adequate	3.33%
Online validating	3.33%
Grand Total	**100.00%**

Impression

We believe that responses to this question need to bear in mind a degree of **apathy** from officers' as to whether improvements are possible.

Well-embedded processes can often lead to **fear of change,** fear of job losses and attitudes of "better the devil you know".

It was notable that **only 36 participants commented on what was good** about the back-office system. **38 participants left the question blank** or even gave a **negative sentiment** (such as 'nothing [is good about the system]').

Building Control Officers: What could be improved?

Time to manually log one application
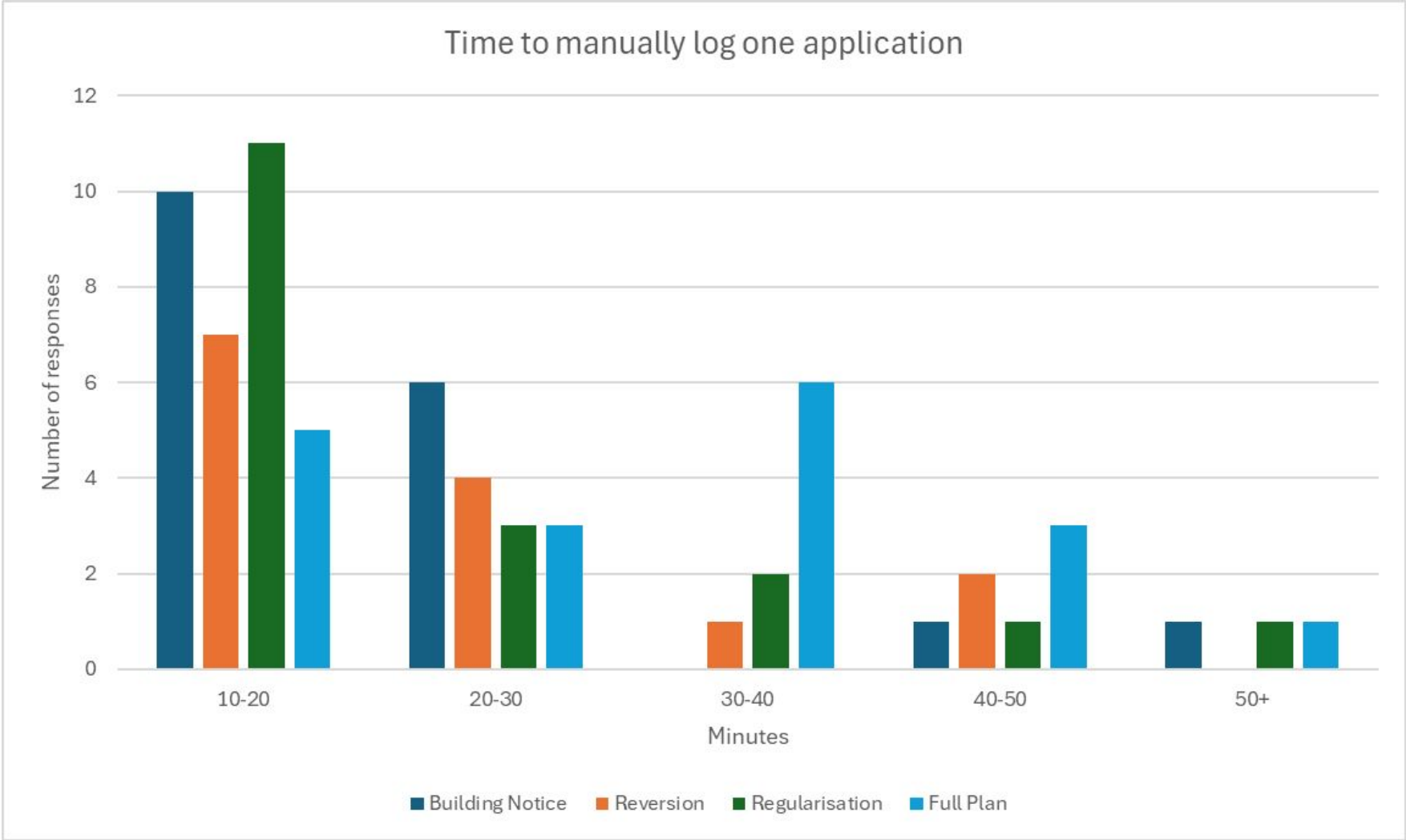
One of our early hypotheses was that council **services rely heavily on manual processing.**

The graph on the left shows survey responses about how long it takes officers to manually process different types of case onto the back-office system.

Whilst many cases take less than 20 minutes, for some respondents these take more than double that time. This could be evidence of just how much **processes vary between councils** - with some more reliant on manual workarounds. This could be improved by a streamlined system.

Officers - Overall sentiments

We are the only service that have to compete for business in the council.
- Surveyor, Officer Survey response

We're the face of Building control - through us repeat engagement is secured.
- Tech Support Manager

The ICT systems in place are outdated and usually have to find work arounds which does not make for a streamlined process.
- Surveyor, Officer Response Survey

In each of the Local Authorities I have worked I have felt the ICT systems in place are outdated and usually have to find work arounds which does not make for a streamlined process, adds time to administrative tasks and increases inconsistencies in processes
- Surveyor, Officer Survey Response

We are a forgotten service within the council, the powers above do not listen to our struggles. We bring in quite a lot of money that is not used for building control, it is invested in other areas of the council.
- Surveyor, Officer Survey Response

The systems fail to deliver what they promise and rarely based on the real time process.
- Surveyor, Officer Response Survey

IT systems could be a lot better.
- Tech Support Officer, Officer Response Survey

Overall feeling of lack of value. …with the lack of staff, value and remuneration in line with private companies.
- Surveyor, Officer Survey response

What needs improvement - Building Control staff

Pay and conditions

We weren't too surprised to hear that surveyors (in particular) have issues with levels of pay in relation to the extent of their responsibilities. We've pulled out a selection of quotes here that sum up sentiments on this point.

This is an area we return to in 'identifying the problem'.

Partners have - of course - taken this away to reflect whether they can do anything for their teams within the current system.

"This has got be one of the most difficult times at present."
- Surveyor, Officer survey response

"pay is poor for the responsibility we have and the expectation of our duties [... I'm] looking to move to the private sector"
- Surveyor, Officer survey response

"Overall feeling of lack of value. [...] with the lack of staff, value and remuneration in line with private companies. There does just not seem to be an interest in LABC as a career and with insufficient trainees, it will eventually disappear totally. "
- Surveyor, Officer Survey response
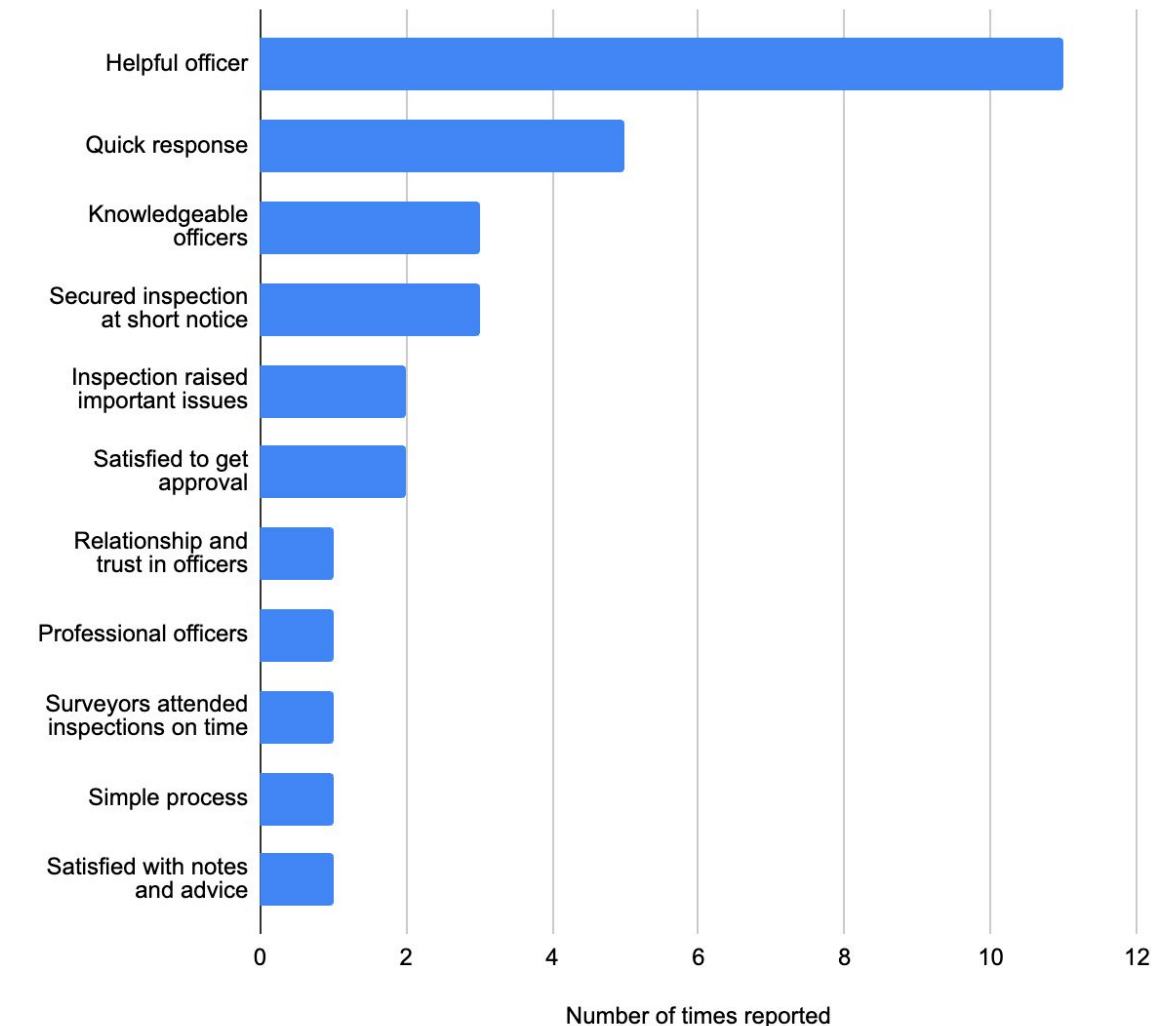
Customers - What's working well?

Overall Customer Satisfaction with the Building Control Process and Service

Reasons customers were satisfied by category
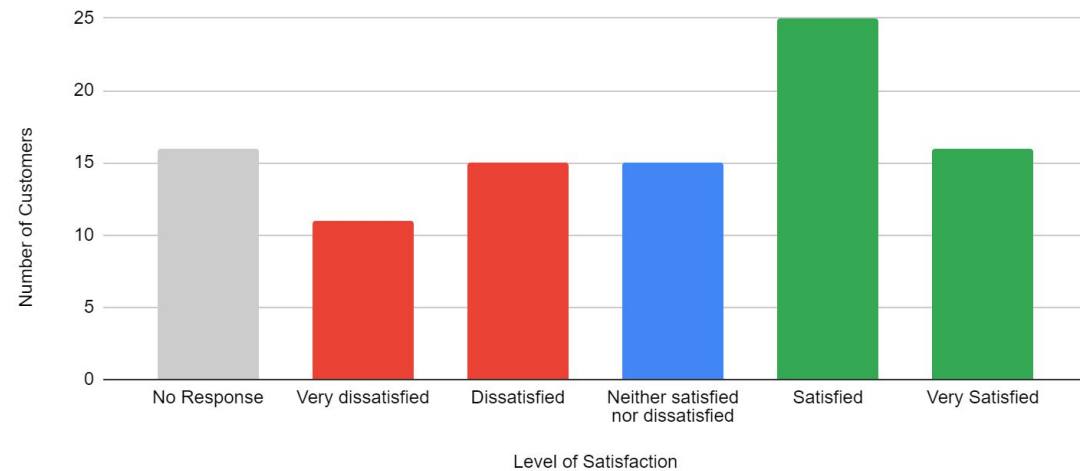
Overall customer satisfaction with services **was good** as the graph above illustrates**.** Customer service - perceived level of **responsiveness and helpfulness -** was a key driver for those positively rating service satisfaction, as shown on the right.
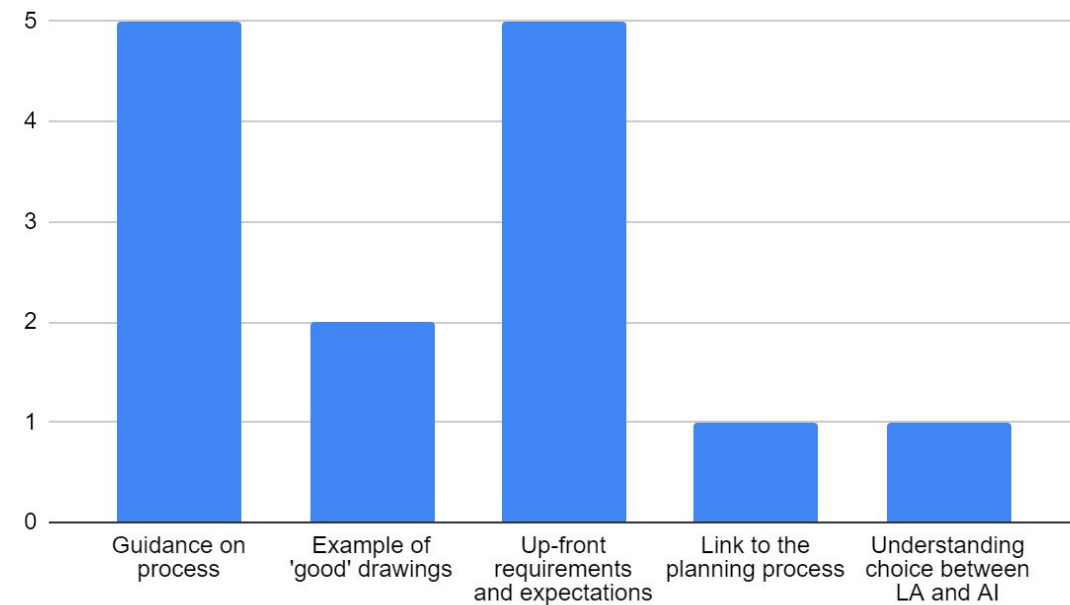
The bulk of respondents were homeowners. One emerging trend from our User Research findings appears to be that generally homeowners liked using council services because they felt they were knowledgeable and trustworthy.
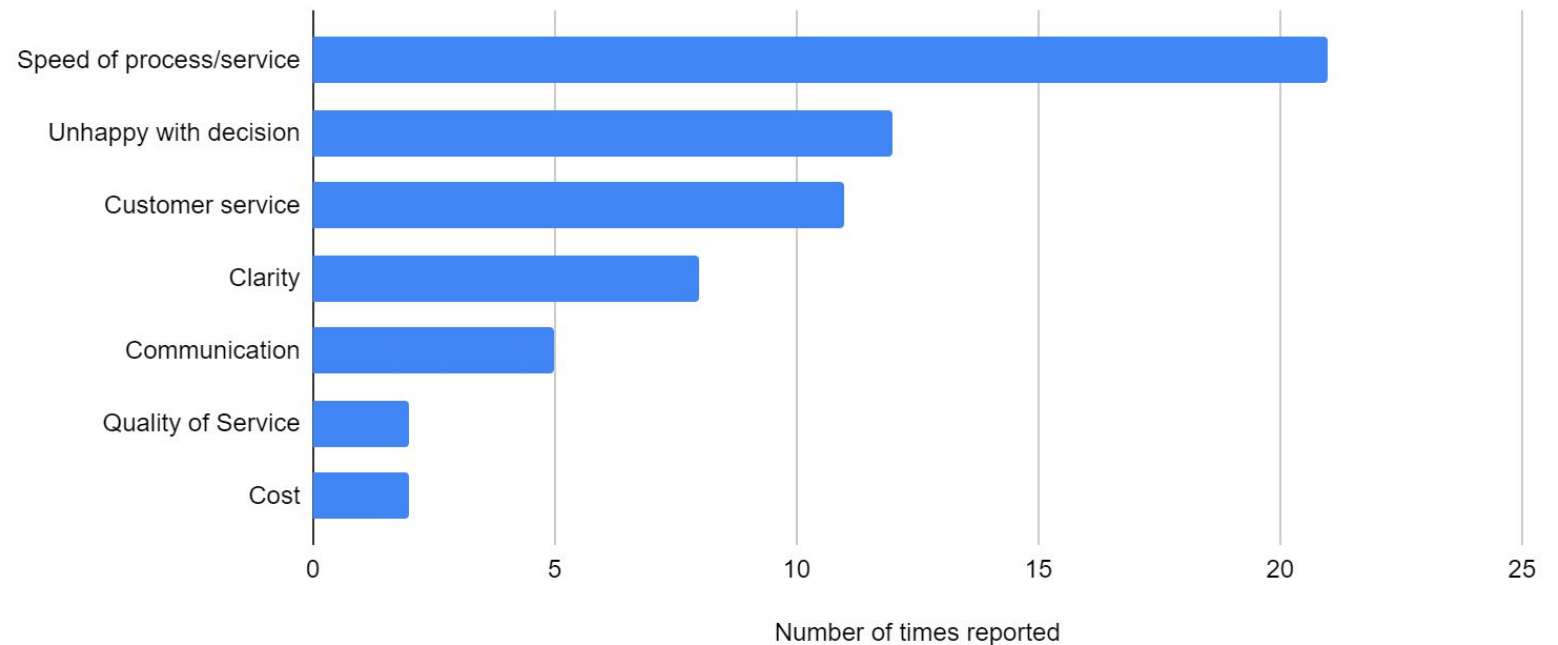
Customers - What could be improved

Guidance that could have helped

Reasons customers were dissatisfied

For customers, some key suggestions for specific guidance that would help them to submit their application were:

- a clear **overview of the process**
- the **likely requirements** for drawings
- a better **link to planning** process

An interesting finding revealed by the survey was that **cost was less important** to customers than we had expected. Very few dissatisfied customers flagged this as a key issue.

What we learned

For the back-office system, many of the officer comments highlighted that **better documents management and search tools** would be the biggest intervention that could help them to improve their work.

Coupled with unresolved issues around pay and conditions, **apathy and fear of change** will be key considerations for **managing any change** in systems and processes.
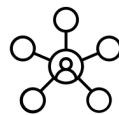
We validated our assumption that there is **significant manual processing** involved in handling building control work at many councils. A data-led approach could ease this.

Customer feedback was generally positive. We didn't have a lot of recent data for partner councils, so conducting these surveys was invaluable. Regular feedback surveys for council BC services should be considered as good practice.

Homeowners wanted more information **to understand the process** overall and there is **specific guidance that could help** them feel more confident using council BC services.

Cost wasn't a significant driver of satisfaction rating. We tested this in later research with builders, who are more likely to influence the decision over which service to use (council or Approved Inspector).

4. Problems identified

Problem

Competing on an uneven playing field

Uneven playing field

We've heard from councils across the country that competing with Approved Inspectors (AI's) is stacked against them and doesn't work.

Challenges of the cost-recovery model

The law requires councils to limit their charges for building control services under a cost recovery model.

Councils must cover the expense of doing all statutory building safety work which is not chargeable. This includes:

- enforcement when things go wrong
- responding to dangerous structures and emergencies, maintaining a presence 365 days a year

Some of those statutory duties are covered by separate legislation, and must not be funded from Building Regulations income. They do not get factored into the 'cost recovery' model.

Council services as a whole must ensure they can both pay salaries and pick up the cost of this work. This means that councils have to draw on 'general funds' or run at a loss.

Recruitment and retention of surveyors

The financial challenge greatly impacts on the recruitment and retention of staff.

Councils and AI's are competing for the same qualified professionals. AI's only carry out the fee-earning Building Regulations approvals work, charged at a profit. They are able to pay more generously with perks, such as company cars.

Another concern raised by councils is the time spent on bringing forward Apprentices, only to see them qualify and leave for more lucrative/attractive opportunities in the private sector.

A typical surveyor's salary is likely to be lower in the public sector. It is unsurprising, then, that recruitment and retention is a huge challenge for councils. This was a common theme in our survey responses.

We return to this point later when we discuss the challenge of having adequate staff to meet the demands of new reforms.

Uneven playing field

As well as the extra costs faced compared to competitors, there is often no real competition when customers are procuring building control services.

78.6%

17.1%
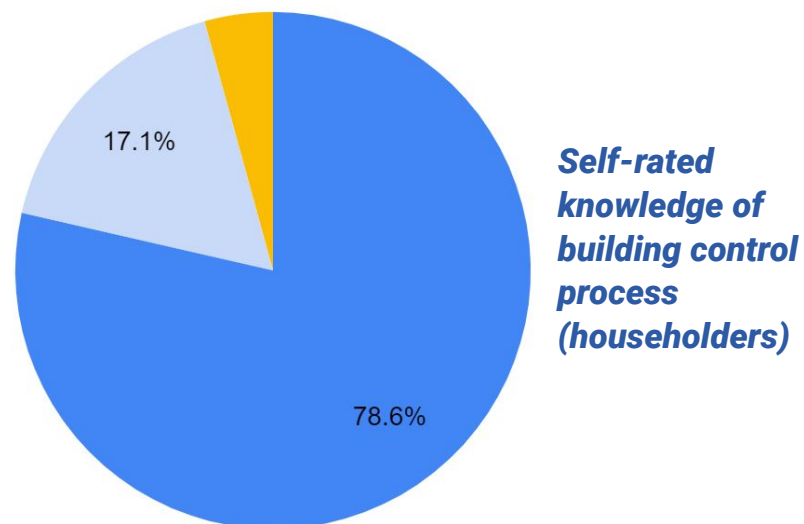
Self-rated knowledge of building control process (householders)

● Not knowledgable ● Good knowledge ● Very knowledgeable

Competing for business

We've heard from subject matter experts that customers (householders) are often not part of the decision-making process when selecting a building control provider.

In our national customer survey and interviews with builders and project managers, we set out to identify why this is the case.

Our survey showed that householders, in particular, have very limited knowledge (see chart to left) of what the BC process involves or where to find guidance.

AI's, exclusively focus on fee-earning work, and thus are able to dedicate more time and resource to building relationships.

They also have the freedom to set-up consultancy arms of the same business providing early design advice, allowing them to circumnavigate new legislation around providing pre-application advice. This also removes the risk of a conflict of interest later in the process.

This "two businesses in one" model increases the AI's opportunity to develop relationships with customers receiving pre-application advice and subsequently to recommend their Approved Inspector for the regulatory work. Council services are not able to do this and thus operate at a disadvantage in this respect.

Lack of transparency and awareness

Our interview and survey findings indicated that often a service provider is selected based on relationships that already exist between builders and their preferred approved inspectors.

An interesting finding was builders were more likely to say that AI's were more responsive, whereas home owners tended to find council services more responsive.

There may be specific reasons why a customer chooses AI's over the council. We heard in some areas, local builders or AI's may be the only option available in their language. Whilst the private sector can respond to a need like this, councils would not be able to sustainably recruit and retain staff on this basis.

Uneven playing field

The lack of knowledge and expectations on the part of customers may also be taken advantage of to reduce costs of service for AI's.

Transparency on level of service

We know from the government's own [independent reviews](#) of the industry that there are "incentives for building control competitors to attract business by offering minimal interventions or supportive interpretations to contractor".

We've heard anecdotal evidence about some of the ways AI's reduce costs:

Approve	Approve works without thorough checks, reliant on photos
Strip down	Strip down site visits to absolute minimum
Minimise	Minimal or no plan-check process
Avoid	Rarely consult fire brigade

Given the public service remit and scrutiny over councils, it's not possible for council services to compete by minimizing the level of service provided.

Additional costs for customers

Some agents / builders exploit customer's lack of awareness by adding a markup for submitting applications, which an applicant could easily have done themselves.

We've estimated how much these costs could potentially stack up.

£51,000

Estimate of the **extra costs paid by householders each year** on agents' premiums for submitting an application **at one council alone.**

Assumes premium of 20% on council's standard fee.
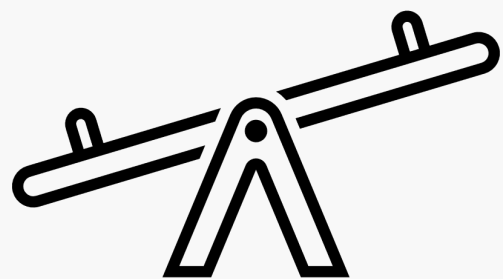
Solving the uneven playing field?

Recommendations

Our findings warrant at the minimum a reconsideration of the cost-recovery model that's imposed on council Building Control services - which creates an unrealistic barrier to competing in the market.

Regulatory change aside, our vision is for greater transparency and empowered customers.

To bring that vision to life, the following would set the right conditions:

- Inclusive guidance on the building control process including applications - whether in plain English or other languages.

- An application process that it is easier for applicants to understand - helping applicants know what they need to do.

- Greater transparency and self-service for customers interacting with council BC services.

Problem

**Regulatory and legislative change**

Key Changes from Building Safety Act 2022

⊘ The Building Safety Regulator (BSR) was introduced by the Building Safety Act (BSA). It is now the sole building control authority for 'relevant' high-rise residential buildings.

⊘ The BSR has put a significant, additional and tightened statutory responsibility onto council building control teams.
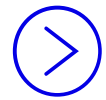
⊘ It is now mandatory for relevant buildings to be registered with the BSR.

⊘ Those responsible for building safety must now have additional qualifications and a 'digital golden thread' of information about each building shall be retained.

'Digital golden thread'

Purpose: To manage risk over the whole life-cycle of a building

Who maintains: Principal Appointed Person

What: Holds information that those responsible for the building will need to:

- show that the completed building and any later building work meets the requirements of applicable building regulations
- identify, understand, manage, and mitigate building safety risks, to prevent or reduce the severity of the consequences of fire spread or structural collapse throughout a building's life-cycle

It must be:

- kept digitally
- kept securely
- a building's single source of truth
- available to people who need the information to do a job
- available when the person needs the information
- presented in a way that can be easily used

Impact of New Legislation

Building Safety Regulator - Impact at Local Level

Increasing workload

Councils will be responsible for work relating to 'relevant' high rise buildings, through the Building Safety Regulator (BSR). Qualified surveyors are potentially facing increased workloads, which could cause delays to their domestic and regulatory work.

Availability of suitable staff

Building Control becomes a registered profession from July 2024, with officers required to pass an assessment to undertake certain levels of work. This means councils must have speicifc qualified officers in place and suitable systems otherwise they are at risk of losing this additional work and income.

Additional complexity to processes

The new process is likely to be more complex with additional information to process, more inspections, increased customer contact for support and developments needing to comply with the new process and more stringent regulatory regime.

*"Frustratingly **fast rate of change recently**, change that is required and comes with good intentions to improve standards, but ...now being used for political gain"*

- Surveyor, Officer Survey

*"It's easy to recruit new lower levels [staff to deal with up to 18 storeys], it's level 3 that's difficult to recruit. **2,000 people need to get qualified nationally.**"*

- Southwark Council

Impact of New Legislation

Case study: Increased Competition at Pre-app

A **key debate** between the partners was whether the new regulations completely, or only partially, removed the ability of councils to provide **pre-application advice** and also work on subsequent stages of a project.

Councils rely on providing pre-application advice to win later work on high value projects.

If councils have provided initial design advice, then it's possible a **'conflict of interest' would arise** preventing them taking on work with the same project at a later stage.

In contrast, AI's, can set up separate consultancy services to handle pre-applications and then recommend their "other business" to provide the inspection role for the construction stage or subsequent work, thereby navigating legal boundaries around who provides pre-application advice.

This outcome may also lead to developers **perceptions** of council building control as less cooperative at certain stages.

Whilst councils work out the position, AI's can move in and use the confusion to their advantage.

This is another example of the constrained ability of councils to compete - **with direct implications on generating income**.
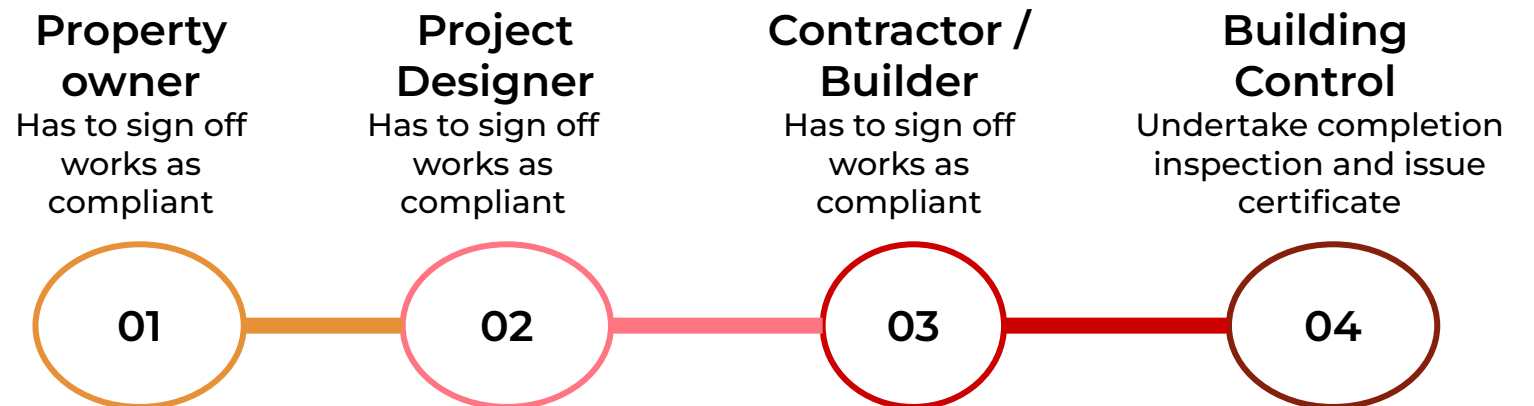
Loss of ££'s

Impact of New Legislation

New Complexity - Completion Certificates

The **process changes** brought in by the Building Safety Act are expected to result in confusion and potentially reluctance to assume responsibility for building safety at sign off stages.

-Those submitting an application must provide additional information on application forms.
-Council's will need to have processes to deal with the collection and review of this new information.
-Those involved with projects must confirm the works are compliant with Building Regs.
-As the final party signing off the process, this may well have additional cost implications to council building control.
-In terms of Householders, they will be expected to sign off work as compliant, when they lack the expertise to do so.
-Overall, this will **add** to **time** and **costs** (as well as **risks** for smaller sites) for all people involved in a building project.

New requirement to submit a completion notice from **three** parties before a completion inspection can take place:
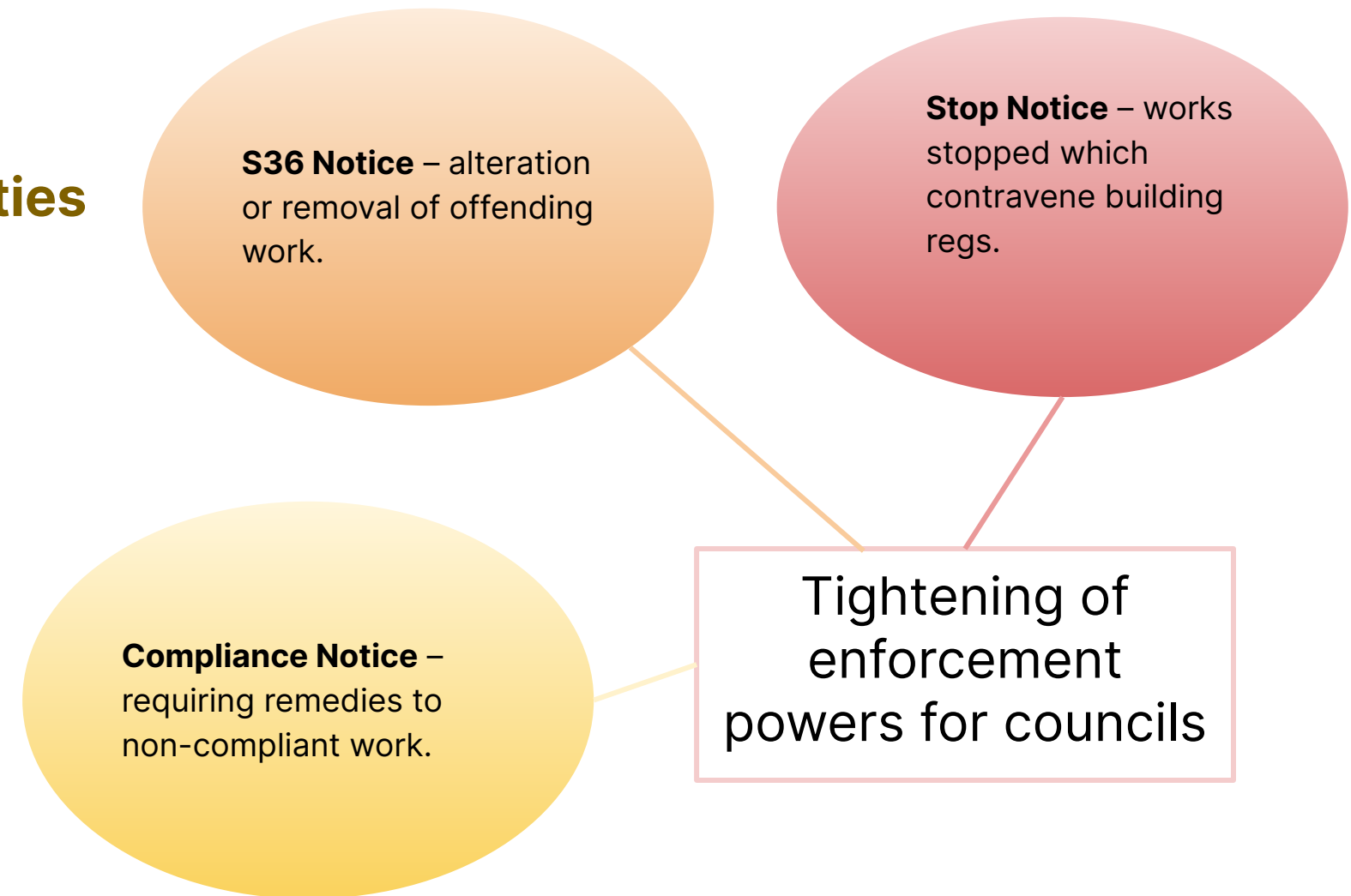
Property owner
Has to sign off works as compliant

01

Project Designer
Has to sign off works as compliant

02

Contractor / Builder
Has to sign off works as compliant

03

Building Control
Undertake completion inspection and issue certificate

04

Ultimate responsibility of compliance lies with the property owner – whether that's a homeowner or developer.

Impact of New Legislation

Amendments to Enforcement for Local Authorities

Methods to secure compliance with building regulations have changed since the BSA was introduced:

- There are now **three notice types** which councils can use, whilst exercising their discretion on the use.
- Extension to time period for **enforcement action to 10 years** from completion of works.
- **Prosecution** outcomes have changed, with those convicted of a **criminal offence** and facing possibility of imprisonment (up to two years). Currently, only subject to a fine.
- Prosecution rights **extended for BSR** and individual dutyholders.

S36 Notice – alteration or removal of offending work.

Stop Notice – works stopped which contravene building regs.

Compliance Notice – requiring remedies to non-compliant work.

Tightening of enforcement powers for councils

The result is likely to be **additional work and increased due diligence** for authorities which will **increase time** and **costs**. It will also require sufficient processes, adequate training and staff in place to be able to carry out these tasks.

Obstacles from Regulatory change

We've had to...change our procedures [at very short notice] and will be having to explain this particularly to domestic customers... [who have] no idea about this, and the responsibilities now placed on them."

- Head of Service

✕ Increasing pressures on resources.

✕ Existing back office system suppliers still not ready to deal with new requirements - even months after they were introduced.

✕ New standards for surveyors means there's a need to have staff with the relevant certification to work across the whole built environment.

✕ Staff now require further training, to achieve the right qualification - further increasing costs to already struggling local authorities.

✕ New needs for ongoing monitoring of accreditation to re-evaluate competence.

✕ Councils are individually grappling with new responsibilities and limitations.

What we learned

The new legislation brings with it **new duties and monitoring obligations** for council services and **new responsibilities** for many different parties involved with the process. This in turn means **greater time, costs and risks** for council BC.

Increasing workloads for council officers, with the new regulatory work and more information required for these new processes.
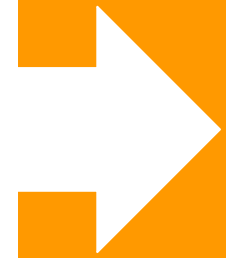
Concerns raised around ensuring officers are **suitably trained and qualified,** a well as retention of staff to carry out work required by council building control services.

Suitable systems need to be in place with a solid **understanding** of processes and opportunities, otherwise councils are at **risk of losing additional work and income**.

The way council building control operates is **constrained**. Council's must undertake regulatory and enforcement work, but don't have to provide fee providing service. They can't change or pick the work they do. This **leads back to the uneven playing field**.

Problem
Standardisation

Data standards

Councils have a **statutory role** to maintain the Initial Notice and Competent Person register for **no fee**.

Approved Inspectors must submit Initial Notices (INs) to notify the council about work they're doing.

A similar arrangement exists for trades like electricians, plumbers, window fitters etc. These are known as Competent Persons.

Councils must then validate and maintain a register of these notices. Initial Notices and Competent Persons Records must be accepted in any format.

As there's **no standard format** for submitting Initial Notices, technical support officers have to spend **time manually re-keying PDF**s into clunky back-office systems.

Competent Persons records are slightly more automated and are received as data collated by a central platform. However, this is **not completely automated** and requires some manual input from BC officers into the back-office system.

How applications are logged onto back-office

Fully automated
12.9%

Manual entry
87.1%
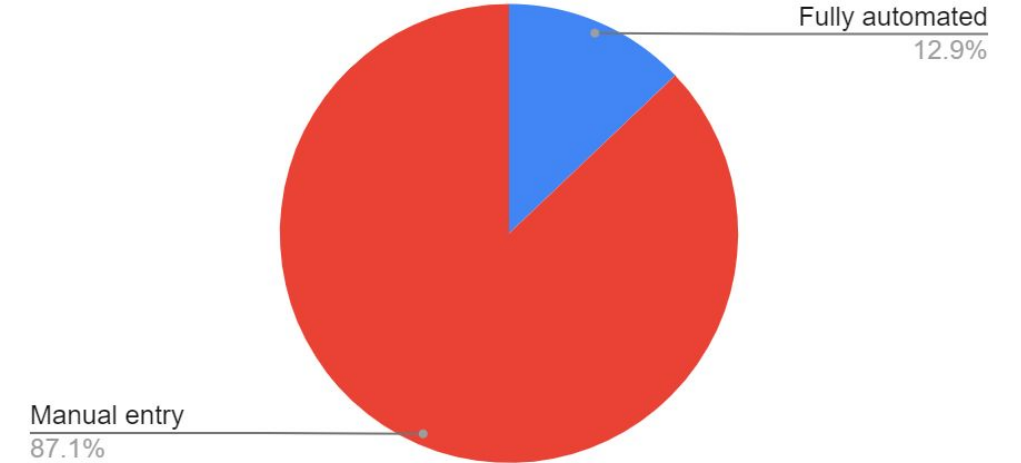
Source; Officer survey responses

Nearly £20k each year

Estimated avoidable cost of manually processing these submissions onto back-office systems at **just one council**.

# Council Building Control webpages

We analysed websites of council partners and across the market. We found differing layouts, accessibilities and information evident on each council site. Some councils use multimedia, videos and pictures to present information. Some use a layout similar to the GOV.UK system.

Customers follow different journeys on websites until they can reach the required information. This can lead to **added confusion for customers** - where submitting one type of regulatory application route is different to that of another, and finding Regulation fee information varies from council to council and is **not always easy to find**.

System configuration for BC applications and fees
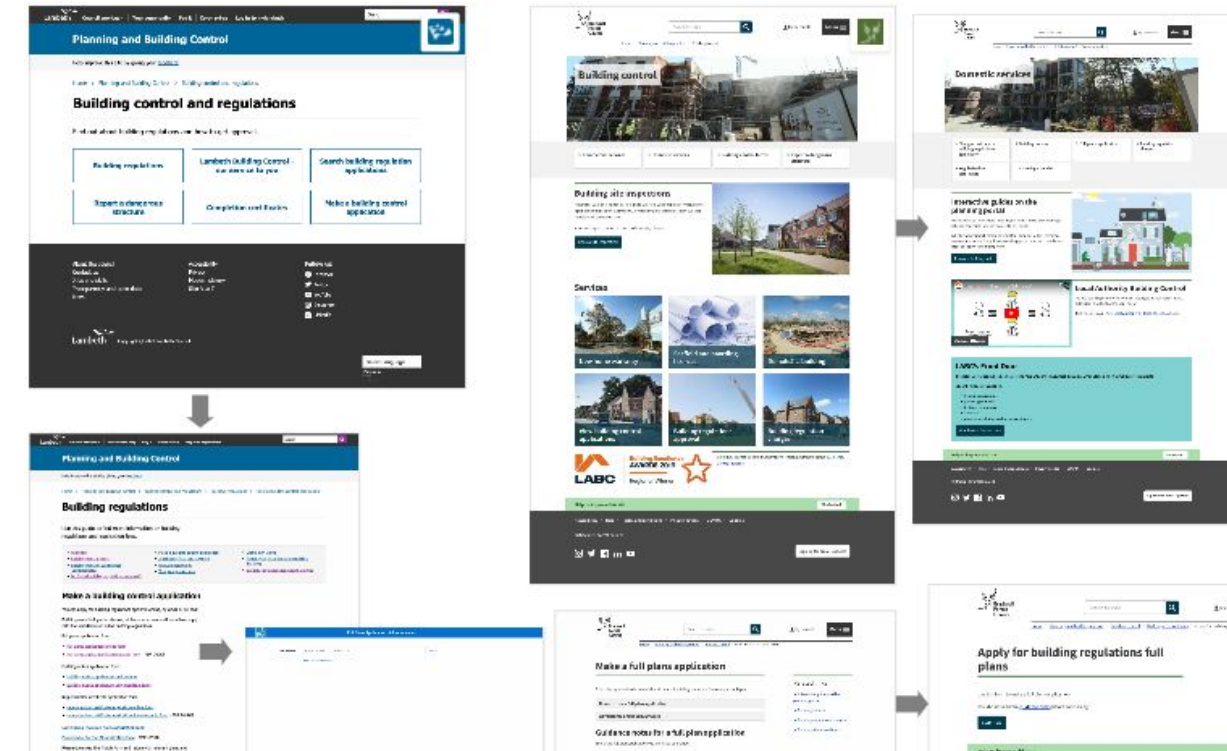
Above and left: Extracts from council websites relating to Building Control services.
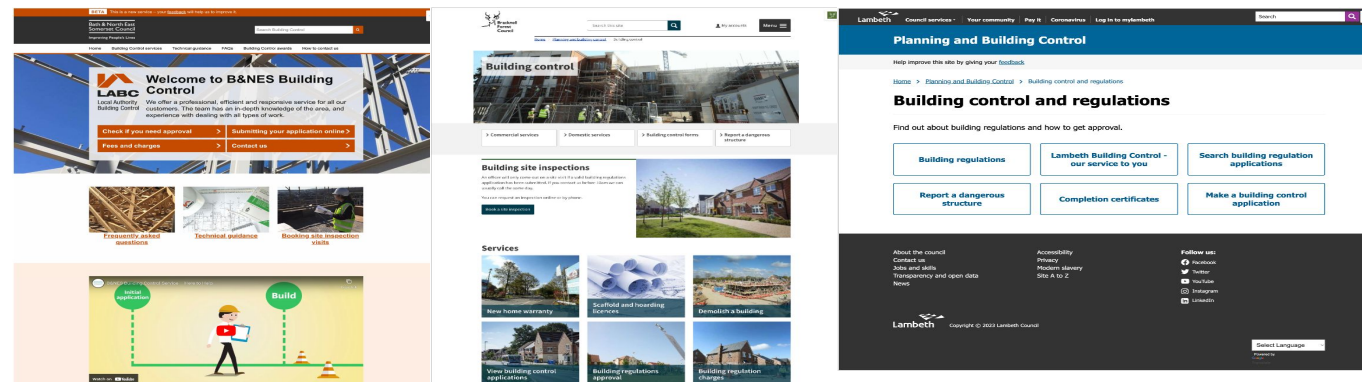
Systems Configuration: submitting an application

- **A number of different suppliers are used for BC application e-forms**
- **Each council use a different level of services from these suppliers**
- **Some councils use the supplier's full package others use partial services**
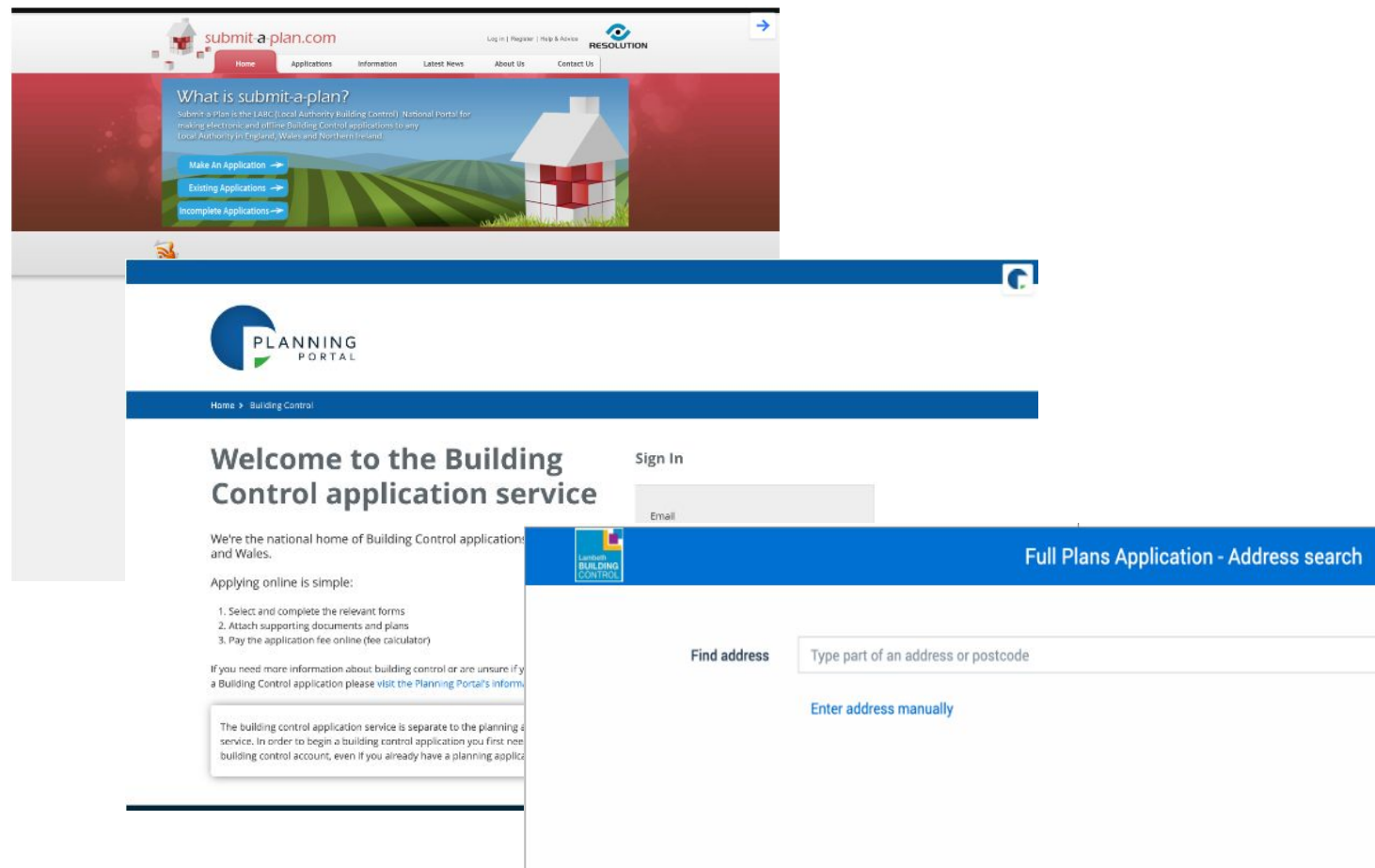
In some authorities, the BC application e-form is used; this allows users to submit applications that are then received by the BC service as a PDF of the application containing:

- Email
- Documents, not data
- Needs officer interaction

In another an end-to-end set up, capability is used. Once the user completes the BC application, it will automatically loaded into the council's Building Control back office system.

This difference in setup links back to comments made in the officer survey, where officers noted that different setups and configurations of the same systems at different councils. This adds to **confusion for customers** and **additional costs** to those individual councils.

The confusion around these systems means that sometimes, customers submit planning applications in error, when they meant to submit a Building Regulations applications. This again, highlights the additional **time** and **cost burden** being generated by a **lack of standardisation** alongside **poor systems** and **signposting**, **for** both **councils** and **customers**.

Left: Extracts from different portals for submitting building control applications.

Digital 'offer'

A key target customer for council services is larger-scale developers. These commercial customers tend to have experience working with AI's that have national coverage, such as NHBC.

We've seen that national AI's offer an enhanced digital journey and a standardised service - a similar way of working in each of the regions they cover. **Enhanced digital services** include the ability to **track the status** of applications, reading directly from the back-office system.

For these customers, the variable and more limited offer from different council services is **a barrier to switching away** from more corporate AI operators.

We found that existing council systems (and those on the market) are inadequate for meeting users needs such as self-service on application status and with respect to sharing documents.

Officers told us that for their more complex schemes, existing systems also **lack efficient ways of tracking work** on a case that is outstanding - such as conditions - leading to manual workarounds by individual officers. As a result, the system (as well as the customers and other staff / managers) have even **less visibility over the progress of a case**.
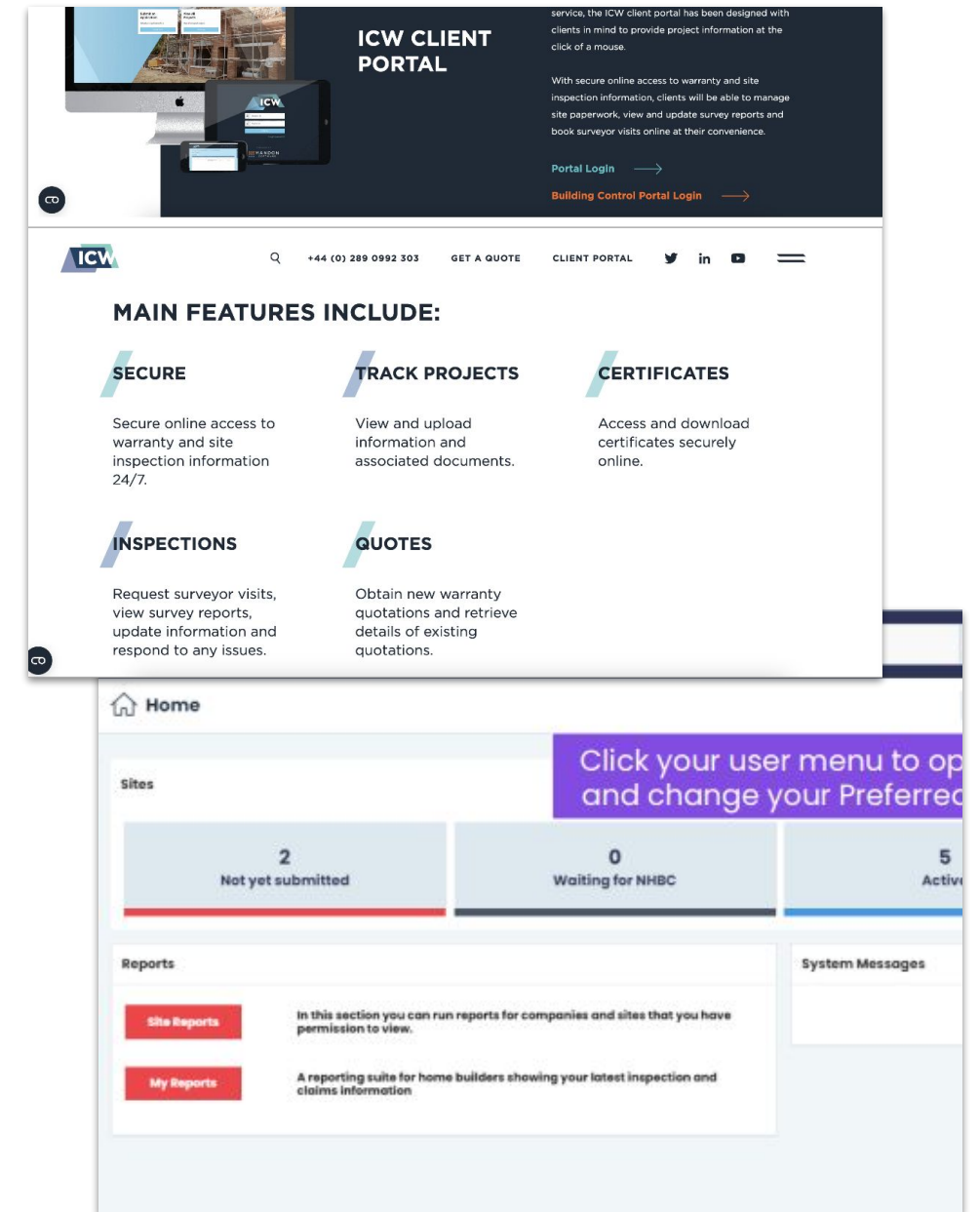
Above: Extracts from approved inspector websites showcasing tools to track applications

What we learned

For many services, digital tools have simply created an equivalent of a paper-based process. For example, Initial Notices have no standardised format meaning one council might receive fifty different formats of Notice to manually process - **at great expense to councils**.

The **lack of standards and reliable systems for statutory registers** is causing extra work and cost for council services. This burden rests wholly on those services.

Private sector **competitors offer a more standardised service** and enhanced digital journey for customers. This may be a barrier for some companies to consider working with council building control services services.

Recommendations

Building control services need to adapt away from paper based processes - both to realise efficiency savings and to enhance the journey for customers.

- Council services need to improve their digital journey to match the competition. However, this is unlikely to be resolved by a front-end solution alone because of the poor quality of data being collected (unsystematically) in the back-office.
- Adopting a data standard for all types of building control applications so that these are interoperable across systems would reduce the burden of manual processing. Government could consider mandating data standards to assist with this.

Council services would benefit from exploring offering the standardised levels of service that national AI's provide, and consider coordinating similar regional level standards to help persuade developers/builders.
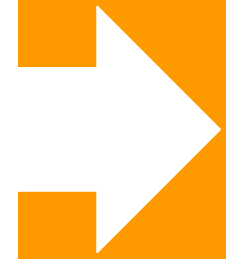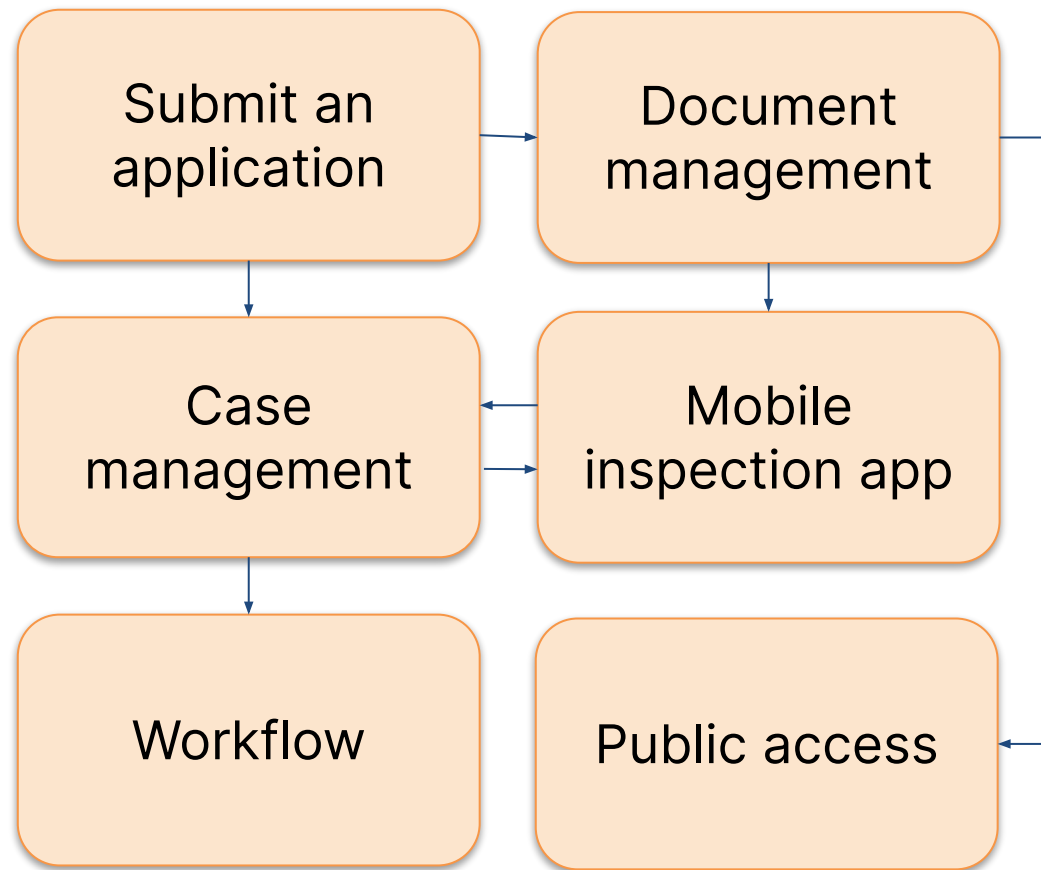
Problem
Systems and workflow

Technology platform

Existing systems that councils use for building control form a 'platform' that broadly consists of the following modules:

Submit an application → Document management

Submit an application → Case management

Document management → Mobile inspection app

Mobile inspection app → Case management

Case management → Workflow

Document management → Public access

- Submit an application
- Document management
- Case management
- Mobile inspection app
- Workflow
- Public access

Despite often having a common supplier, implementations vary across councils.

For example Lambeth do not use a mobile site inspection app, whilst BANES and Bracknell Forest do not use data-led submission tools.

Our engagement with councils nationally confirmed that bespoke configurations are common. This means that councils may be missing out on the tools to deliver a more efficient service.

As noted in the previous section, manual re-keying for cases into back-office systems is a time-sink. Not having an optimal configuration is leading to costly inefficiency in some instances.

Customisation is also often expensive. Modules such as inspections apps were well liked by surveyors who do use them, however these add-ons are charged as extras.

Pain points with current systems

Inefficient systems

In many areas, existing tools have (at best) digitised the handling processes of a paper-based era.

Document management was a significant pain point we ran into across our surveys and interviews.

These tools generate a lot of manual work - as most documents come by email there's a lot of attachments to handle.

We heard some councils estimate that around 40% of technical support work is purely keeping track of documents that change during the lifecycle of a building control case.

As well as document handling, we also heard about frustrations with:

- Ineffective search & retrieval tools
- Incomplete records being returned
- Data getting lost or corrupted
- Systems refusing to store relevant symbols (e.g. for equations)

Time was too limited for us to carry out detailed research on time spent on such lower-value admin. Benchmarks from innovation in other areas such as Digital Planning are, however, encouraging. We would develop [more detailed metrics](#) at Alpha stage.

"These things aren't decided by the users, **they are decided by IT!**"

"[Council BC] as a whole **needs a complete IT overhall to have a standardised system.**"
- Surveyor, Cheltenam, Officer Survey

We also heard that existing systems are **failing to adapt**. There's **outstanding requests** for changes to systems to meet the **demands** of new **Building Safety Regulator requirements**. Despite these being required for legislative reasons, they have **not been addressed yet** - years after their announcement and over 6 months after actually coming into force.

Pain points with current systems

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

*"For Excel, you can use Google.. But for this system, **you cannot find information** [publicly]."*

*"You kind of **need to know what you're doing in the first place** to configure [our back office system]."*

Onboarding & training

As systems tend to be highly bespoke to the process of a given council and to have been adapted to meet new needs over time, suppliers are incentivised to charge for add-on features.

This complexity makes it harder for councils to competitively procure their solution from other suppliers.

Documentation and guidance for existing supplier systems is anecdotally poor. To address this, councils are individually expending time and effort on developing internal manuals and guidance notes that try to help staff navigate existing systems.

Training courses for users of existing systems are also charged separately. This adds to the overall burden of spend. There's also lost time for officers on training. With a user-centred system, officers could just getting on with their job with less extensive training. This is another area we would look to develop detailed metrics on.

The feedback loop for suggesting improvements to large suppliers is ineffective. We heard from staff that it feels "like a black hole" where suggestions are never addressed. Councils have little leverage to secure improvements to the products they use during contract terms.

Workflow issues

Missed opportunities

Together with complexity of submitting an application, councils also do not take advantage of offering homeowners and other developers a **smooth transition** from **Planning** stage to Building Control.

Applicants must submit a new application, re-entering information that the authority already holds - and officers then need to validate this and link the record back to the Planning case.

We heard in the officer survey that **communication within the team** is a particular **unmet need** in existing systems - such as notifying surveyors of new documents or voicemails.

Interviews with Lambeth officers along with observing their day-to-day work, showed that the **system is not fit for purpose** for officers who need to track more complex cases.

This **leads** them to **work outside** of the system **to track** outstanding conditions, and relies on them manually maintaining their own individual records.

This kind of **workaround** makes it impossible for the customer to track progress using council systems. Additionally, it would cause significant issues, **delays and cost** when a surveyor may need time off (such as for holiday or sickness leave).

Officers also suggested **ways to improve** how they currently report on progress within the back-office system, which in turn could allow greater transparency to the customer.

For example:

- at a basic level, that the **templates built into** the system be kept up to date
- a greater use of standard **'events'** and routinely-used comments setting out what is required to **communicate clearly** with applicants
- **site inspection notes** could be **digitally shared** and then **agreed** with the applicants.
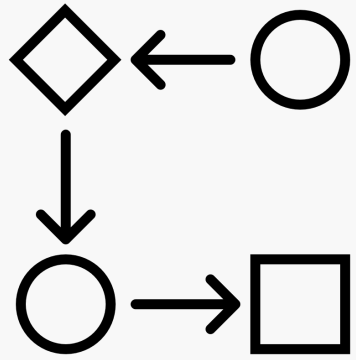
Improving systems & workflow

Recommendations

Our vision is a **fit-for-purpose**, back office system that meets the needs of the building control remit, including the new requirements for maintaining a **digital golden thread** for each building.

Developing the business case, such as building up detailed data on the time spent carrying out existing lower-value administration tasks, is something we think would be key at Alpha.

The following would help to create those conditions:

- A user-centred back office system, with data-led automations to remove routine manual entry and tracks communication.
- Reducing the manual handling of documents by defining standards and allowing customers to self-service.
- Realising opportunities to reduce friction and generate business - such as offering a consistent thread from the Planning Application stage to the council's own Building Control service.

5. User research findings

User research

For this discovery, our User Researcher led over 2,500 minutes of interviews with building control officers and with customers of the partner councils' services.

Lambeth's project team also carried out interviews with builders and project managers to supplement our research.

There are six main user groups for building control. These are set out on the right. The **User Research report** provides User Personas for the above, developed by the partners, along with a detailed assessment of the User Research workstream.

Council building control staff who serve customers and ensuring compliance with the regulations

Householder customers who use building control services

Architects / designers who design plans for new buildings, alterations and extensions to existing buildings

Engineering professionals who create specifications and calculations for building structures

Developers / builders / contractors who carry out the building works

Project managers who manage the work so it gets completed on time and on budget

Approach to user research

A key section of our **regular workshops** was handed to our User Researcher. Specific areas of focus for this research were decided collectively and taken forward into smaller working groups.

The User Research Trello board logged key questions to research including what was involved in obtaining Completion Certificates and how many councils had separate plan and inspection functions.

Key to this workstream was considering which types of users and stakeholders we should **prioritise** for interview to to best inform our work within the constraints of the budget and time.

For example, in the 'householders' group of users, there could be different experiences depending on whether the customers were freeholders or leaseholders, or if they had submitted a Building Control application themselves or used an agent instead.

Users with access needs (both officers and customers) were a group we had been keen to engage with to consider their needs. This was a difficult to reach group and so would be one to prioritise in any future work.

Significant work went into **pain points mapping**, as well as building the User Personas mentioned in the previous slide.

External users - What's working well

From our user interviews about the existing service, there were a number of positive aspects.

For Local Authority building control services, one heartening finding was that householder type customers trusted local authority information as they felt it was independent and more reliable.

Some councils clearly had strong technical support teams who were engaging with customers and subsequently generating further business. However, this was not true across the board.

Customers

- Customers we spoke to reported having helpful and friendly officers to support them.

- Availability for site inspections at short notice.

- Confidence in surveyor's knowledge. Homeowners want someone who "knows the regs inside out" and know the buildings in the local area. Council services have more authority on this front.

Commercial

- In our more limited sample of commercial customers, dedicated resourcing was highlighted as a positive. This was where the council could provide provide named surveyors and guaranteed standard of service for a set fee.
- Where experience was good, council surveyors were regarded as more professional and more approachable.

Builders

- Confidence in surveyor's knowledge. For some builders, council services are already the first choice.
- These customers place a high degree of trust in advice council surveyors, who are seen as authoritative.
- It was clear that relationships between builders and preferred surveyors are a significant factor that drives repeat business.

An area where we struggled to fill in knowledge gaps was with user needs for commercial customers - particularly the larger developers like housebuilders.

We did manage to speak to some; however, to gain a fuller understanding we would like to further explore this area at Alpha.

User research highlights

The quotes below are a selection illustrating the positive feedback collected from customers:

*"With building control you had **a partner who is helping** you..."*

– Homeowner Customer 3, BANES

*" 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

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

– Commercial Customer 2, Lambeth

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

– Homeowner Customer 3, BANES

*"..there is **always someone available to help**"*

– LA Commercial Customer 1, BANES

What needs improvement

It was clear local authority building control services have a way to go in terms of stronger marketing and building relationships.

For many customers cost was less important than the quality of service.

There was varied feedback when it came to customer service, and whilst some councils received really high praise for this work, others didn't meet expectation. Opportunities to share across technical support teams and a system that was more intuitive may help those services where customers were less happy with the service they received

Specific feedback

Commercial users

- Unmet expectations for a modern IT system that is easy to use and holds all their case data in one place.

Customers

- Have difficulty choosing the right application type for their needs. When they do, they may choose the wrong application type mistakenly trying to keep costs to a minimum.

- Communications are siloed and often the customer is kept out of the loop as the agent (often builders or architects) liaises with building control staff directly.

- As lots of information is requested by email, customers may miss requests and cause delays (as no-one will be proactively following up).

Reflecting as a project team on these interview findings, we felt that **transparency and responsiveness** were key to expectations from customers across these categories.

Overall, the feeling was that the systems used in the day-to-day work was hampering officers in the roles, rather than assisting and enabling them.
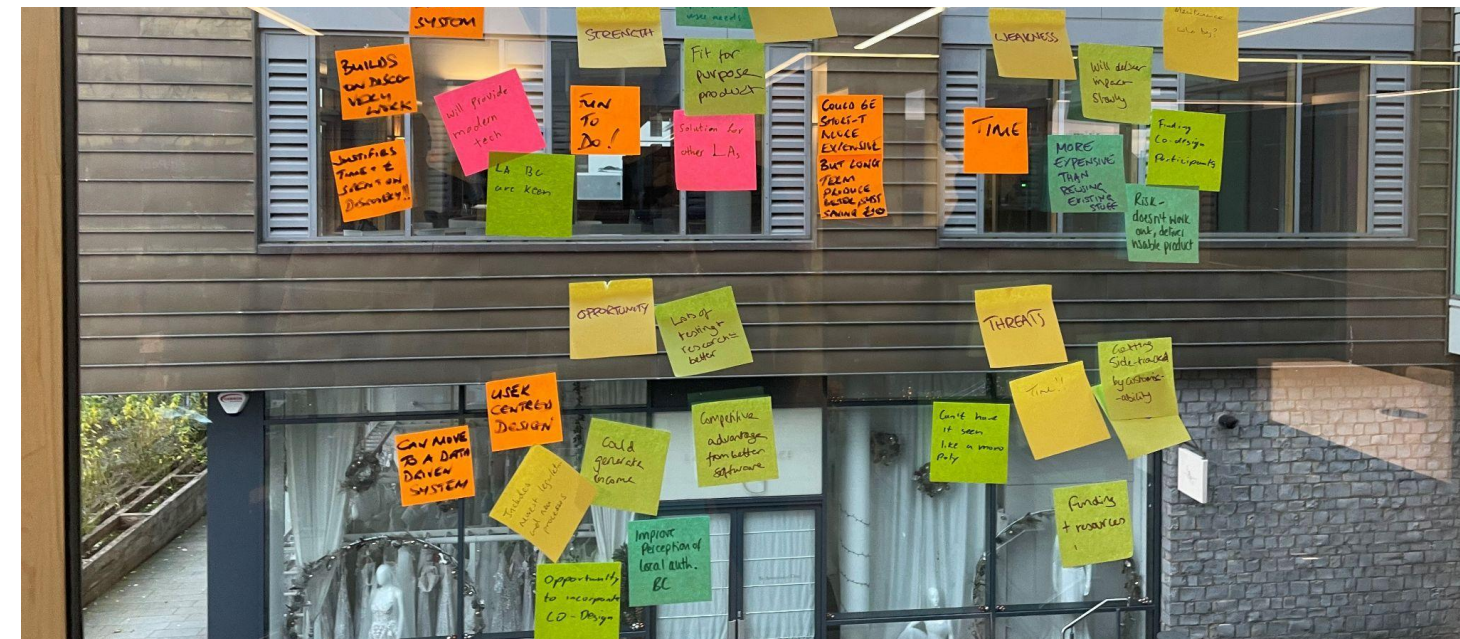
Builders -
Current experience

It was clear in feedback from our interviews with other council building control services that builders were often key to deciding which building control provider to use. We realised late in the process the vital need to engage with builders to better understand their views and experiences.

The project team then recruited a sample of builders from across the country, screening by their experience with smaller project types. This was because we had learned that builders were most likely to be influential in selecting the provider of BC for this scale of project.

Our screener also collected rankings of the experience of using council building control services versus AI's (detailed on the next slide). Each builder was asked to rate both for council building control service and AI's.

Differences in rankings were stark - but these must be seen through the lens of differing constraints on LA's compared to private sector competitors.

One clear factor informing these results is that resources at councils will always be under pressure for [myriad reasons](#), so its unsurprising that they're not perceived to offer a 'like for like' service compared to AI's.

Builders - Current experience

We took encouragement from relatively high rankings given to council services on **trust**. This was much better than expected - as customers often approach councils with a preconceived mistrust - a wider issue beyond the remit of this research.

By improving our systems, we'd expect to see scores around responsiveness improve, with resources freed up for a better service.

Out of 16, the number of builders who rated services as **'good' or above** in these areas:

			Council Building Control	Approved Inspectors
Response times	>	Returning calls and emails	8	12
Customer care	>	Quality of the service received	8	12
Ease of contact	>	Getting hold of the right person	7	12
Trust	>	Perception of transparency and reliability	9	12
Co-operation	>	Perception of the collaboration towards the customer's goal	8	12

Builders - What needs improvement

We asked builders we spoke to about the reasons they prefer to use Approved Inspectors (chart to right).

Our findings indicate that **responsiveness** and ability to offer **tailored services** that meet the needs of business were **key drivers** of choosing an AI over a council service.

Unsurprisingly then, improvements these participants suggested (chart to far-right) for council services were around **customer service** and **relationship-building**.

Reasons Builders Preferred AIs
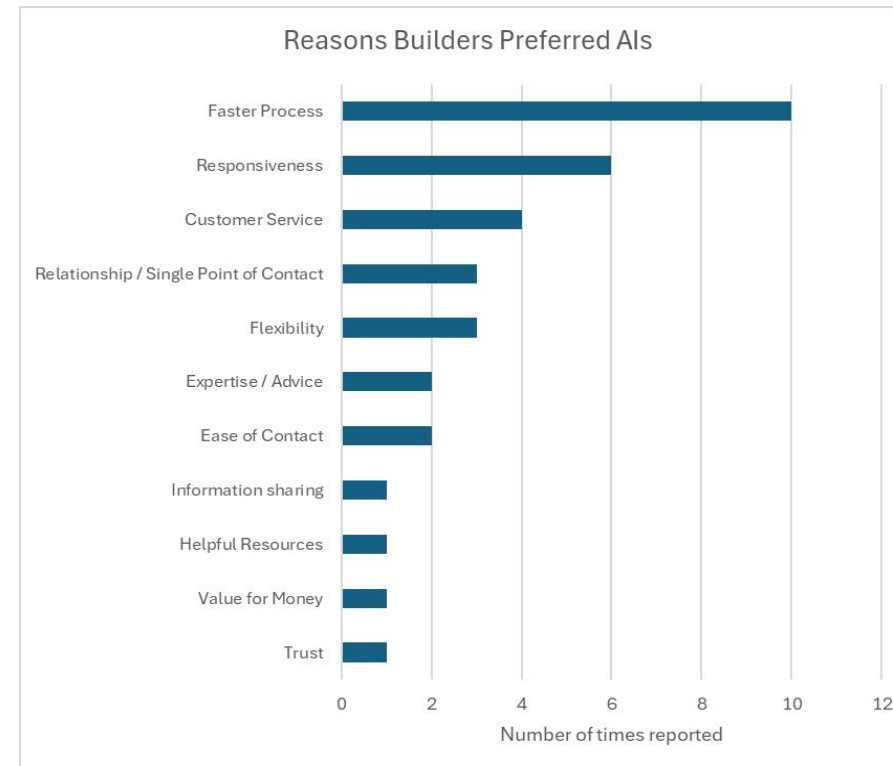
As we know that builders often make the choice around which service to use, we've taken these findings into account preparing our options and recommendations.

By **increasing responsiveness** and giving **more time to spend on** and innovate on **customer service**, we could improve the sense of value for money customers get from opting to use council building control services.

Improvements needed for Builders to use Council BC
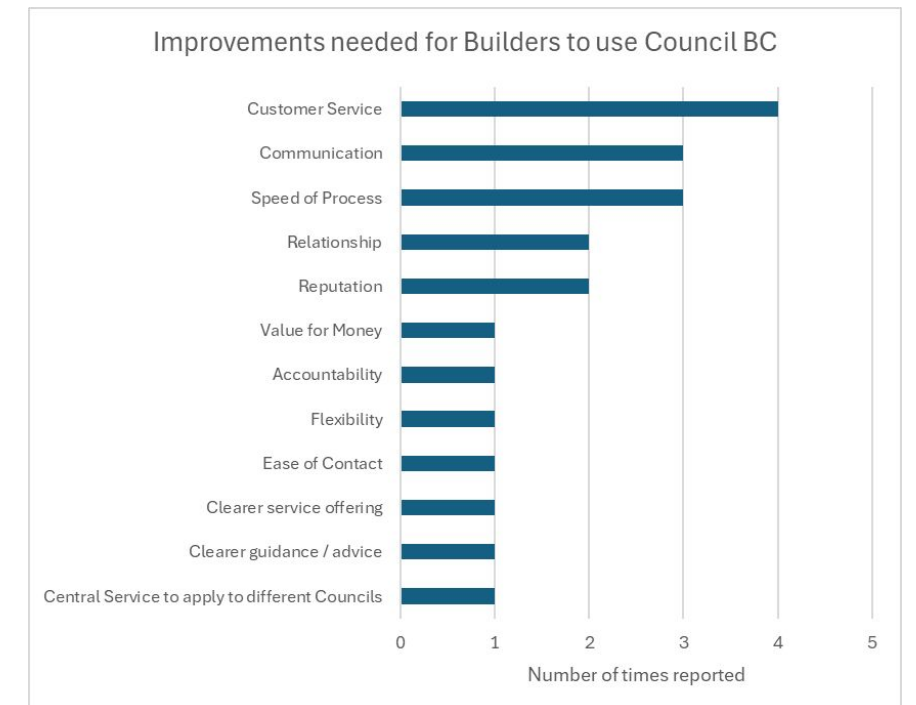
What we learned

Customers may feel frustrated when their **interactions via different** channels are not seamlessly dealt with. There's a greater chance of overlooking important emails or requests.

Customers prioritise the **trust, reliability and authoritative** advice **over cost** when choosing a service provider.

Customers may struggle with **choosing the appropriate application type** to make. Opting for a cheaper application fee may result in increased costs for them in the long run due to **potential errors** or delays.

Marketing efforts such as search engine optimisation may **divert customers away** from councils when they are looking for council services, leading to missed opportunities for business.

Commercial customers may opt for competitors' portals where it is a **superior digital offer**, highlighting the importance of enhancing the council's digital platform to meet customer expectations. Councils may be missing out on higher-value work because they are not able to offer this level of service.

Internal users - What's working well

We spoke to and engaged with teams of staff at all of our partner councils.

Where a team is well-resourced, particularly in Technical Support teams, and is skilled in customer relations as well as knowledgeable, we found that customer confidence was clearly greater and thus repeat business was evident.

Surveyors who used mobile application for inspections on site (available at some councils) embraced them and found they worked well.

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

For managers and Heads of Service, on the whole, they were positive about their teams (including their admin/technical support officers) which suggests that those roles are 'smoothing over the cracks'

What needs improvement
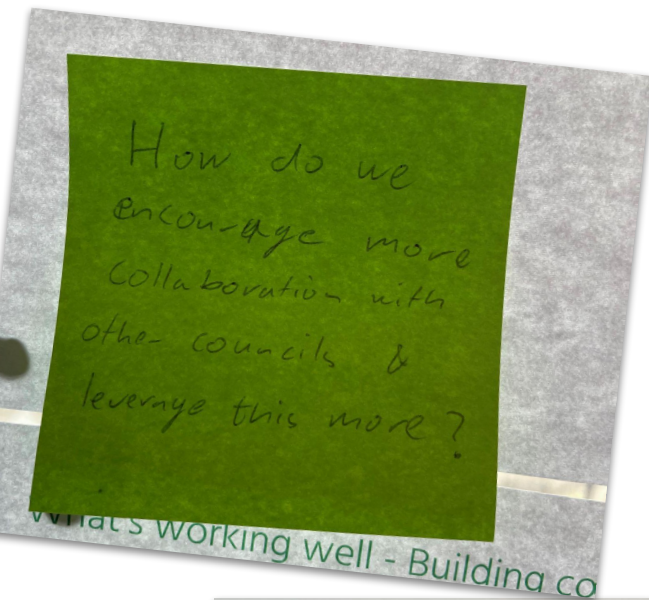
Within user interviews at councils, key areas of **pain points** for internal users varied slightly compared to our survey findings.

A common recurring theme - similar to that found in our survey - were complaints around existing case management systems. In particular, **manual inputting**. Additionally - complaints around the **document management system** - again with manual filing of documents.

There was a **lack of structure** to the data that was kept, for example an officer reported having "100s of site photos not linked to a particular visit date [in DMS]". This made their work harder to track.

Additionally - concerns were raised around the **lack of transparent** and **joined up communications** within teams.

For Technical officers, **calculating fees** for each case was a pain point - as it may need to be checked with different officers and slow down the response.

Managers and Heads of Service were concerned at the time and costs related to **manual reconciliation of payments** at regular intervals.

Across the board, officers flagged the issues with the **lack of continuous improvement** of the software for building control as well the differing configurations across authorities.

The issue of training up **apprentices** was flagged - both in terms of the time and cost but also on **morale for teams** when apprentices subsequently moved to AI's on qualification.

Heads of Service expressed concern at the **lack of customer feedback** to improve the service.

Additionally, staff at all levels were keen to see greater **collaboration** across councils on common issues.

Building control staff - What we learned

There is evidence of existing best practice for customer service in teams, but they need to be well-resourced and knowledgeable to deliver this.

There's a willingness and desire to **collaborate across councils**. We were really impressed with how enthusiastic teams at various councils were to get involved and share their views and insights, with a commitment to **improving their service**.

Current systems are **not fit for purpose** to efficiently manage building control files associated with each case, resulting in extra time and cost on each case.

Enhancing our systems is anticipated to generate improved responsiveness, potentially **freeing up resources** to deliver an enhanced level of customer service.

There's a **lack of structured data** in BC systems, information is often contained in PDFs and files that are not categorized with metadata, impacting the generation of data for management reporting and making file retrieval difficult.

Support provided by existing suppliers is insufficient, with a noticeable **absence of iterative improvements** to the software.

Applications originate from various portals, some of which may not offer the same level of quality as others. This causes **excessive manual input** into the system due to the absence of effective integrations.

User needs

Another asset of the discovery is our Building Control User Needs catalogue. This is out in the open online.

Distilling our research, the project team scoped these preliminary user needs as a way to judge the functionality council services need from suppliers to deliver a modern, fit-for-purpose service.

We have identified over 80 user needs in our research and have organised them by user group and the step of the user's journey (referring back to our service map).
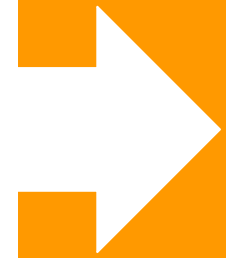
We've also drawn on this to help inform our options and evaluate what's on the market currently and what we know is in development.

6. Metrics/Benefits case

Business case: The scale of potential savings

Assessing the Cost Benefit impacts

Building a business case for change

The partners ran a workshop using the Cost Impact Benefit exercises gained from a Local Digital forum event. This provided useful pointers to evidence we should gather as part of the metrics workstream.

Calculating an accurate total benefit from our proposed interventions is complex due to the indirect nature of some costs and uncertainty around others.

We came up with an approach to calculating the scale of savings that could be achieved, as set out on the next slides.

We looked at just three scenarios based on pain points from our research selected by the team (including Heads of BC Services and technical officers).

In the next slides, we explore the savings possible from reducing the direct and indirect costs of...:

1. Keeping document management systems up to date manually
2. Having to search case files in a DMS manually based on unstructured data; and
3. Manual reconciliations of fee and other income

Throughout this report, we've referred to potential savings or additional costs that are based on council data.
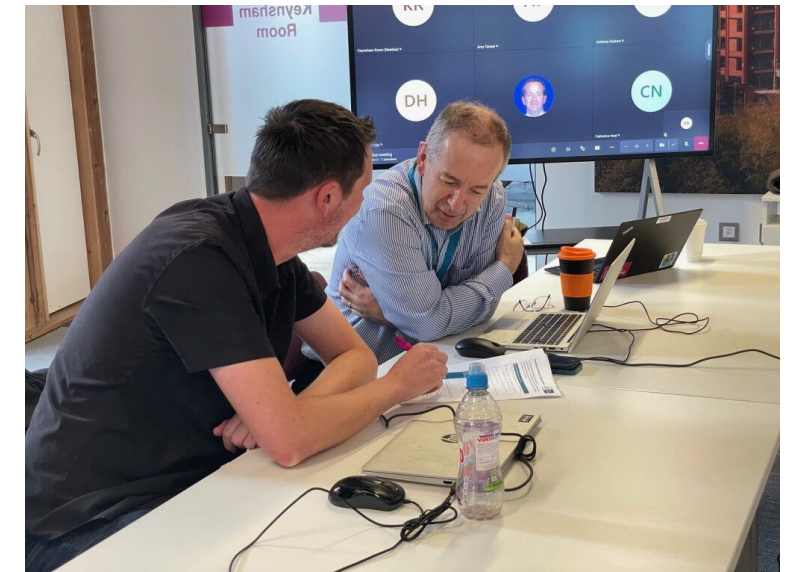
Business case: The scale of potential savings

Scaling potential savings up nationally to 20 councils (five in London, 15 outside of London) could realise direct savings to councils of **£1.8million** each year.

These are initial estimates and are sensitive to assumptions made (particularly salary costs). They are, though, based on our understanding of the business.

£1.8 m

£220,000 — Value of staff time saved through automation of Initial Notices and Competent Persons registers

£196,000 — Value of staff time saved with an improved document management system

£960,000 — Avoidable cost of additional (resilience) staff required to manage with inefficient document management systems

£350,200 — Avoided cost of staff time for wasted/abandoned site visits and additional preparation time due to workflow and internal communication improvements

£107,000 — Avoided cost of staff time spent on manually reconciling payments

Scenario 1: What's the cost of keeping document management cases up to date manually?

Challenge to address

For managing documents, existing systems have, at best, digitized former paper-based processes.

This leads to problems in two dimensions:

1) Technical staff spend large amounts of time indexing documents manually. These may be received by email and forwarded to relevant officers.
2) Surveyors are often unsure if case files are up to date.

Impact

Additional staff time is needed to carry out manual processes.

Failure manifest

Appointments may have to be rescheduled. This impacts reputation, customer satisfaction which can mean customer are less likely to us council BC service

Socio Economic Costs

If surveyors do not have the latest information, this can result in abandoned visits. This has a knock-on effect for householders, unnecessarily taking time off work, or for builders being diverted from other jobs.

Opportunity costs

Staff time spent on lower-value tasks, rather than lead-generating for new business or giving a more attentive level of service.

Cost Savings on Document Uploads

Lambeth	2023	20% Time Saving
Total documents manually uploaded after submission	7,397	7,397
Time per document (hours)	0.5	0.4
Time per year (hours)	3,698	2,959
Technical Support Officer hourly rate with on costs	£35	£35
Annual Staff Cost	£131,111	£104,889
Cost Saving		£26,222

Costs for Additional Resources

Lambeth	Cost including on costs for additional posts
Technical Support Officer	£45,000
Surveyor	£70,000

Scenario 1B: keeping document management cases up to date.

Challenge to address
For managing documents, existing systems have at best digitized former paper-based processes.
This leads to problems in two dimensions:
1) Technical staff spend large amounts of time indexing documents manually. These may be received by email and forwarded to relevant officers.
2) Surveyors are often unsure if case files are up to date.

Impact
Additional staff time is needed to carry out manual processes.

Failure manifest
Appointments may have to be rescheduled. Reputational impact, customer satisfaction which can lead to customers being less likely to use council BC services

Socio Economic Costs
If surveyors do not have the latest information, this can result in abandoned visits. This creates a knock-on effect for householders, unnecessarily taking time off work, or for builders being diverted from other jobs.

Opportunity costs
Staff time spent on lower-value tasks, rather than lead-generating for new business or giving a more attentive level of service.

Additional DMS Search and Retrieve Costs for Site Visits

Total Site Visits (5 Year Average)		2,986

Lambeth	Additional time to follow up at the office	Additional preparation time
Percentage of site visits affected	45%	25%
Number of site visits affected per year	1,344	746
Additional time per site visit (hours)	0.50	0.25
Additional time per year (hours)	671.76	186.60
Surveyor hourly rate with on costs	£54.40	£54.40
Annual Additional Cost	£36,546	£10,152
Total Additional Cost		£46,697

Scenario 3 - Financial Control

Challenge to address

Financial control of the applications:

▪ How might we reconcile payments for different types of applications?

Impact

▪ A lot of double and triple checking across different systems (Council finance systems and back office systems etc.) to reconcile payments with payment fees in back office.

What couldn't we do as a result?

▪ Our income is linked to how we operate! Salaries, better services and cost recovery. We cannot sustain our services without a good revenue stream.

What did we have to stop or not start doing?

▪ Stopped marketing the service and finding time to survey customers.

Failure manifest

Customers went to private sector

Socio Economic Costs

Unsafe buildings / poor quality of housing buildings

Opportunity costs

Time spent on managing finances rather than providing top notch customer service and generating new business.

Estimated cost impact:

We looked at a calendar year of receipts and made some assumptions around average time to receive income, log income and reconcile that income.

We then applied that to those receipts and compared the output to a likely automated system.

The estimate shows that the automated process would reduce the costs from £19,000 pa to just under £5,000, making a **saving** of around **£14.5k** annually **per council**.

| 2023 calendar year | No. of individual receipts per month | Hours | | | | | | | Hours | |
		Receive income*	Log income on back office	Log income - internal cashbook	Reconcile differing systems	Total time for 1 No. receipt	Total time to manage receipts		Estimated officer time per automated receipt	Total time to manage automated receipts
Jan	36	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	36		0.25	9.00
Feb	39	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	39		0.25	9.75
Mar	54	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	54		0.25	13.50
Apr	50	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	50		0.25	12.50
May	45	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	45		0.25	11.25
Jun	49	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	49		0.25	12.25
Jul	44	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	44		0.25	11.00
Aug	48	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	48		0.25	12.00
Sep	40	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	40		0.25	10.00
Oct	48	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	48		0.25	12.00
Nov	50	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	50		0.25	12.50
Dec	34	0.25	0.25	0.25	0.25	1	34		0.25	8.50
Grand Totals	**44.75**						**537**			**134.25**

*sometimes by telephone taking card payment, sometimes notified by cashier, etc.

Cost of administration	Sc6		
Hourly rate +oncosts	35.45	19,037.85	4,759.46

Savings from automation

Another clear win from an **automated system** would be in the **processing of Initial Notices** - which are submitted by Approved Inspectors to log work they are undertaking - and **Competent Persons notifications**.

We've calculated the cost of the **manual-entry aspect** of this process alone, assuming it could be fully automated by introducing a data standard. Our existing data indicates that in an average year, an inner London council could realise savings of nearly **£20k per year**, whereas a non-London council could see savings in the area of **£8k per year**.

Scaling this up nationally to around 20 councils (5 London, 15 non-London) could see annual savings of **£220,000 each year**.

Lambeth	Initial Notices	Competent Persons
Total Applications*	1,088	11,183
Time per app (mins)	10	2
Annual average time (hours)	181.27	372.75
TS hourly rate with on costs	£35	£35
Annual Staff Cost	**£6,426**	**£13,215**

* 5 Year Average

Bath and North East Somerset	Initial Notices	Competent Persons
Total Applications*	559	11,301
Time per app (mins)	10	2
Annual average time (hours)	93.10	372.75
Estimate TS hourly rate with on costs	£18	£18
Annual Staff Cost	**£1,650**	**£6,710**

* 5 Year Average
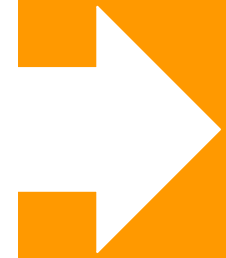
Metrics: Baseline evidence collection

Baseline metrics

During the project, Lambeth's team met with PUBLIC who are conducting project evaluations on behalf of Local Digital.

We agreed a set of metrics we would collect to help establish baseline data which we can use to measure the impact of any intervention we might make.

We've collected our preliminary data and assembled this baseline for partner councils where possible.
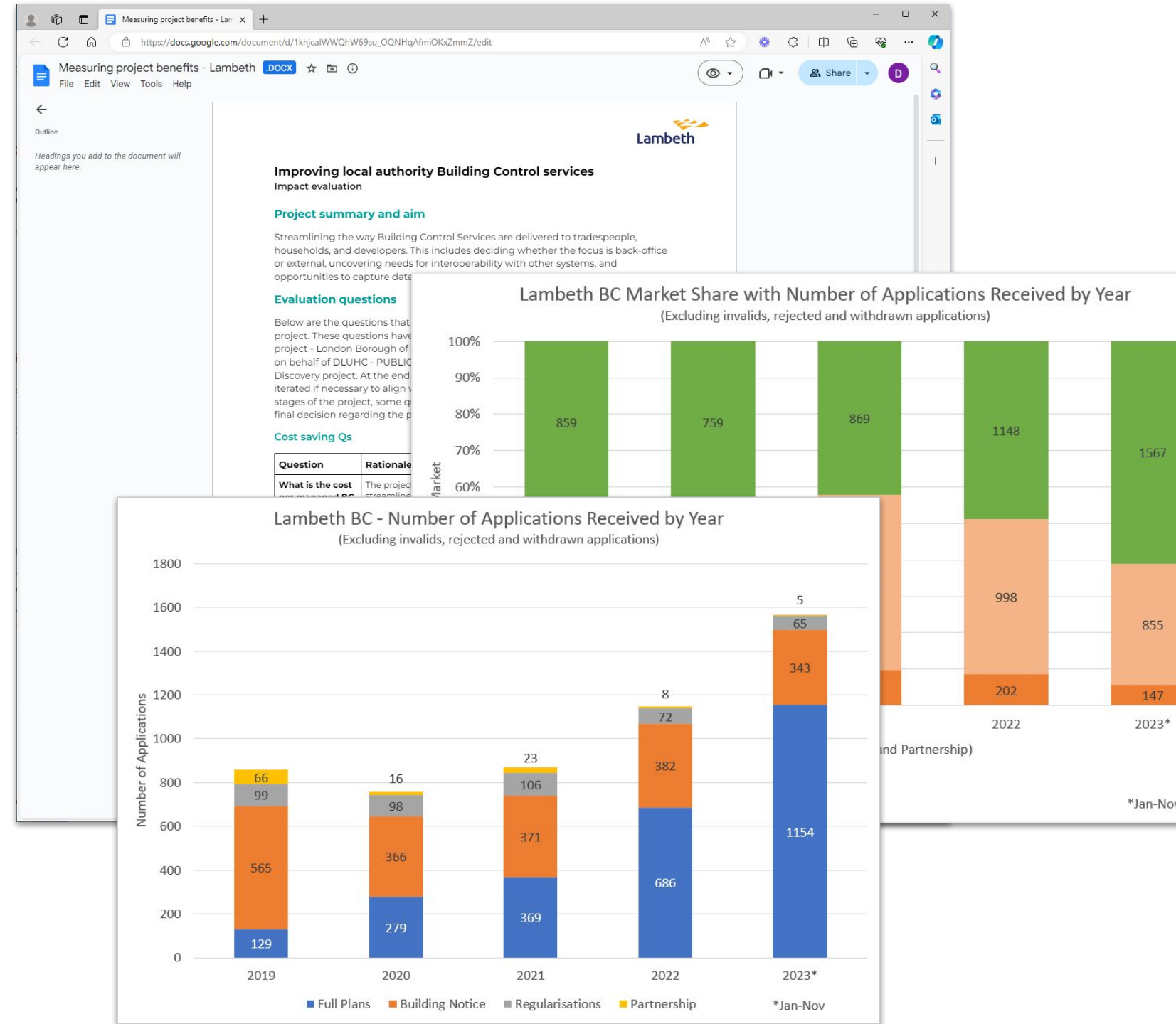
Further metrics

We recognise that the case we're making here is based on a number of assumptions along with the best evidence we have available. This includes our own partner council's data, as well as the conversations and interviews that took place during this Discovery.

The business case is an area we want to develop in an Alpha phase with:
- Collection of timesheet data to form a baseline of evidence, covering manual administration and clerical tasks throughout the life cycle of a case
- Detailed metrics on satisfaction of officers and customers
- Training costs of existing back office systems
- Refining and bolstering the details of costs we've assumed in the Business Case here, by using a wider base of data from other partner councils across England
- Investigate more avenues for automation as we discover them and calculate the realisable savings.

7. Options

Options analysis

Our approach

Early on in the project, the partners aligned around a common long-term vision for how services from council building control should feel and be perceived by its users. The vision is:

*"Local authority building control is **frustration-free for all its users**. It is the **service of choice**, renowned for its **modern & innovative** offer."*

A range of different approaches and options could be taken to solve some or all of the identified pain points.

At an in person workshop and working as a group, partners considered which options match up with all three of the following essential characteristics for a successful service:

- **Desirability** – it meets users needs and outcomes
- **Feasibility** – it's technically and operationally viable
- **Sustainability** – it's flexible and easy to maintain

By considering options against these criteria, we could discard any approaches that fail to satisfy any one of the criteria and focus our recommendations on the most promising solutions.

Principles

From discussions on the project, we've also developed some key principles against which to evaluate the options.

We then took the options from our workshop and refined them further and tested these with key decision-makers (Head of Service level or above) at the partner councils and other councils we had engaged on the project so far, including Ealing, Southwark and Redbridge.

Transparent
Transparency - e.g. for inspection notes: I can see the justification and rationale for why requests are made.

Open
Open source development. Open data standards. Modular - it works with other systems.

Efficient
Respects public money - it delivers a service that is more efficient and effective.

Inclusive
Inclusive - It is user centred in design. Processes are clear. It is accessible. It works on different devices.

Scalable
Is a solution that can work for multiple councils and is ready to adapt to changes in regulations.

*Initial notices could be **auto-validated**. If there were a **national schema** and mandated way of submitting*
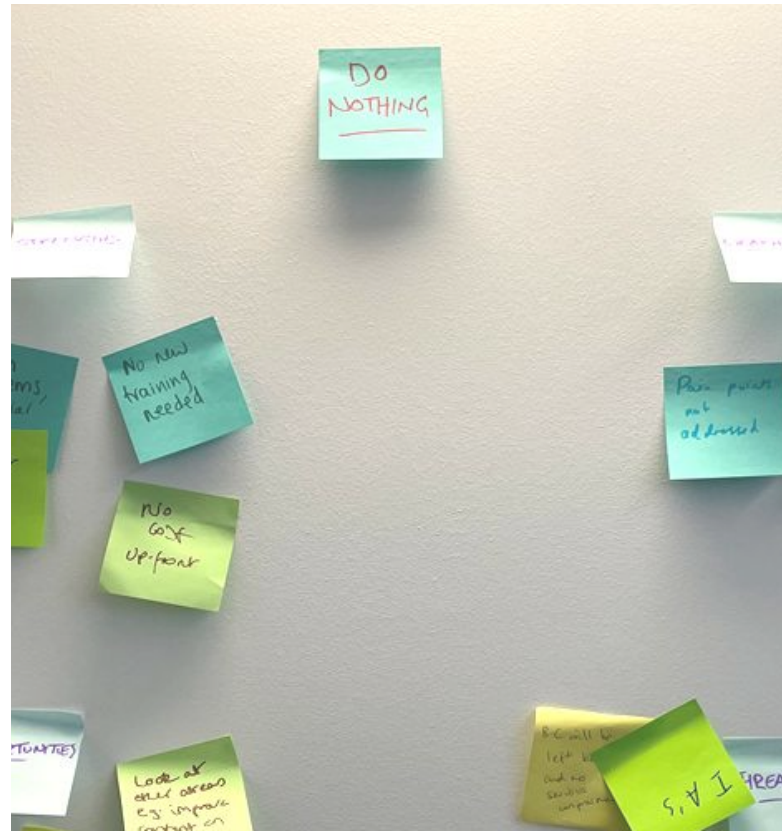- Officer, Ealing Council

*"Our vision is to get to a more **flexible and modular** approach to procuring back-office systems"*
- Officer, Southwark Council

Options

The options we distilled down to are set out in this table

	Enhance the back office system	Enhance front of house - website and submissions	Improve quality of data coming into the system
Least intervention	Do nothing	Do nothing	Do nothing
	Negotiate to secure improvements to the existing back office system	Improve and standardise Building Control council websites based on user research.	Create a data standard for submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons and work with existing suppliers and portals to encourage its use.
	Purchase a commercial system off-the-shelf	Build a dashboard to track case status, monitor progress, and schedule site inspections efficiently with for example a diary and fee calculations.	Create data standards for time-consuming submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons, that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. Lobby government for this to be mandatory to use.
Most intervention	Develop a bespoke solution, exploring adaptation of the open-source system under development for Planning.	Develop a data-led customer submission portal which includes the above, and that provides detailed guidance and assistance	Create data standards for all submissions to building control that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. And lobby government for these to be mandatory to use.

Options

We felt that 'do nothing' was not a particularly useful approach in any of these areas, given the extent of pain points we have identified and the level of change that services need to adapt to.

We've discounted this option completely.

	Enhance the back office system	Enhance front of house - website and submissions	Improve quality of data coming into the system
Least intervention	**Do nothing**	**Do nothing**	**Do nothing**
	Negotiate to secure improvements to the existing back office system	Improve and standardise Building Control council websites based on user research.	Create a data standard for submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons and work with existing suppliers and portals to encourage its use.
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Most intervention	Develop a bespoke solution, exploring adaptation of the open-source system under development for Planning.	Develop a data-led customer submission portal which includes the above, and that provides detailed guidance and assistance	Create data standards for all submissions to building control that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. And lobby government for these to be mandatory to use.

Options

Negotiating improvements was not a viable option to recommend. The balance of responses in our SWOT analysis were negative. We noted that there was little leverage for councils to negotiate whilst in long-term contracts and where there's council-wide procurement, other functions will mean it's likely that BC remains 'locked-in' to the same supplier.

Speed of achieving improvement depends so much on willingness of the supplier to act. Anecdotally this is difficult to achieve.

We explored other solutions already on the market as a team. We evaluated them against the principles and success criteria. We didn't find any viable alternative to existing systems.

We discounted these options.

	Enhance the back office system	Enhance front of house - website and submissions	Improve quality of data coming into the system
Least intervention	Do nothing	Do nothing	Do nothing
	Negotiate to secure improvements to the existing back office system	Improve and standardise Building Control council websites based on user research.	Create a data standard for submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons and work with existing suppliers and portals to encourage its use.
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Most intervention	Develop a bespoke solution, exploring adaptation of the open-source system under development for Planning.	Develop a data-led customer submission portal which includes the above, and that provides detailed guidance and assistance	Create data standards for all submissions to building control that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. And lobby government for these to be mandatory to use.

Options

For the 'front of house' options, we considered that standardising and improving the council websites was not ambitious enough and would not address user needs around - for example - self-service on the status of a case.

We've reviewed recent efforts to provide more guidance (such as Buckinghamshire's services on the PlanX platform), however these rely heavily on manual work and there's no published evidence suggesting they've improved the service. Significant further work is likely needed to make that type of intervention impactful.

We feel that the lack of automated and accessible guidance means there's a key unmet need - particularly for householders to navigate a complex area.

So we have discounted these options.

	Enhance the back office system	Enhance front of house - website and submissions	Improve quality of data coming into the system
Least intervention	Do nothing	Do nothing	Do nothing
	Negotiate to secure improvements to the existing back office system	**Improve and standardise Building Control council websites based on user research.**	Create a data standard for submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons and work with existing suppliers and portals to encourage its use.
	Purchase a commercial system off-the-shelf	**Build a dashboard to track case status, monitor progress, and schedule site inspections efficiently with for example a diary and fee calculations.**	Create data standards for time-consuming submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons, that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. Lobby government for this to be mandatory to use.
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Options

There's a clear role for government in mandating data standards which can be iterated on to improve data quality throughout the life of a development project.

A data standard for IN/CP records could realise time and cost savings ([as discussed](#)), so is a clear short term win. However, working with existing suppliers and portals raises the same dependencies on the same suppliers as for the back-office. We've discounted that option.

Unlike for time-consuming records like INs and CP records, it's not clear whether a data standard for all cases make significant savings on time/cost. Further metrics should be collected to justify standards for all submissions.

So we have discounted the highlighted options.

	Enhance the back office system	Enhance front of house - website and submissions	Improve quality of data coming into the system
Least intervention	Do nothing	Do nothing	Do nothing
	Negotiate to secure improvements to the existing back office system	Improve and standardise Building Control council websites based on user research.	**Create a data standard for submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons and work with existing suppliers and portals to encourage its use.**
	Purchase a commercial system off-the-shelf	Build a dashboard to track case status, monitor progress, and schedule site inspections efficiently with for example a diary and fee calculations.	Create data standards for time-consuming submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons, that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. Lobby government for this to be mandatory to use.
Most intervention	Develop a bespoke solution, exploring adaptation of the open-source system under development for Planning.	Develop a data-led customer submission portal which includes the above, and that provides detailed guidance and assistance	**Create data standards for all submissions to building control that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. And lobby government for these to be mandatory to use.**

Options

Our preferred options are those highlighted in the table.

Our perspective is that the **remaining preferred** options are both **inter-linked** and **dependent**. We know we need to **improve speed** and **responsiveness**. Improving these two factors, will **also increase** the **value for money** ranking.

Where we improve on these areas, we expect to see a higher value for money ranking from customers, given the restriction on setting fees on a cost-recovery basis. Therefore the service effectively will benefit from both, i.e. staying at a similar cost for an improved and more responsive service.

Together, they ensure **high quality** and **structured data** throughout the process. This would **enhance self**-**service** for customers and ensure a **more efficient** journey for officers.

A focussed approach to **data standards minimises** the **burden** of **manual** processing on **non fee earning** statutory **work**. It would also be a sensible proof of concept for future work.

	Enhance the back office system	Enhance front of house - website and submissions	Improve quality of data coming into the system
Least intervention	Do nothing	Do nothing	Do nothing
	Negotiate to secure improvements to the existing back office system	Improve and standardise Building Control council websites based on user research.	Create a data standard for submissions by Approved Inspectors (e.g. Initial Notices) and by Competent Persons and work with existing suppliers and portals to encourage its use.
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Most intervention	**Develop a bespoke solution, exploring adaptation of the open-source system under development for Planning.**	**Develop a data-led customer submission portal which includes the above, and that provides detailed guidance and assistance**	Create data standards for all submissions to building control that can be automatically fed into back-office systems. And lobby government for these to be mandatory to use.

8. Barriers to change
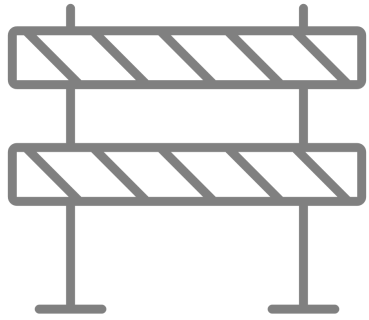
8. Barriers

We recognise that - alongside their long-term advantages - the options we've assessed present their own short, medium and long-term barriers. Those include:

Short/Medium	Buy-in at strategic level (local and national)	The project will need funding and championing by senior stakeholders - both in councils and in government - to [unblock barriers, connect the right people](#) and drive the vision.
Medium	Interoperability of existing systems	Historic data is currently subject to a degree of vendor lock-in, and any project would need to resolve whether existing systems can ever be retired or need to be worked alongside.
Short/Medium	Change management in councils	Managing fear of change and social, technical and institutional complexity of transition to any new system
Ongoing	Cost Recovery model	Financial model of building control services will limit the investment services can make into improvements.

9. Conclusion

Main recommendations

Our recommendation is to proceed with the project into an Alpha phase along the lines of the [preferred options](). Interest and support received during our Discovery phase, notably from external stakeholders like Redbridge, Ealing, and Southwark, as well as other local authority building control services, highlight its potential. We're encouraged by the fact that users and key stakeholders were so highly engaged and enthusiastic about our work.

Significant progress has been made in respect of journey mapping, understanding user needs and gathering feedback. Our proposed interventions would build upon and complement the efforts of ongoing open-source projects like PlanX and Back-office Planning System (BOPS), so that value can be unlocked quickly.

Although Alphas typically focus on a single MVP output, our recommendation is to twin-track development of both the customer-facing and back-office improvements. This approach ensures genuine improvements to realise anticipated cost savings - and making the most of the opportunity to leverage and adapt existing open-source software.

Summary of main recommendations

- A reconsideration of how the cost recovery model applied to Building Control **works in practice** within this competitive private sector.

- Supporting an **Alpha** to look at developing:

Open data standards for lower-value, time-consuming building control submissions so these are ready to be consumed by a back-office prototype	A data-led customer submission portal and guidance service to meet user needs for customers and improve the end-to-end experience of customers	Adaptation of the open-source Back Office System into a fit-for-purpose service for processing Building Control applications to improve officer experience

Appendix - Visual of teams we would need to connect

Based on our recommendation, we have prepared the visual here to illustrate just how big the potential change needed really is, and the many different stakeholders that would need to be involved in the journey.

At this stage, we've represented these as a constellation. The levels of involvement individual stakeholders would vary based on how much work is committed to, and the amount of dependencies that arise.

This is not exhaustive - we may well also discover new stakeholders in Alpha.

Building Safety Regulator (Digital team)

DLUHC Digital Planning (ODP) team

Existing suppliers (e.g. DEC, IDOX, Dataspace and many others)

DLUHC Reform Policy (BC), Legislation and Sponsorship team

Competent Persons Register

Project Team + Local Digital
•Council Partners

Approved Inspectors

Thank you