



Together
we will end
homelessness

Brent Council's online systems

A Crisis Brent Peer Research project

**Co-authored by Beulah Williams, Devon Clarke
and Ismael Yusuf.**

March 2019





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About Crisis

Crisis is the national charity for homeless people. We help people directly out of homelessness, and campaign for the social changes needed to solve it altogether. We know that together we can end homelessness.

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Summary

This report is about how people who use local support services in Brent access and use Brent Council's digital online systems – specifically My Account and the Homelessness Portal, their experience of using them and how it impacts/has impacted them.

We conducted face-to-face research (surveys and interviews) at three support services in NW10, speaking to a range of local residents as well as support staff.

We found that the experience of the online systems is quite mixed. However, for those who had negative experiences of the systems, and those who have barriers affecting their use of them, the impact on their situation and life can be significant. It can threaten their housing and income stability, their mental wellbeing, important relationships and ability to progress in other areas of their life (for example due to the time taken to resolve issues).

In order to help people to access the services they need, we recommend that improvements are made in four areas:

1. The technical usability of the system
2. Support for people using the services
3. User informed design and testing
4. Council good practice and offer



Background to the research

Digital services¹

More and more of the UK's population continue to use the internet more frequently. For a majority of the population, developments in digital technologies are continuing to make previously complex, costly or time-consuming tasks more simple and convenient to undertake. Because technology has made delivering and managing essential services more efficient in many ways, the UK Government's Digital strategy is to become 'digital by default', with *"the only non-digital ways to access services will be the assisted digital support for the people who really need it."*² Alongside this, the Government has also published a list of 'Digital Service Principles' to guide best practice in the delivery of services via digital means.³

So, coupled with cuts to government spending, and in-line with this digital by default strategy, local councils are working to provide more of their services to their residents via online systems and to help people to access them. In 2017, Brent Council published a Digital Strategy for 2017-2020. It sets out a vision for how they should utilise digital technology within their wider program of change to deliver on five priority areas: demand management, raising income, regeneration, employment and skills and business and housing growth.⁴

In line with this strategy, Brent council currently encourages customers to use online systems only to manage things like welfare benefits, council tax and changes of circumstances (via 'My Account') and to present to the council if they are homeless (via a 'Homelessness Portal' application).

- 1 By 'services' we refer to the whole service provided by Brent (i.e Homelessness applications), by 'systems' we refer to the specific technical IT system involved, inc. design and functionality
- 2 Please see Government's Approach to Assisted Digital: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-approach-to-assisted-digital/government-approach-to-assisted-digital#fn:5>
- 3 Please see the list: <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/service-standard>
- 4 Please see Brent's Digital Strategy: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/your-council/about-brent-council/council-structure-and-how-we-work/strategies-and-plans/brent-digital-strategy/>

Digital services and vulnerable people

The Government's Digital Inclusion Strategy⁵ recognises that around "10 per cent of the adult population may never be able to gain basic digital capabilities" (due largely to disability or literacy skills). Further findings by an Ofcom survey, as reported by Good Things Foundation⁶, show that 90 per cent of non-internet users can be classed as disadvantaged (taking into account the most common indicators - social class DE and being disabled, as well as leaving education at 16 or under).

It is essential that 'Digital by Default' does not exacerbate digital divides – by unfairly providing more opportunities to those who are IT literate than those without – and furthermore, that it does not contribute to further disadvantage or impact on the welfare of disadvantaged or vulnerable people. There is concern that, if made digital, services specifically in place for disadvantaged or vulnerable people, such as homelessness applications, could exclude the very people they are in place for.

Brent Council's Digital Strategy for 2017-2020 aims to improve "the lives of all residents and deliver local priorities more efficiently"⁷. A recent report by the Council provides an update on the strategy and outcomes for vulnerable people. The report notes the importance of ensuring vulnerable people benefit fully from the programme of change, and that the intended positive outcomes of the whole strategy are achieved with the whole population. We would like to highlight that the areas of the programme that directly influence

the experience of all customers accessing services (and hence, the experience of vulnerable people) are laid out in Brent's 2017-2020 strategy under 'Demand Management'. This strategy prioritises a self-help approach (paragraphs 3.4-6 and 'table 1' below) and support for residents focusses on improving digital skills and connectivity.

The UK Government states that 'assisted digital' (in-person help for people 'who really need it' to use online systems and services) should be woven into all digital inclusion programmes. In line with this, Brent council are currently updating their options for required 'assisted digital', or in-person support for their residents, including rolling out the library-based Community Hub model across the borough.

Brent's report notes that around 50 per cent of responses to Brent council's recent survey about accessing and using Council services were positive. When asked "How strongly you agree or disagree with this statement about public services available to Brent residents?", 56 per cent agreed that "Local services are easy to access". And when asked "How strongly you agree or disagree with this statement about the Council?", 45 per cent agreed that "It is easy to carry out council transactions online", and 46 per cent agreed that they "know how and where residents who need support to access Council Services can get it"

5 Please see Brent's Digital Strategy

6 Good Things Foundation and Professor Simeon Yates (2017) *The real digital divide? Understanding the demographics of non-users and limited users of the internet an analysis of Ofcom data*, Page 3. Sheffield: Good Things Foundation.

7 Gadsdon, P. (2018) Digital Strategy Progress and Outcomes for Vulnerable People. London, Brent Council. Online p.3

Table 1

Digital Strategy (Demand Management) objective	Aligned design principle
Design more effective and preventative service models.	The service will promote self-help and preventative measures.
Make online the first choice for interacting with all council services.	Online will be the first choice for interacting with the service.
Ensure all residents have access to the resources and support they need to confidently access online information and services.	Support in accessing services will meet the needs of the individual.
Integrate channels, applications and workflows to enable seamless end-to-end transactions across a wider range of services, increase automation and maximise the first touch capability of council officers.	Service users will only need to submit relevant details once.

Crisis Brent, with support throughout from Peer Researchers, has set out to supplement this information by investigating how people in the NW10 area using local support services experience using these online systems of My Account and the Homelessness Portal, and the impact that using

(or needing to use) them has had on their lives. The data and detailed insights collected have been used to make a series of practical recommendations to Brent Council for how the systems, and the offer and practice around the provision of the services, can improve.

Crisis Brent and Peer Research



This is a Peer Researcher-led project managed and delivered by Crisis Brent - a homelessness charity based in North West London. The Peer Researchers on this program are fully trained volunteers who use local support services, in this case Crisis Brent and B3. Peer Researchers generally come from the same target community or have experienced some sort of similar life circumstance to their research participants. This model brings multiple benefits, including well-designed, accessible research questions; trust; more involvement through connections; valuable opportunities and experience for the researcher. The Crisis Brent Peer Researchers received formal training and support from Crisis' central research department and their volunteer support program.

Method and participation

A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods was used to gather the data for this research project, including a 12-question survey consisting mostly of multiple-choice questions, and semi-structured interviews with 3 questions for guidance. These methods enabled us to get a range and depth of information that represented our sample well and gave an accurate picture of how Brent Council's online systems work for people.

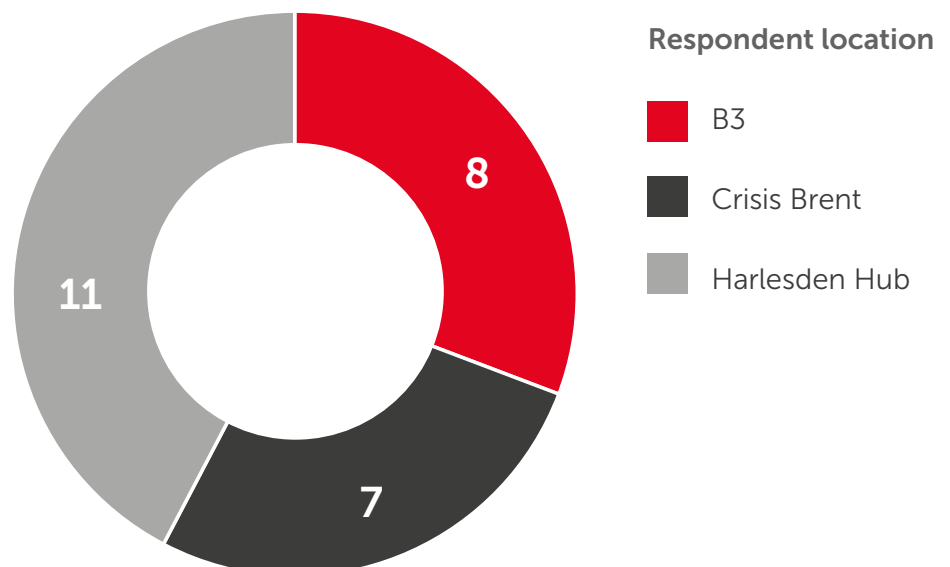
The research took place between 14th November – 21st December 2018 in three locations:

- 1 Harlesden Hub - a drop-in service based in Harlesden library for people to receive advice and help with situations such as housing, legal and welfare benefits issues
- 2 Crisis Skylight Brent – a homelessness service
- 3 B3 – a drug and alcohol support service

During the research we carried out 26 surveys and 5 interviews with people using these services. To supplement this data, Crisis Brent coaches put forward 11 case accounts - 9 about the Homelessness Portal and 2 about My Account - and we interviewed two support staff who regularly help people use My Account – an advisor at the Hub and an IT tutor at Crisis Brent.

We did not take specific demographic data from the research participants, instead we built up a picture of our sample in other ways:

Fig 1: Research participants by location



- Via the criteria for taking part: the individual either used, or had needed to use, My Account or the Homelessness Portal
- Via where we recruited participants: they were users of the services at our research locations, meaning they had specific support needs or disadvantage in certain areas of their life (i.e. participants from Crisis Brent had been affected by Homelessness)
- Through researchers' anecdotal evidence: we found that approximately 50 - 60 per cent of participants did not speak English fluently
- Through relevant survey questions: Such as "How often do you access the internet", and "Do you feel you have any personal barriers affecting your use of the systems?"

The in-depth interviews gave a good insight into the issues people experience using digital online services. Language was very important as people whom English was not their first language struggled with the terminology, whilst conducting the surveys, many of the participants said they had issues with creating usernames and passwords. They also said that the digital online service timed out during their application and they were unable to continue their application.

Ethical Considerations



The survey/interviews were conducted with sensitivity and professionalism. The interviews, in particular, could have brought up some difficult feelings as we asked about the impact of the online services experience on their life. Participants also had language and cultural needs that needed to be considered. As such we always offered privacy and confidentiality, obtained consent forms and stored the data securely. Any images and names used in this report have written, signed consent from participants.

For some participants, the language barrier that affects their use of the system also may have affected their understanding of the research and survey questions. We attempted to mitigate any misunderstanding by asking directly if they have understood (if we felt they had not understood we did not record their response), by translating or finding a translator if needed (i.e. a family member) or by asking their advisor for clarification.

Findings

Presented below are the findings of our research laid out in four thematic areas:

1. Using the internet (accessing the internet in general and accessing the My Account and Homelessness Portal systems)
2. Experience of the systems (including technical problems, personal barriers and how well they work)
3. Impact (on respondents lives or situations)
4. Suggested solutions

The statistics and graphs represent the quantitative data collected from the surveys. The additional detail, commentary and case

study information comes from a combination of the qualitative survey question responses, participant interviews, case accounts provided from Crisis coaches and accounts of experience from the Crisis Brent IT tutor and Harlesden Hub advisor (referred to as 'support staff').

Using the internet

Accessing the internet in general

48 per cent of respondents we spoke to find it either easy or very easy to access and use the internet in general. But the same proportion, 48 per cent, found it difficult or very difficult or had never accessed the internet.

Of all the participants, 44 per cent of people access the internet via their own computers and 36 per cent use their mobile phone either also/ instead. However, most importantly,

Fig 2: Ease of accessing and using the internet

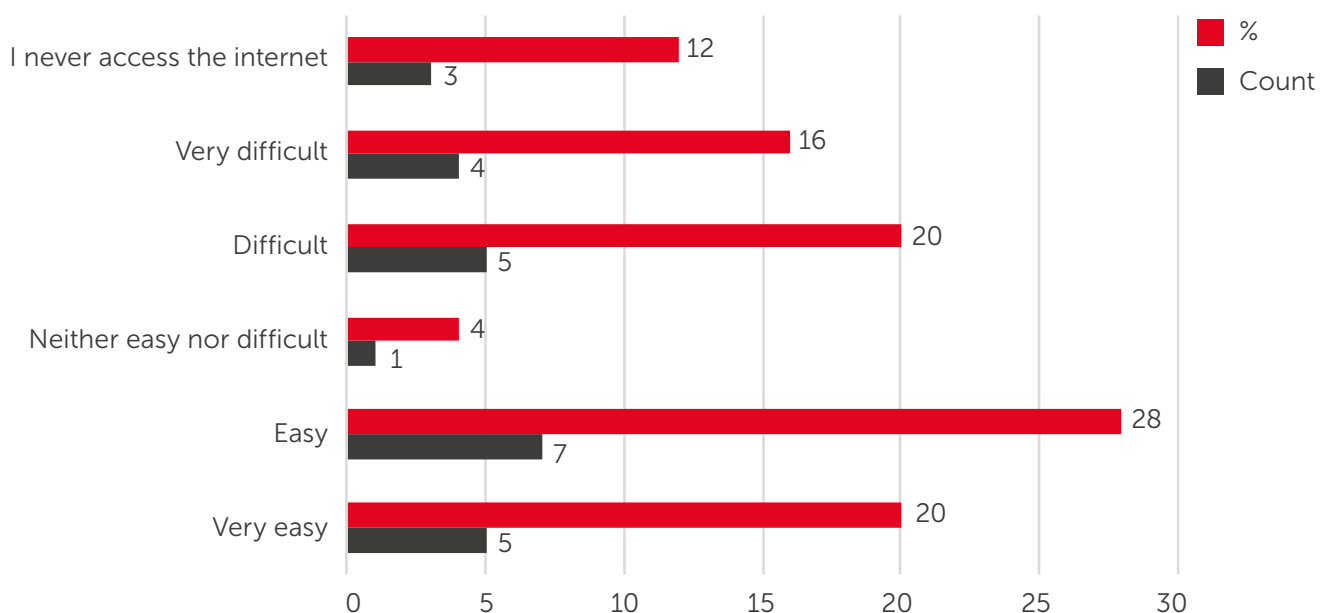
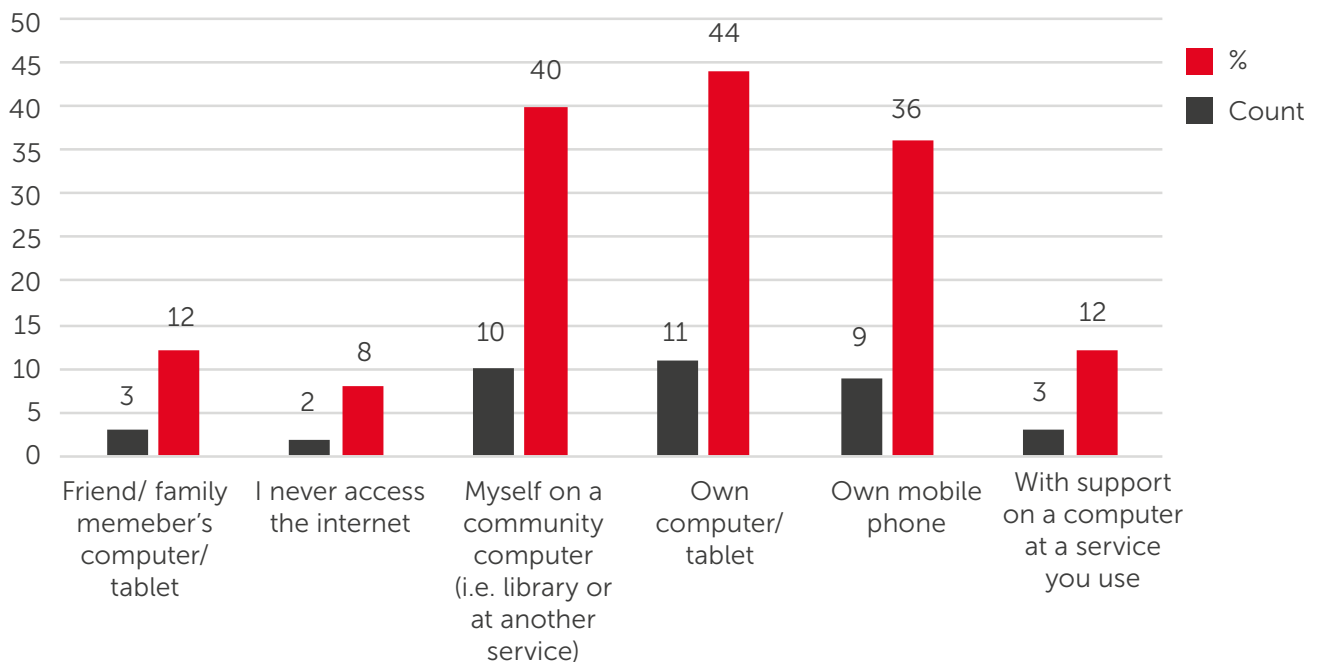


Fig 3: Accessing the internet location



we found that 40 per cent of our participants either also or instead accessed the internet on a community computer i.e. in a library or with support at a service they use.

Almost half, 48 per cent, of our sample access the internet every day. However, 32 per cent of those spoken to access only a few times a year, very rarely or never.

In terms of the national context, according to the Office of National Statistics⁸, 9 out of 10 UK households have internet access, and 89 per cent of UK adults make use of the internet on a minimum weekly basis in 2018. This is an upward shift of 1 per cent from 2017. This indicates a continuing surge in internet use particularly when 2001 is considered, which stood at 51 per cent. Therefore, we could be looking at higher figures in the near future.

For over 65s, those using the web for tasks like shopping more than trebled from 2008 to 2018, from 16 per cent to almost 50 per cent. Despite *"households with one adult aged 65 years and over [having] the lowest proportion of internet access, at 59 per cent in 2018"*, senior citizens are becoming more quickly connected than the rest of the population of adults generally.

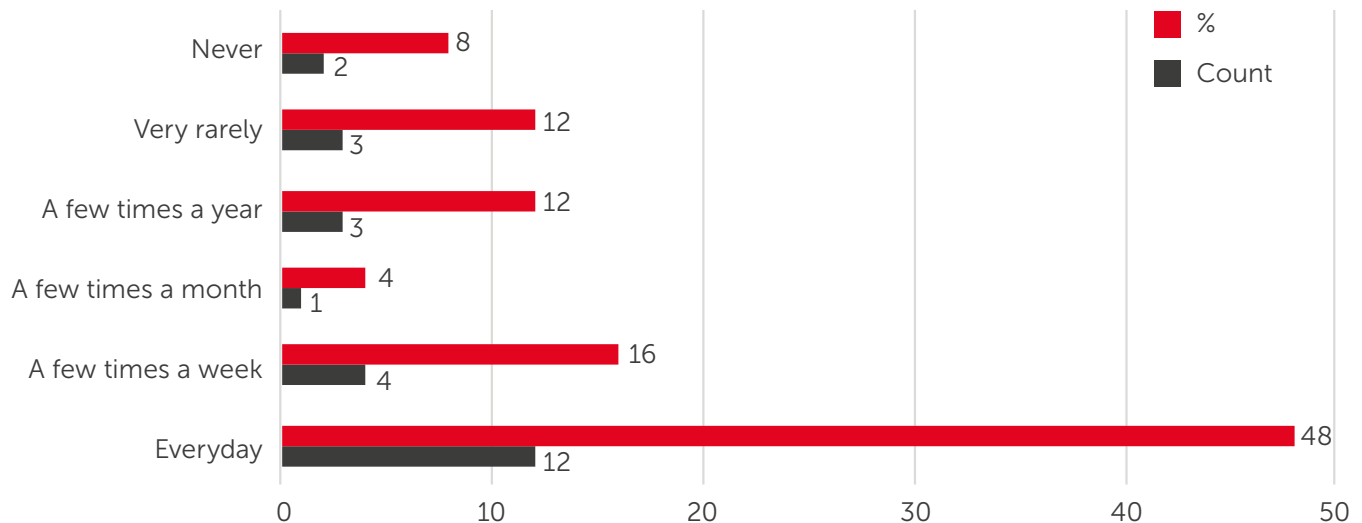
The ONS research reports that *"the proportion of those who had not used the internet in the last three months has fallen from 40 per cent in 2006, to 9 per cent in 2018"*.

According to Statista⁹ smartphones were the responsible device for almost 50 per cent of web access in the United Kingdom in 2018. Laptops and tablet devices come after respectively (though tablet computers are the most popular devices used to access the internet for those aged 65 and over –

⁸ Prescott, C (2018) *Internet Access- household and individuals, Great Britain, Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) research*, ONS 2018

⁹ Statista: Technology and Telecommunications (2018) *Most Important Device for Internet Connection*. Article

Fig 4: Accessing the internet frequency



at 42 per cent¹⁰). Desktops, or static devices, are becoming less used.

Our sample uses the internet a lot less than the UK population average, but of those who do use it, the most common devices are mostly the same. However, our target group of 'service users' report often using community computers - i.e. at libraries or other support/ public services that they utilise – and, hence, are likely to experience restrictions to usage such as access times and time limits more regularly. Just as many of our sample use the internet via these services as they do via smart phones.

Accessing My Account and the Homelessness Portal

To be eligible to take part in the research or be represented, it was a requirement that participants 1) used either the services of the Harlesden Hub, Crisis Brent, or B3, and 2) Used, or had a need to use at some point, My Account or the Homelessness Portal.

The majority of those who completed the survey, 84 per cent, have used Brent's My Account. People mainly use it for applying for Housing Benefit (65 per cent) and completing a change of circumstance form (57 per cent) and 40 per cent use it for Council Tax reasons.

There were 4-6 people, 16 per cent, that we think had submitted a homelessness application via Homelessness Portal, or an advisor or someone had done so on their behalf (16 people said they had used Brent's Homelessness Portal but we believe this was a miscommunication or misunderstanding when the question was put to the participant due to, for example, a language barrier). To supplement this number and provide a more representative picture, the number of Homelessness Portal users represented has been boosted by 9 case accounts being provided from Crisis Brent staff – and they are described with the rest of the findings below.

10 Prescott, C. (2018) *Internet Access- household and individuals, Great Britain, Opinions and Lifestyle Survey (OPN) research, ONS 2018*

Fig 5: Use of My Account

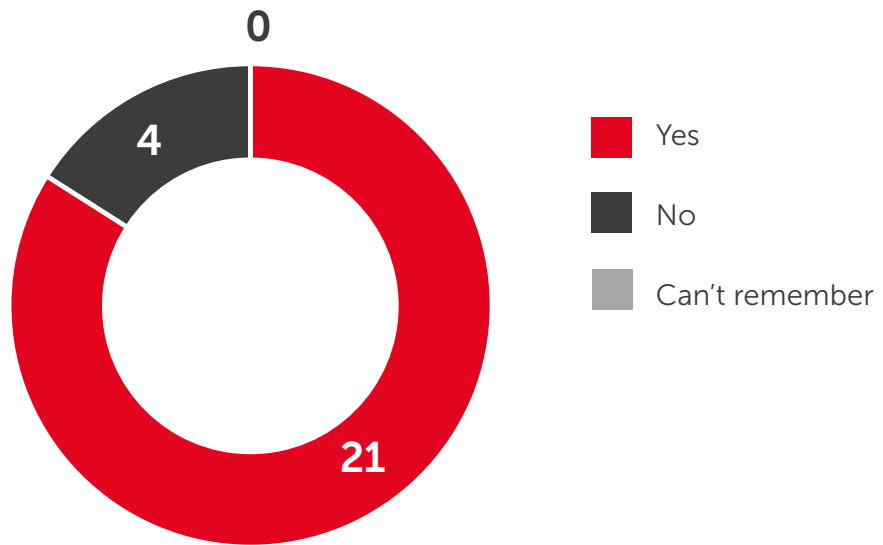
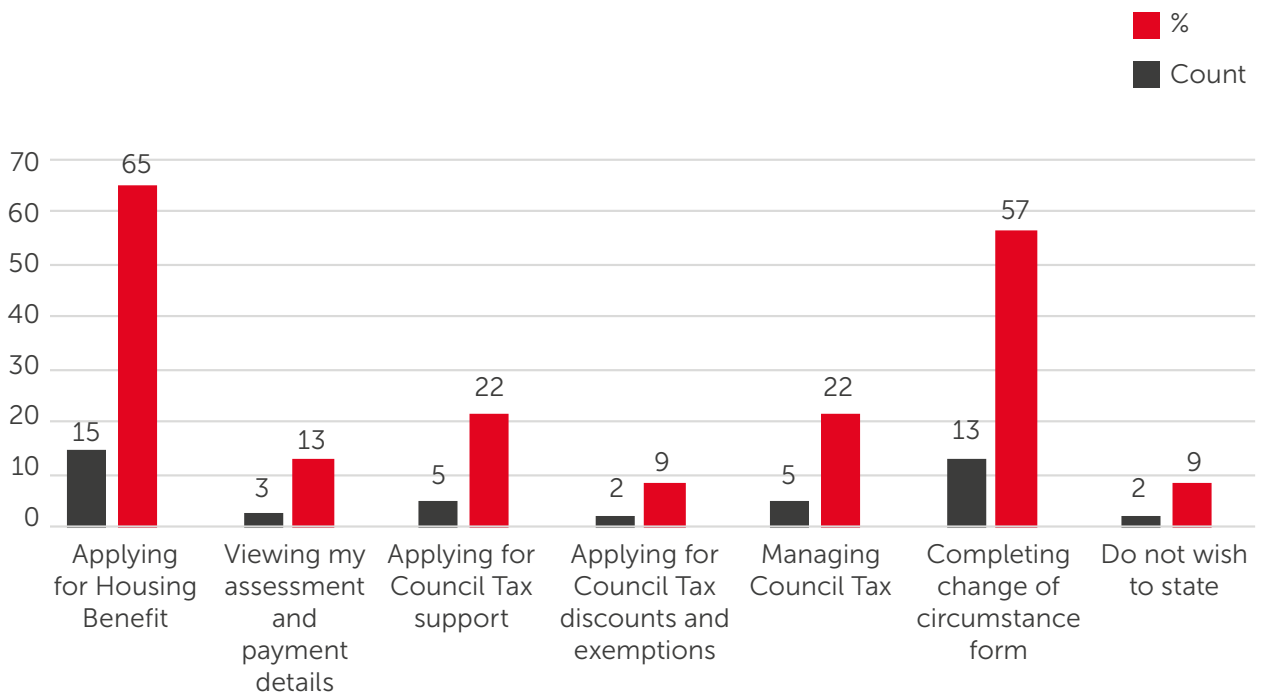


Fig 6: Reason for use of My Account



**Case Study: RD – family member**

RD has to help his Mum and Aunt with their council tax and housing benefit as they find it difficult.

He finds navigating online systems easy when there is a computer, he has enabled his aunt to use the basics of MyAccount but his mum is not computer literate and so he regularly helps her on it.

When they were completing an application together, their experience was that the system is not user friendly. They needed to contact customer service to get some information and clarity and were holding for 45 minutes.

This caused frustration at the time, and, as RD notes, it could have led to more serious issues:

“My Mum would not have been able to complete the application without help. [The delays] can affect their housing, council tax or any other business when it comes to benefits, people can... face eviction through no fault of their own.”

However, RD was clear to state that that online digital services are a useful tool, and the 7-10 days response time is accurate. However, “it would be great if it was user-friendly”.

“There should be more face-to-face options with customer service officers who are able to assist people who struggle, and phones need to be answered quicker”

Experience of the systems

74 per cent did not have their needs met completely or at all by My Account. For the rest of those using it, a quarter (26 per cent) have had their needs met successfully.

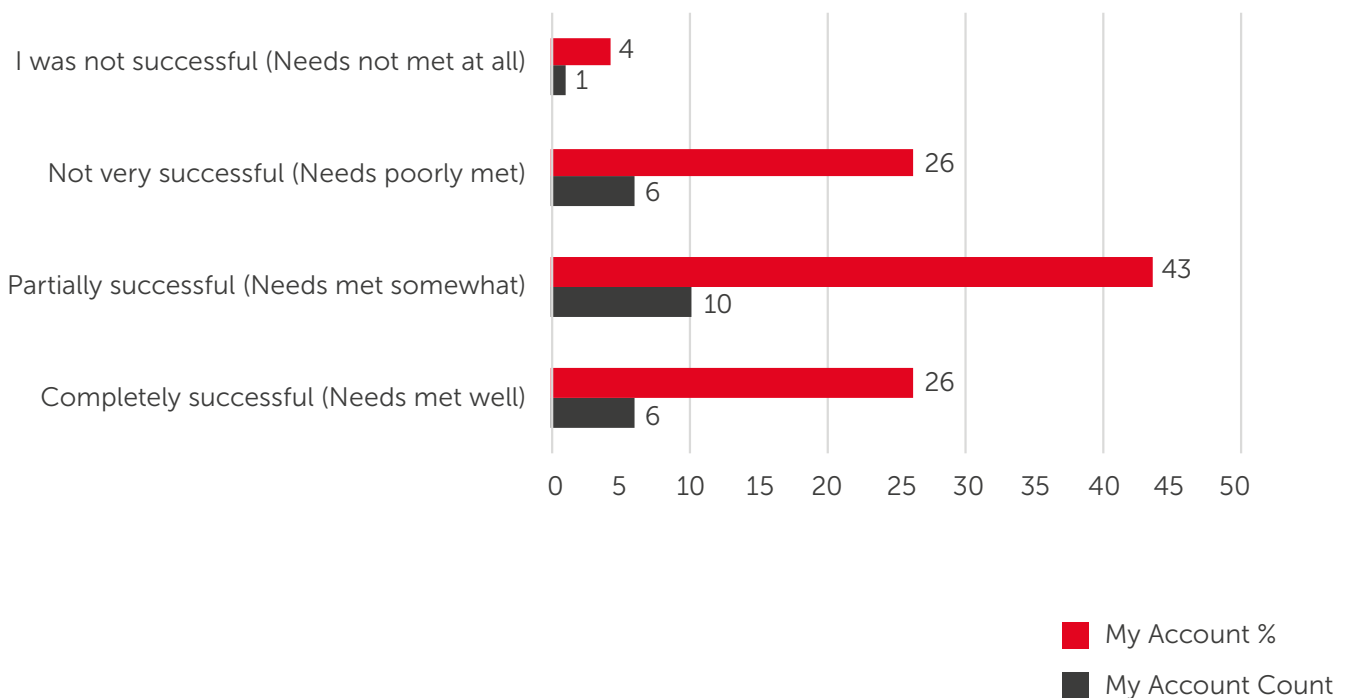
38 per cent find it mostly hard or very hard to use My Account or found it not useable at all. One quarter again (26 per cent) find it easy to use and the same proportion have had a mix of experiences – finding it partly easy and partly difficult to use.

Just over 6 out of 10 (64 per cent) did not find the online system straight forward and could not easily use it to do what they needed to do.

Research participants were asked to state what sort of **technical problems** with the system they encountered which contributed to their experience, and also if they have any **personal barriers** which affect their experience of using the systems. Crisis staff were also asked these questions in relation to recent cases of theirs.

Please note that the survey figures for the Homelessness Portal were not high enough to report any statistics here, however case accounts and qualitative answers have provided detail, and this is presented below.

Fig 7: Success of having needs met by My Account



Technical problems

For almost a third of people using My Account (31 per cent) the **time it takes** to complete tasks (linked to time-limited sessions, see below), and the **need for passwords, numbers and log-in IDs** (linked with the ease of being locked-out, also see below) were the primary technical problems with the online system.

A further 27 per cent said that the **system crashed**. For just under a quarter (23 per cent) the **language used** on the system was a problem.

The **processes involved** in uploading documents and navigating the system was a problem for 19 per cent, and 15 per cent reported there **not being enough support**.

Fig 8: Usability of My Account

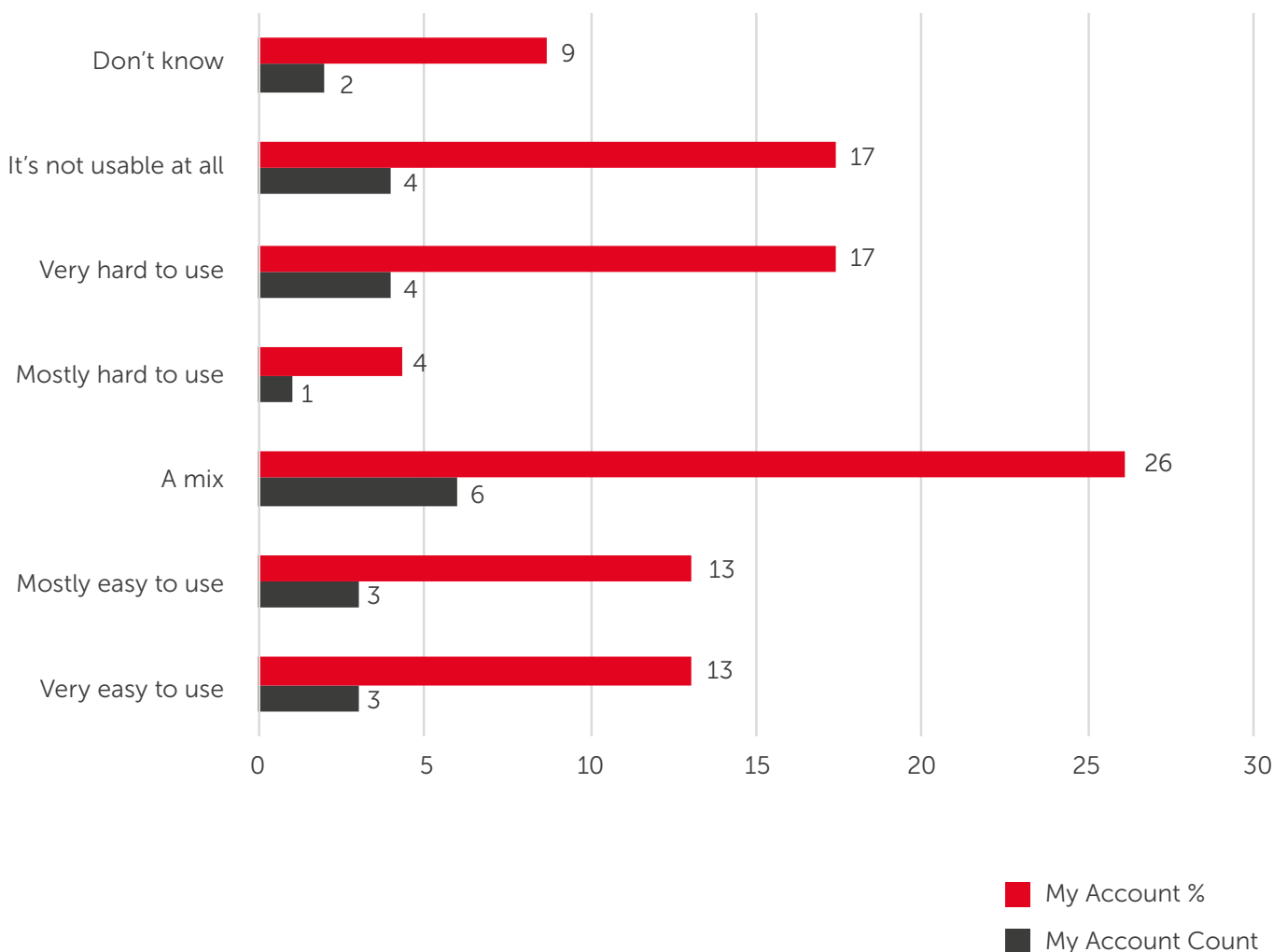
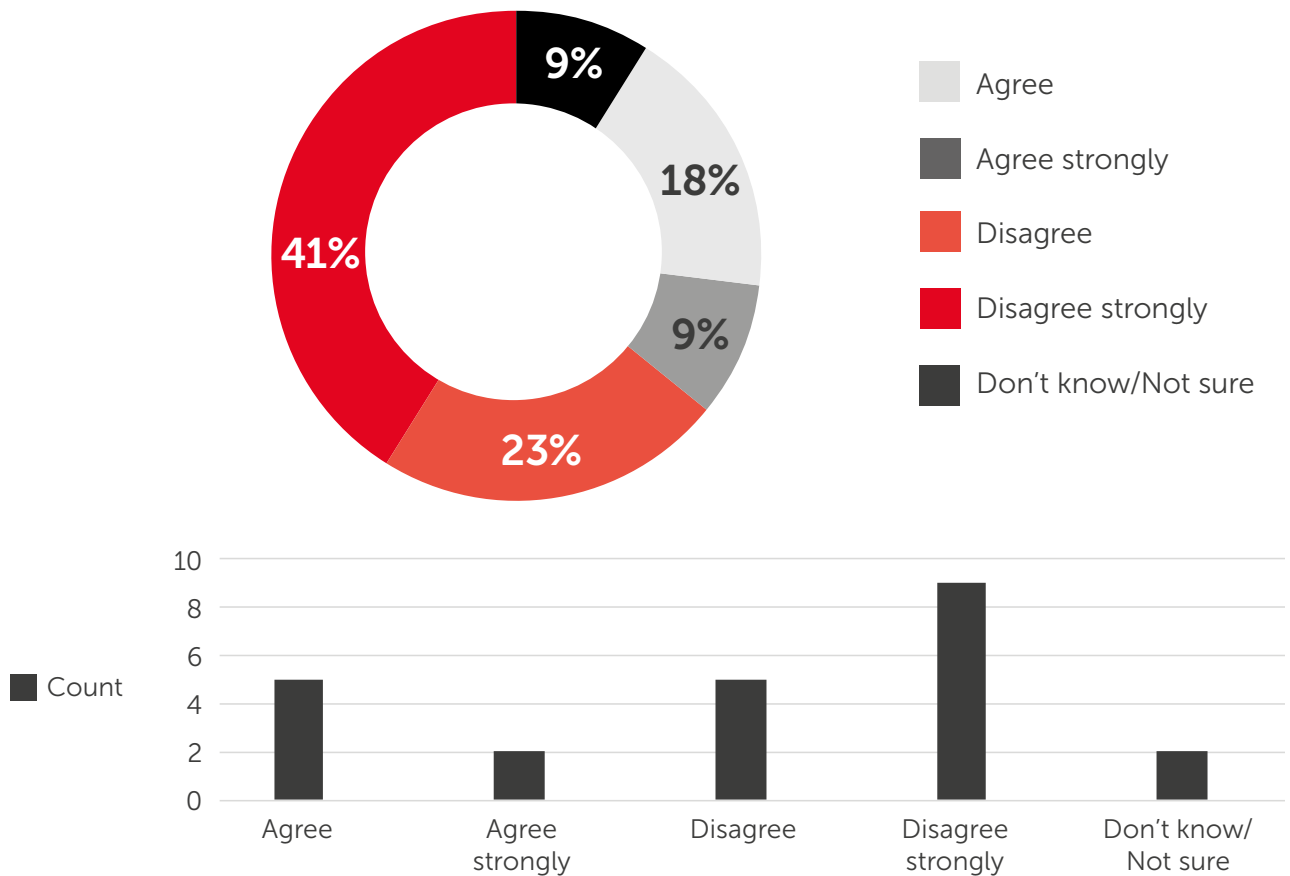


Fig 9: My Account satisfaction statement



Accounts of cases provided by Crisis Staff and interviews with support staff highlight navigation and instruction problems with the site. For example, the format that information is required to be input in by the user is not made clear, and size and location of buttons are awkward. It was also noted that the system does not make clear what documents are needed before beginning a session, and this then removes the user's ability to opt for a fast-track application and session time-outs.

The overriding technical issues reported across the findings are:

- being logged/ timed out of sessions, due to reasons such as searching for required documentation which is not made clear outside of the system
- being locked out of accounts

because of loss of details, or unable to open new accounts if some details had been used in the past. **This is also a primary problem with the Homelessness Portal**

- the system not having the capacity to enable people to communicate or sort out complex case situations effectively.

It was reported that these issues go on to bring up further technical problems with both My Account and the Homelessness Portal including: with password reset emails i.e. not having the correct links in them; the council helpdesk responses being slow i.e. long waits on the phone line, or for online help; and miscommunication and inappropriate actions to be automatically taken on complex cases – such as claims being closed.

Many client accounts pointed to a significant lack of knowledge amongst eligible people, who are

also vulnerable, about the existence of both of the online systems (see personal barriers).

“Appointments are hard to come by, impossible to book one over the phone and if you call you are waiting for 45-90 mins to be able to speak to someone to only not have the information passed on.”

Interview participant

Fig 10: Technical problems with My Account

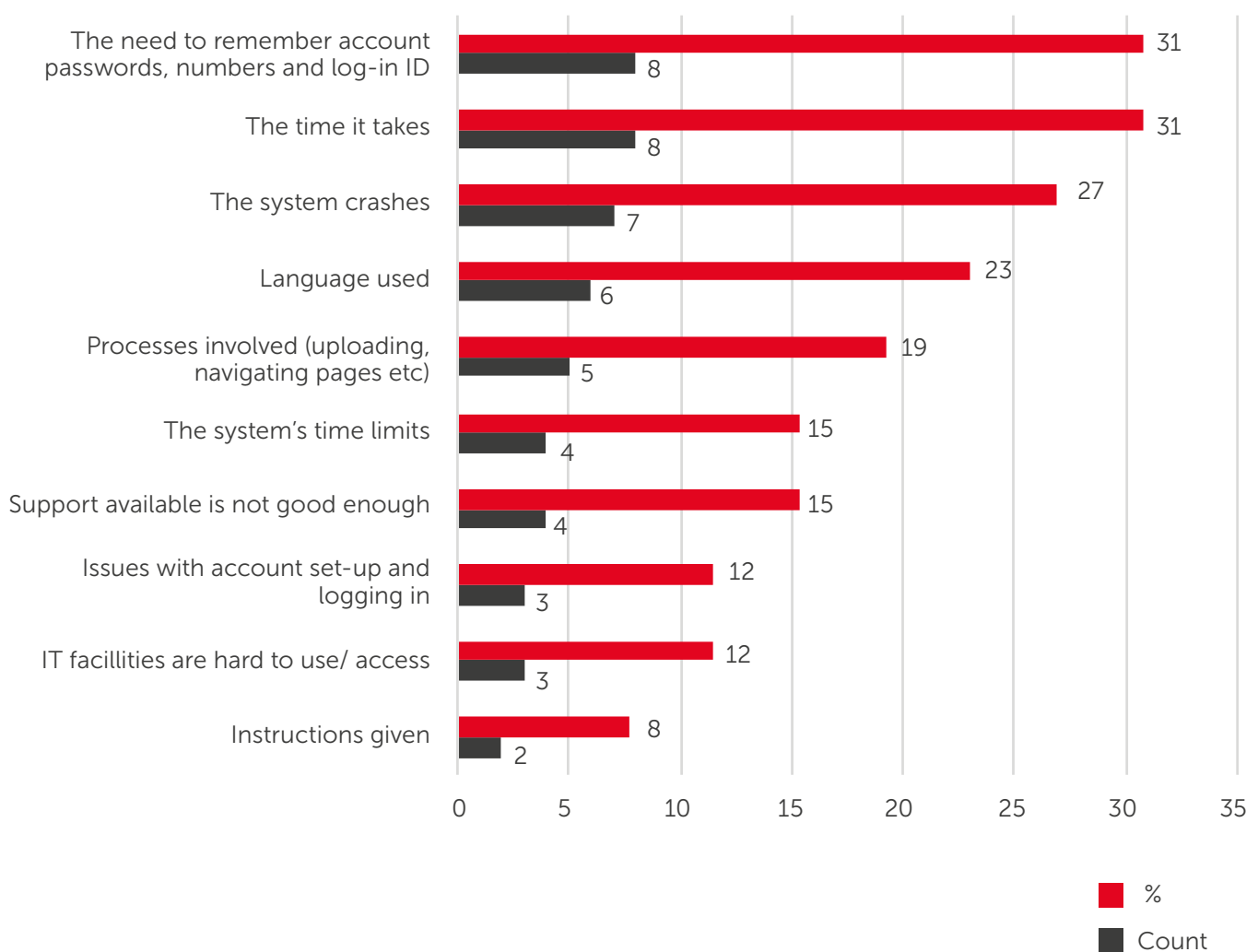
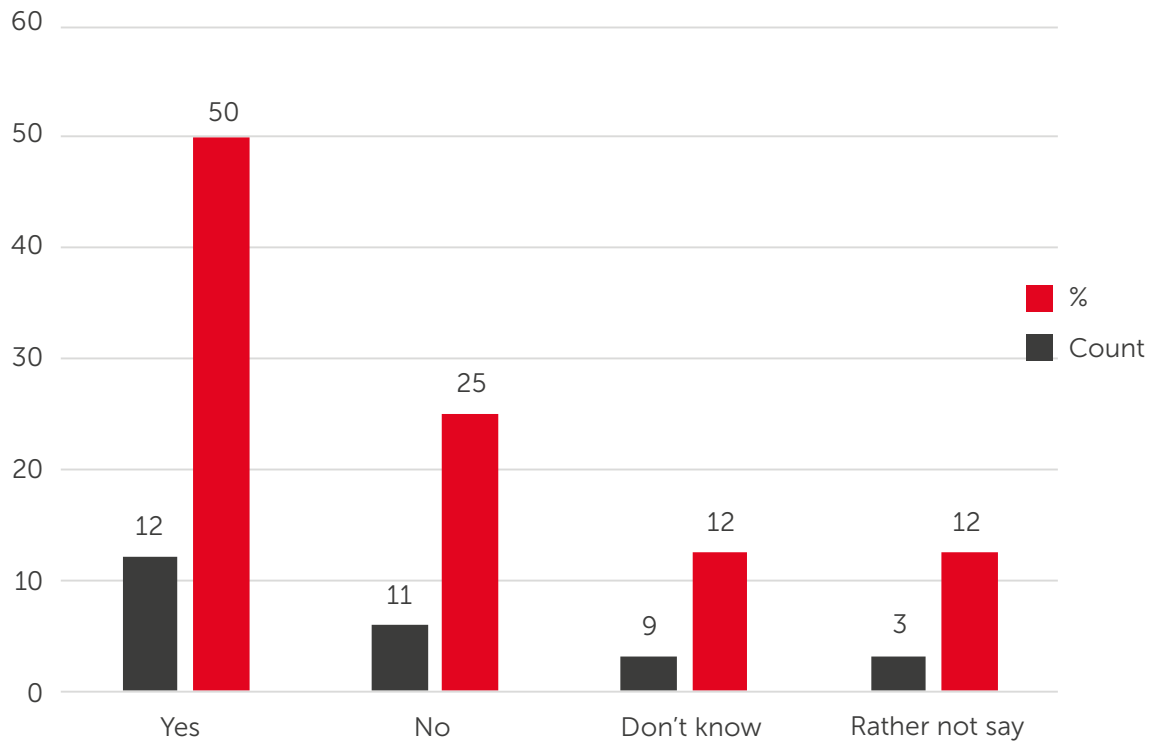


Fig 11: People with personal barriers affecting use of My Account



Personal Barriers

Only 25 per cent said that they did not have any personal barriers that affected their use of the online system.

There were four primary factors reported by survey respondents as personal barriers which affect their use of the systems:

1. Mental and physical health and learning difficulties

- Support staff working with clients using the online system reflected that the additional support needs their clients have can also be barriers. Personal issues and life factors affect the client's ability to retain information, their attention and ability to keep follow-up appointments. This means that when the systems do not work smoothly, it can have detrimental effects on their housing situation and safety.

2. Lack of access to a computer, difficulty using IT and lack of knowledge of the systems

- Accounts of 11 cases provided by Crisis Staff noted that 5 had no current email address or email access. Over half can't use computers 'well, or at all' and some were illiterate.
- In many of these cases the individual simply didn't know the systems were there at all. Two had made several trips to the civic centre to declare as homeless or ask for help before they discovered Crisis and were able to work with a coach to make a homelessness application on the Portal.

3. Language barriers: people can't understand the language used on the systems or the communications about the systems nor can they access the support they need
4. 'Age': older people were not confident or able to use the systems effectively
5. Lack of ability for people to use the services effectively also has had an impact on the organisations helping them; they often go beyond their duties to protect the vulnerable person. One support worker stated that Crisis was required to fund a night in a hostel for a vulnerable female client when the password reset link was not functional on the email. Another coach had to use their own organisation email address to set up an account.

What works well?

As well as describing the issues and barriers, respondents were asked to state any part of the systems that they think works well for them. Their responses were as follows:

- Survey responses: 4 people said they systems are easy to use or some instructions are clear, 3 people said it saves time and is always available, 2 people said it provides real-time figures and a record of dealings with the council, and 2 people said that the ability to dispute issues online was convenient

Staff reflected that the systems are convenient for people who have a computer and know how to use it, the online system is helpful as it provides a recorded history and evidence of documents, and the automated response time for contact about My Account cases is usually accurate (7-10 working days).

**Case Study: Debbie – My Account user**

Debbie relies on the system, but it causes intense pressure and frustration.

She is dyslexic, which also affects her memory, and she has hearing problems. Usually her daughter, or someone else who has time, has to help her use computers.

About the online system, Debbie says

“It doesn't work for me, the keyboard gets confusing and it can be stressful, especially when I haven't got help and I'm doing it on my own in the library”.

The impact on Debbie is three-fold:

Firstly, the stress brings on her anxiety and panic attacks, and

“it gives me low esteem and the feeling of not being independent and not feeling normal”.

Secondly, the difficulties in using the system also mean she has missed deadlines and her rent has been stopped as a result.

And finally, her reliance on her daughter puts pressure on their relationship and causes frustration between them.

As a solution to the issues, Debbie would like to bring back 'one stop shops' which were comfortable and friendly and answered her questions straight away.

“I would prefer to have someone sitting with me helping while I try and do it online”.

Understanding the impact

The interviews provided accounts of the impact that the experience of using the online systems has / had on the participant. These accounts have highlighted that there are potentially serious impacts on several key areas:

- Housing and financial stability i.e. deadlines can be missed, or benefits stopped erroneously
- Personal wellbeing i.e. anxiety, stress and feeling of depression is caused or exacerbated by being unable to carry out tasks on their own, to understand or see clearly what is happening with the case or to have questions answered quickly, and concerns about where to get help.
- Relationships i.e. pressure and frustration is caused between individuals and their support networks due to not being able to access the system or carry out their tasks on their own and so they rely on help.

- Efficiency within council services and efficiency for the client managing their personal affairs i.e. clients have to make long calls/ visits to council and chasing is common - *"I find myself going back and forth"*
- Ability for services in the sector to operate effectively i.e. services have had to 'pick up the pieces' when the systems fail, including dealing with password issues for example.

Our case studies provide further insight into the effect the experiences has on people represented by our sample, as well as suggested solutions.

**Case Study: Mihret - Homelessness Applicant and My Account user**

When Mihret was threatened with homelessness her support worker could not help as her Homelessness Portal account was locked. Her English is poor.

With limited knowledge of the systems herself, her advisor at Brent and coach at Crisis manage the systems for her. She is OK using computers but the language barrier and other personal barriers makes navigating the council's systems difficult.

Mihret's coach recently tried to help resolve an urgent issue. She had had a previous portal account linked to a mobile phone which was lost. A change of circumstances meant she needed to re-apply as homeless but was unable to make a new profile. In attempting to make her a face-to-face appointment the council's response was that she needed assessing by the housing team (requiring a Portal application).

At the time, she was sleeping in a temporary shelter and had to leave the following week. It took days to unlock her account and identify a solution with the council. As a result, she was very close to needing to sleep on the street, increasing her vulnerability.

Mihret and her support worker say the system is too rigid.

"We would like to see the system designed to be more responsive to variables like types of people representing, accessing the system from different devices."

Discussion and conclusion

This concludes the report of our findings on people's experiences of using Brent Council's online systems - My Account and the Homelessness Portal – and the impact of them.

In summary:

- Many of those spoken to regularly access the internet but a large proportion do not
- Accessing the internet via public computers at community services is common and important to people
- When it comes to using My Account, three-quarters were/ are not able to complete what they need to do, over one third find the system hard or unusable, and almost two-thirds say that the service is not straightforward
- Some people do find it convenient and easy to use, usually when they can easily access and use the internet
- The problems people encounter with both My Account and the Homelessness Portal are caused by a mixture of technical problems - with the design and accessibility of the digital system - and personal barriers affecting how easily and successfully they navigate the services.

- When My Account and the Homelessness Portal do not work for people, it causes a range of impacts, including exacerbating the same disadvantage that the services are set up to support. There are negative consequences on people's housing situation, personal well-being and relationships and also on the general efficiency of the Council itself. This means services outside of the council have to deal with the consequences.

The research shows that although many people in our target group do have IT access barriers, a large amount regularly access the internet, but still experience difficulties when using, or needing to use, the services in question. Although several respondents reported that Brent's online systems are easy or partially easy to use, the findings also indicate that they are not functional or publicised to a level that enables certain customers with specific support needs to undertake important tasks relating to homelessness applications, benefits management and applications on their own and support is lacking in certain areas. The research also highlights the fact that people using support services in NW10 experience personal barriers which restrict their ability to access and use systems like these. The types of personal barriers can be both common and prevalent (i.e. IT illiteracy and language barriers) or complex and unique (see the 'Debbie' case study).



The research shows improvement is needed to make the system work for people. The system is not well enough set up for complexity in two essential areas: personal barriers (affecting access and use) and cases (affecting actual success of tasks).

It is recognised that Brent Council is committed to ensuring the outcomes of their digital strategy are as successful for vulnerable people as any other. The Brent Council report on the 2017-2020 digital strategy¹¹ states that 'vulnerable people' includes those with learning difficulties, mental health disabilities, severe physical disabilities, severe hearing and visual impairments, as well as those of pensionable age that are unable to navigate on-line services. However, our findings show that personal barriers are often more complex, and combinations of apparently less 'severe' barriers can affect the use of digital systems for many people. Equally, prevalent technical problems with the system can have serious life impacts causing further barriers.

¹¹ Please see Brent's Digital Strategy: <https://www.brent.gov.uk/your-council/about-brent-council/council-structure-and-how-we-work/strategies-and-plans/brent-digital-strategy/>

Suggestions

“You’re almost sure to get help needed with face to face support”

Interview participant

Research respondents were asked to provide suggestions for how the services and systems can be improved. They have been grouped and can be summarised as follows:

- More, quality face-to-face support with the services particularly close to home (8 comments)
- A more reliable, simpler and faster system i.e. not crashing, easier password reset etc (5 comments)
- Improve people’s training and understanding of the system and processes i.e. training and good instructions (4 comments)
- Offer a multi-lingual service (4 comments)
- Provide better real-time support with the system i.e. helplines (3 comments)
- Stop inappropriate actions being taken on a case i.e. communicate and respond to complexity better (3 comments)

“I want proficient employees always available for the help and benefit Brent residents. It should not just be about saving money. It should be about making sure an older person’s problems are taken care of. Elderly people should certainly have a unique service solely available to them. Also, every step possible to prevent an older person’s negative situation should be put into place.”

Interview participant

The support service staff who provided more insight into the Homelessness Portal also provided their solutions:

Table 2:

Solutions put forward by support staff

Ability to see urgent cases, to avoid out of hours work

Varied system for varied people presenting (less rigid)

Staff /phone line accessible, even for appointments

Solve log-in and verification issues – inc not requiring NINO or opening new accounts with same info

Helpdesk for immediate help

Clearer navigation

Send multiple methods of communication

Freephone number

Email or keep record of issues that arise

This concludes discussion on the research findings. The next chapter lays out our associated recommendations.

Recommendations

When we look at the research data, government principles and the suggested solutions together, it is clear that in order to help people to access the services they need, improvements need to be made in four areas:

- 1. The technical usability of the system**
- 2. Support for people using the services**
- 3. User informed design and testing**
- 4. Council good practice and offer**

Brent Council's four Demand Management objectives within their digital strategy (see table 1 on Page 9) focus on self-help, prevention, meeting individual support needs, online as first-choice and seamless transactions. Each recommended action below will enable Brent to deliver on their objectives, whilst keeping effective service provision for disadvantaged customers at the centre. After the list of recommendations, we have shown where each recommendation fits best with these four objectives (Table 3), and have provided some existing examples of organisations that currently deliver, or help councils to deliver, services in ways that complement our findings.

List of recommendations

Technical usability of the system

- R1. Better non-English language provision: provide multi-lingual versions or a telephone translation service for My Account and the Homelessness Portal
- R2. Reconsider system time-outs: ensure people cannot be timed out during application/use of online system
- R3. Solve account access issues: make it simpler to restore access to accounts and regularly check functionality (including links on verification emails).
- R4. Better live technical support: provide properly trained and responsive staff on hand for assistance, via an efficient helpline AND chat system with prompt response times

Support for people using the services

- R5. Better in-person support for all: well-publicised drop-in and appointment based service dedicated to 1-2-1 My Account and Homelessness Application support, guidance and assistance at local Hubs (not restricted to people with defined barriers)
- R6. Sufficient IT equipment: include more easy to use scanners and printers, and provide free USB sticks for My Account users, at libraries/hubs etc

User informed design and testing

- R7. Broaden the definition of vulnerability and list of IT barriers: they are more nuanced than suggested in the digital inclusion strategies and associated reports.

- R8. Monitor effectiveness: Set up a log of problems for support staff and external staff which is audited monthly. To understand when and where online system is not working. Publishing how they are responding to these.
- R9. Get more frontline insight: Council staff shadow local services to see the day-to-day realities for disadvantaged groups and staff. Also provide disadvantaged people more opportunities to feed directly back and into the design. Web designers themselves should also test with vulnerable people for frontline insight.

Additionally, upon delivery of this report, we would like to see a commitment to monitoring progress on these recommendations for the services in focus. We also welcome a discussion on how the findings are relevant in the wider context and can be taken on board to help improve other systems such as universal credit.

Council good practice and offer

- R10. Raise standards: Commit to delivering online systems to the level of the Government's digital service standards, particularly focussing on improving the flexibility of the design and processes for regular iteration and improvements¹²
- R11. Promote: Make more people aware of My Account and Homelessness Portal
- R12. Raise skills: Provide regular, free IT training sessions, including introduction to My Account, with a specific focus on the elderly, those who speak different languages, and those with learning difficulties
- R13. Communicate more: Broaden means of communication with applicants beyond only letters or online notifications i.e. use combinations of text, phone, email for contacting and informing people

¹² <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/service-standard>

Brent's Demand Management objectives

Table 3:

Digital Strategy (Demand Management) objective	Aligned design principle	Our recommendation reference
1. Design more effective and preventative service models.	The service will promote self-help and preventative measures.	R3, R9, R13
2. Make online the first choice for interacting with all council services.	Online will be the first choice for interacting with the service	R4, R11
3. Ensure all residents have access to the resources and support they need to confidently access online information and services.	Support in accessing services will meet the needs of the individual.	R1, R5, R6, R7, R12
4. Integrate channels, applications and workflows to enable seamless end-to-end transactions across a wider range of services, increase automation and maximise the first touch capability of council officers.	Service users will only need to submit relevant details once.	R2, R8, R10

Existing examples

- Essex Council has worked with FutureGov on how they can deliver on their 'Essex Digital'¹³ strategy for services in a way that works for everyone. This includes embedding the government's digital service standards in their strategy, and delivering through a 'Service Design' team rather than a 'Digital' team.
- We Are Digital¹⁴ offers innovative digital inclusion training for residents who may be struggling
- The Good Things Foundation¹⁵ works with councils to help improve digital inclusion through a model focussed on social justice and inclusion.



- Camden Council are publicising their online systems far and wide:

¹³ Digital Essex: <https://www.wearefuturegov.com/work/digital-essex>

¹⁴ We are Digital: <https://www.we-are-digital.co.uk/>

¹⁵ Good Things Foundation: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/what-we-do>

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Appendices

a. Research Survey

Crisis Brent Research 2018 Survey: Experiences and impact of Brent Council's online services

Opening question:

Do you, or have you ever, needed to use Brent's 'My Account' or Homelessness Portal?

Yes – please proceed with asking to take part in survey (**please complete the form clearly**)

No – thank you, you do not need to proceed

Section 1: about your internet usage.

Q1: How would you describe your ability to access and use the internet? (Tick one)	
Very easy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Easy	<input type="checkbox"/>
Neither easy/nor difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>
Difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very difficult	<input type="checkbox"/>
Not sure	<input type="checkbox"/>
I never access the internet	<input type="checkbox"/>

Q2: Where do you access the internet? (Tick all that apply)	
Own computer/ tablet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Own mobile phone	<input type="checkbox"/>
Myself on a community computer (I.e. library or at another service)	<input type="checkbox"/>
With support on a computer at a service you use	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friend / Family member's computer / tablet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Friend / Family member's phone	<input type="checkbox"/>
I never access the internet	<input type="checkbox"/>
Other:	<input type="text"/>

Q3: How often do you access the internet? (Tick one)	
Every day	<input type="checkbox"/>
A few times a week	<input type="checkbox"/>
A few times a month	<input type="checkbox"/>
A few times a year	<input type="checkbox"/>
Very rarely	<input type="checkbox"/>
Never	<input type="checkbox"/>

Section 2: about your use of Brent's My Account and the Homelessness Portal

Q4a: Have you ever used Brent's My Account?					
Yes			No		Can't Remember

Q4b: If yes, what have you used My Account for? (Tick all that apply)	
Completing change of circumstance form	
Applying for Housing Benefit	
Viewing my assessment and payment details	
Applying for council tax support	
Applying for Council Tax discounts and exemptions	
Managing Council Tax	
Do not wish to state	
Anything else not listed	

Q5: Have you ever used Brent's Homelessness Portal?					
Yes			No		Can't Remember

Section 3: About your experience of using these online system(s)

Q6: Have your needs have been met successfully by the online system? i.e. Were you successful in doing what you needed to do (Tick one)	My Account	Homelessness Portal
I was not successful (Needs not met at all)		
Not very successful (Needs poorly met)		
Partially successful (Needs met somewhat)		
Completely successful (Needs met well)		
Don't know		

Q7: How do you find the usability of the online system? (Tick one)	My Account	Homelessness Portal
It's not usable at all		
Very hard to use		
Mostly hard to use		
A mix		
Mostly easy to use		
Very easy to use		
Don't know		

Q8: What are the main technical problems with the online system? (Tick any that apply)	My Account	Homelessness Portal
Language used		
IT facilities required are hard to use/ access		
Instructions given		
Processes involved (uploading, navigating pages etc)		
Support available is not good enough		
The time it takes		
The system's time limits		
Issues with account set-up and logging in		
The need to remember account passwords, numbers and log-in ID		
The system crashes		
Other(s)	My Account	Homelessness Portal

Q9: What are the best parts of the online system?

	My Account	Homelessness Portal
1		
2		
3		
4		

Q10: How could the system(s) you used be improved?

My Account	Homelessness Portal

Q11: Do you feel you have any personal barriers affecting your use of the online system (such as your language, or your age etc) and would you like to list them?

	Yes	No	Don't know	Rather not say
1				
2				
3				
4				

Q12: Do you agree or disagree with the following statement: "Using the online system is straightforward and I can use it easily to do what I need to do" (Tick one)	My Account	Homelessness Portal
Disagree strongly		
Disagree		
Neither agree or disagree / partially both		
Agree		
Agree strongly		
Don't know/Not sure		

Thank you, please now complete the **consent form** and take your **information sheet** and sign up to take an **interview** if you wish!

b. Interview guide for researchers

Crisis Brent Research 2018 Semi-structured interview Experiences and impact of Brent Council's online services

- Introductions
- Specify the focus of the interview: ***I'm researching what people's experiences are of using Brent Council's online services - My Account (benefits management) and the Homelessness Portal - and what is the impact of them.***
- Do consent form and give info sheet at the start – participant can stop at any time and will not be identified unless they give permission on the consent form
- At end: Offer take name and photo for case study

Firstly: Is consent form completed and info sheet given?

Interview Q1: Do Brent Council's online services and systems work for you? Why?

Interview Q2: What impact did your experience of the online system have on you or your situation?

Interview Q3: What type of support do you prefer when using Brent Council's services and why? i.e. online chat, phone line, face to face (if so where) etc...

Any other notes...

c. Consent form

Consent form for 'An 'online future' survey

Now for the legal bit...

It is important that only people who want to do so take part in the survey.

As part of this survey, we will be asking you some questions about your age and your ethnic background as well as things like your health and any life experiences that may have impacted on your housing situation.

You should also be aware that you do not need to answer any question you do not wish to and that you may withdraw from the research at any time you wish.

Please tick the boxes below to show you agree with the following statements:

Consent form – please tick for 'yes', the green parts are compulsory for taking part	
The study has been explained to me and I have been given an information sheet	
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time	
I understand that the answers I give will be confidential and anonymous as your name will not appear anywhere in the research	
I give consent for my name to be used as part of a case study in the research report (the report will be seen by relevant officers in Brent Council, the Brent Homelessness Forum, Crisis Brent and other relevant individuals only in relation to this research)	
I consent for my photograph to be used within a case study in the research report (the report will be seen by relevant officers in Brent Council, the Brent Homelessness Forum, Crisis Brent and other relevant individuals only in relation to this research)	

Name of participant	Signature

Name of Researcher	Counter Signature

Date:

Please complete the back of this form if you would like follow up information about this project.

If you would like to receive follow-up information, please provide your contact details bellow. These contact details will only be used for the purpose of contacting you to give you follow up information. Your details will only be accessed by members of the research team and will not be passed on to anyone else. They will be deleted at the end of the project.

Email:
Phone Number:
Best way to contact you:
Best times to contact you:

d. Info sheet for participants

'An 'online' future?'

Research participant information sheet

Thank you for helping us to find out whether 'online-only' access to council services helps or hinders those in need.

At Crisis Skylight Brent we want to address problems surrounding homelessness so we can work towards ending it.

Crisis Brent Peer Researchers are conducting a study into how people in our community use Brent council's digital, online systems and services.

This is a great opportunity to help us understand more about how online-only access to council services helps or hinders people, especially those experiencing homelessness or those who are at risk of it.

The research is being conducted at Crisis Brent, the Harlesden Hub and B3. The research results and recommendations will be provided to Brent Council, the new independent Brent Homelessness Forum and Crisis UK to help them improve their systems and support for people in need in Brent.

Thank you for taking part in the valuable research, and completing the consent form. If you'd like to find out more, please contact the research officer:

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