



Birmingham City Council Usability Investigation

Reviewed: Council Websites

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Introduction

The aim of this project is for Birmingham City Council to investigate the usability of a series of council website and gain feedback from existing users on the design and navigation mechanism of their current and proposed websites.

Usability generally refers to ease-of-use and consists of five components or attributes:

- **Learnability:** How easy is it for users to accomplish basic tasks the first time they encounter the design?
- **Efficiency:** Once users have learned the design, how quickly can they perform tasks?
- **Memorability:** When users return to the design after a period of not using it, how easily can they re-establish proficiency?
- **Errors:** How many errors do users make, how severe are these errors, and how easily can they recover from the errors?
- **Satisfaction:** How pleasant is it to use the design?

The first component of this involved a usability review of seven Council websites. This included a benchmarking activity where we completed ten tasks across the seven websites. This did not only focus on the more common tasks but also on niche tasks which may not be regularly completed. We then examined key metrics gained from this exercise in order to draw conclusions about the overall effectiveness of each websites Information Architecture.

The second part of the investigation used focus groups to gain an insight into how users of the existing website engage with the council, what they use the council website for, as well as gaining qualitative feedback about their opinions of both the current and prototype Birmingham Council website.

We then provide an overall conclusion based on the results of both components of this investigation and make recommendations for how Birmingham City Council should move forward with the redevelopment of their website.

Methodology

This usability investigation consisted of two elements, a usability review which included a benchmarking activity and engaging with users using focus groups.

- The usability review focussed on seven existing council websites. A practitioner reviewed the websites while completing a set of pre-defined tasks using a combination of two established usability inspection methods; heuristic review and cognitive walkthrough. Heuristic review evaluates how well a website meets recognised principles of usability while Cognitive walkthrough focuses on simulating how well new users would be able to complete tasks. For the purposes of this investigation, the tasks involved using the navigation mechanism to find information or perform specific actions (e.g.: report a faulty street light). The benchmarking activity focussed on capturing metrics to evaluate three attributes of usability; effectiveness (measured by task completion rate), efficiency (measured by task completion time) and error rate (number of instances the practitioner made an incorrect navigation choice).
- Focus groups are an established user-centred design research method. They are an effective qualitative research method and were used to explore users thoughts and opinions as well as gain feedback on both the existing and proposed Birmingham Council website. While one of the focus groups did involve a review of a range of council websites and users were asked to describe how they would go about completing information finding tasks, we did not capture any quantitative data as this is not appropriate using a focus group methodology.

A full description of the main findings of each of these elements is presented in the rest of this report.

Usability Review

This section contains a summary review of each of the seven council websites which were included as part of this investigation. The seven URLs examined were:

- <http://www.manchester.gov.uk>
- <http://www.copeland.gov.uk>
- <http://www.wigan.gov.uk>
- <http://www.coventry.gov.uk>
- <http://www.liverpool.gov.uk>
- <http://www.shropshire.gov.uk>
- <http://www.edinburgh.gov.uk>

In this section we describe the main features of each site's navigation mechanism which has the potential to enhance usability as well as issues which may negatively impact the usability and overall user experience of each site. We focus primarily on the overall information architecture and visual design rather than individual tasks.

Manchester City Council

The primary navigation mechanism of the website uses clear, concise text labels, supplemented by icons (Figure 1). The use of iconography has the potential to enhance usability for those who first language is not English and those with lower levels of literacy and IT competence.

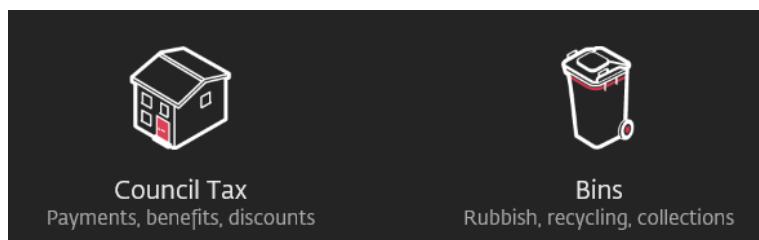


Figure 1 – Clear text labels and icons.

The main site navigation is presented as an accordion. Figure 2 presents the primary site navigation mechanism displaying the primary as seen when entering the page. We make the assumption that Manchester Council elected to have the most visited/popular functions visible on screen-entry and let the user then filter through the secondary and tertiary items using the accordion mechanism.

When selecting on the top-level items in the navigation hierarchy, for example, Council Tax, the secondary items appear below (Figure 3). A button to access additional council tax topics is provided with the secondary navigation elements. Activating this takes the user to a page with the full range of Council Tax topics within the sites Information Architecture (Figure 4).

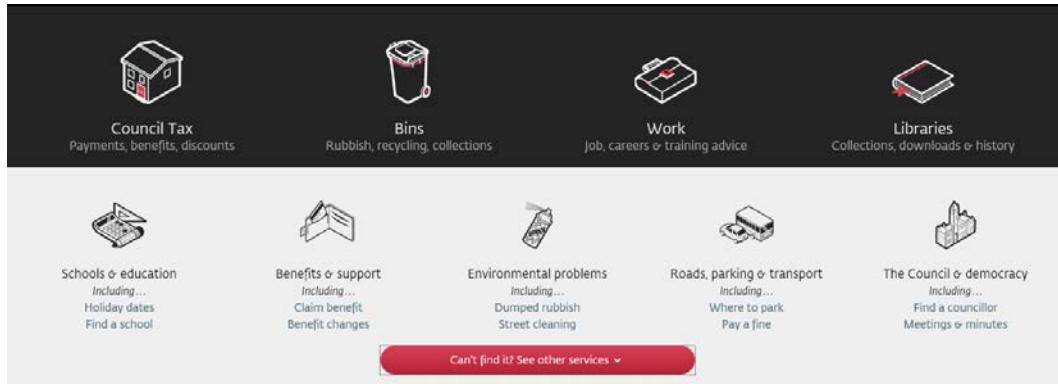


Figure 2 – Primary navigation.



Figure 3 – Secondary navigation; Council Tax.



Figure 4 – Full range of navigation element; Council Tax.

The site presents a relatively small selection of ‘core’ links on the homepage and then allowing the user to view secondary elements in the accordion. By delivering the navigation elements fashion, while keeping the users’ focus narrow, the navigation mechanism of the site has the potential to be effective as it does not present the user with unnecessary or superfluous content.

On potential limitation of the homepage design is the presence of a scroll stopper. A scroll stopper occurs when the visual appearance of elements on a page may indicate to the user that they have reached the bottom of the page. Figure 5 shows a possible scroll stopper on the Manchester City Council homepage. The visual appearance of the two rows of navigation followed by an image may prevent users from scrolling down past the large image to see the rest of the content present at the bottom of the screen (Figure 6).

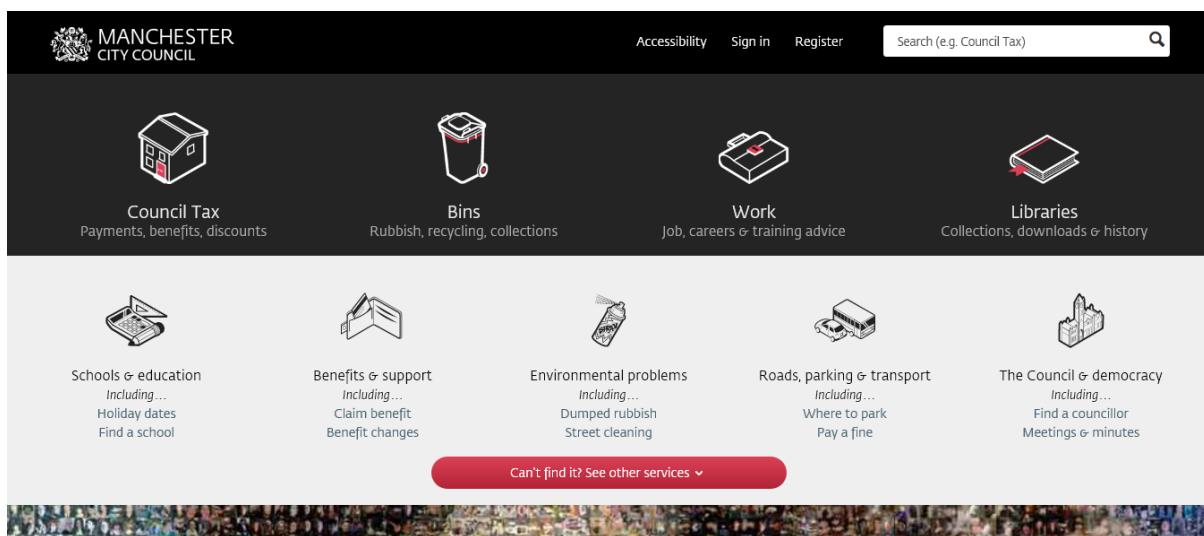


Figure 5 – Possible scroll stopper.

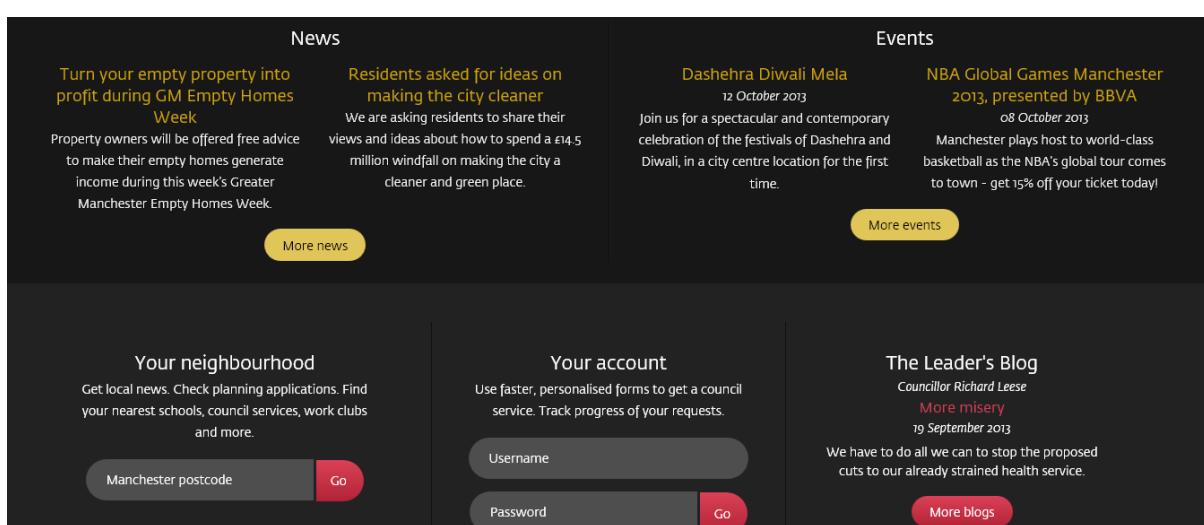

 A screenshot of the Manchester City Council website homepage, focusing on the bottom section. It features three main columns: 'News' (with stories about GM Empty Homes Week and residents making the city cleaner), 'Events' (with events like Dashehra Diwali Mela and NBA Global Games Manchester), and 'Your neighbourhood' (with a search bar for Manchester postcode). To the right are sections for 'Your account' (log in with username and password) and 'The Leader's Blog' (by Councillor Richard Leese, discussing proposed cuts to health services).

Figure 6 – Content at bottom of screen.

Copeland Borough Council

This website groups the content into six primary categories with a pop-up menu implemented which displays the main sub-categories (Figure 7).

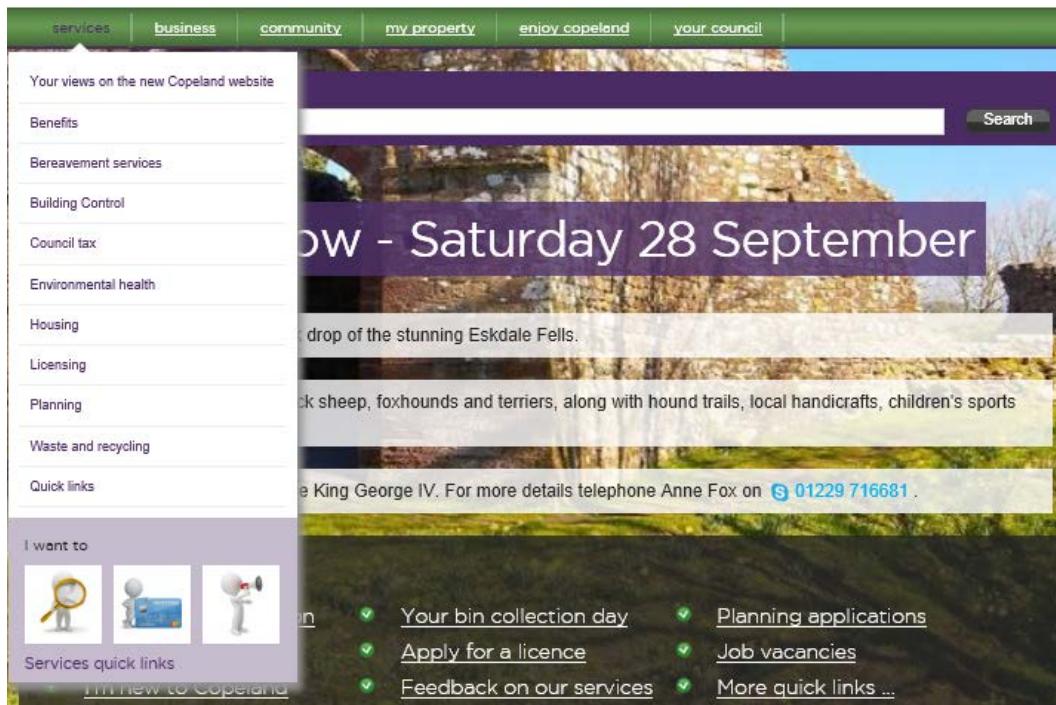


Figure 7 – Primary Navigation elements.

The website also presents a series of 'Top Tasks' in a prominent position on the homepage. This should ensure that users can access these quickly.

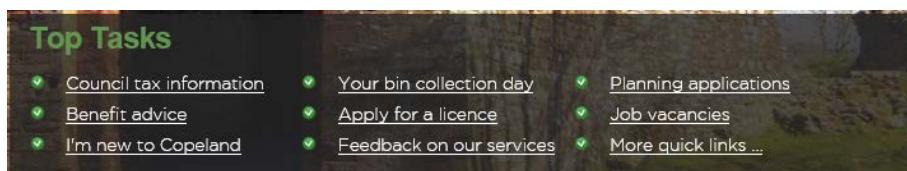


Figure 8 – Quick access to top tasks.

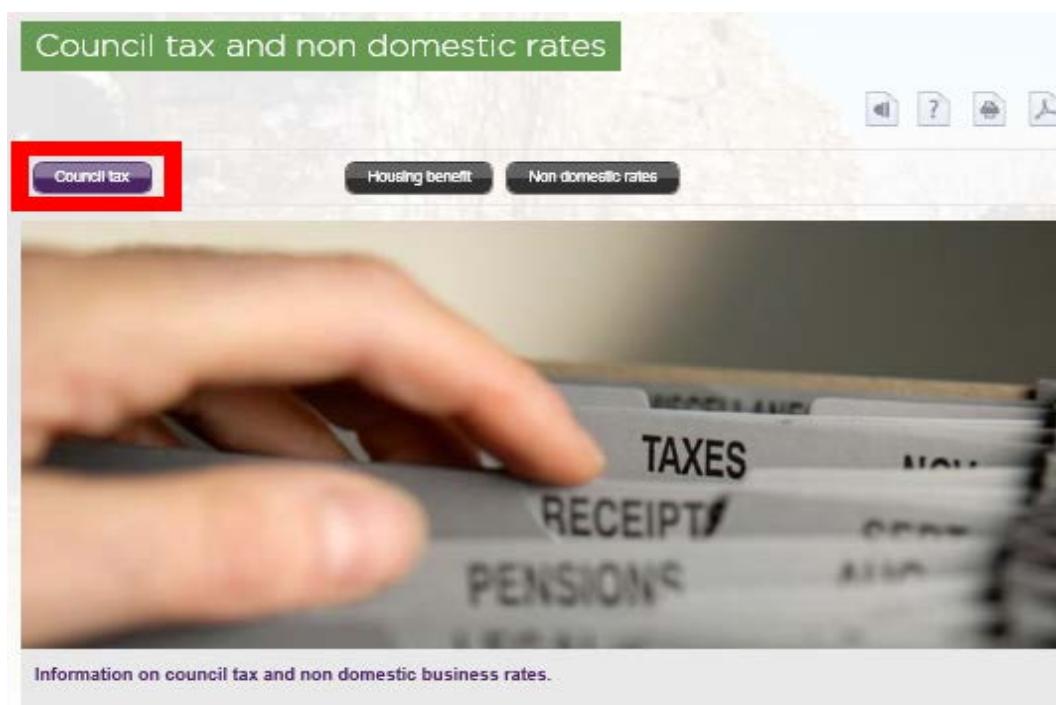
This website also supplements some of the textual links with icons (Figure 8). Unlike the Manchester Council website (and others) these icons could be considered abstract and the meaning of them is not immediately apparent on first glance. Also, they are not supplemented by clear text labels and the user must hover over them to view a tooltip.



Figure 8 – Poor use of icons.

While the primary navigation mechanism of this site is logical and intuitive once we navigate further into the site, the navigation is less effective.

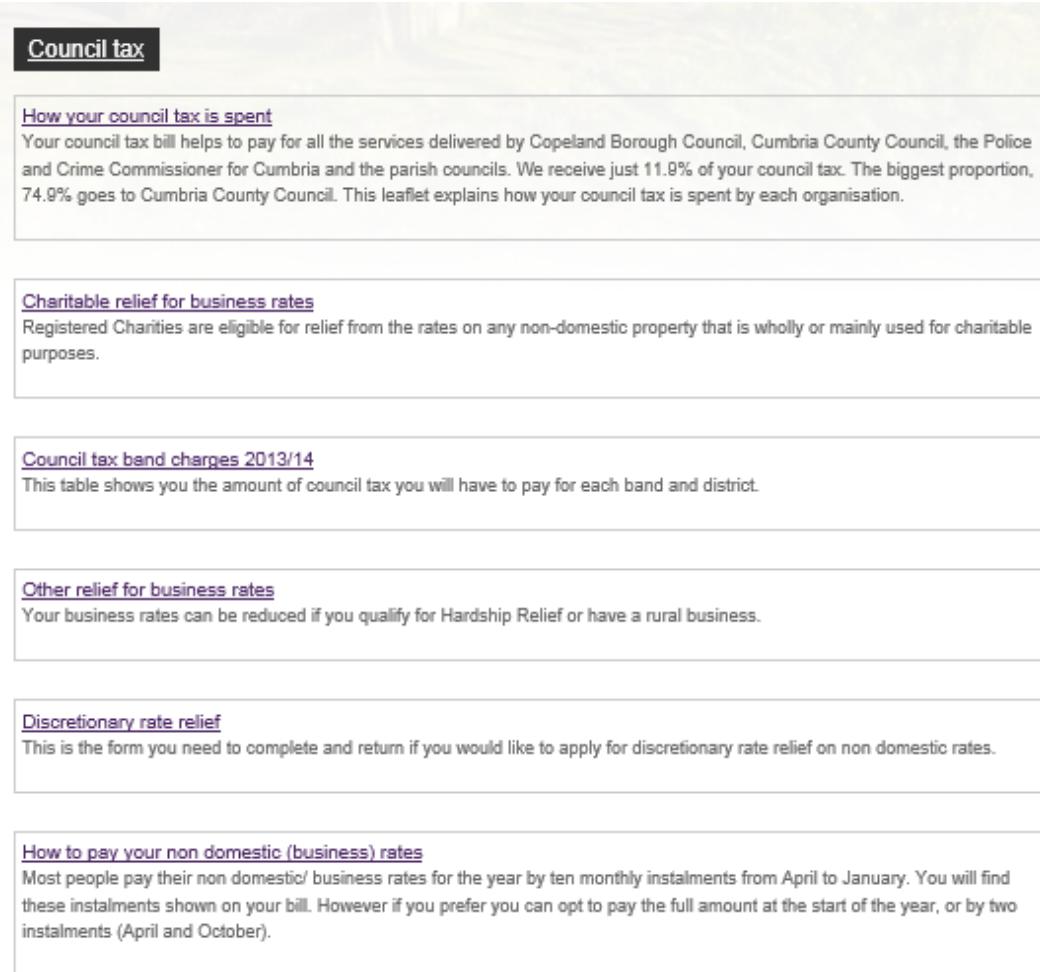
Figure 9 shows the page which is displayed upon selecting the Council Tax link from the services menu. We might reasonably assume this is the main Council Tax page but additional content can be accessed from the Council Tax button (highlighted) which is presented in Figure 10.



- Council tax**
- [What it is and council tax band information](#)
 - [Discounts available](#) - including information about empty properties
 - [Explaining the changes to council tax discounts for empty properties](#)
 - [Second adult rebate](#)
 - [How to pay your council tax](#)
 - [Request a council tax payment card](#)
 - [Set up a direct debit](#)
 - [Council tax leaflet that explains where your money goes](#)

Figure 9 – Page accessed from main Council Tax link.

The duplication of link items labelled ‘Council Tax’ and the fact that it links to similar, related content are spread across two separate pages suggests that the content of this website is not organised as effectively as it could be. This is supported by the results of the benchmarking exercise.



Council tax

How your council tax is spent
Your council tax bill helps to pay for all the services delivered by Copeland Borough Council, Cumbria County Council, the Police and Crime Commissioner for Cumbria and the parish councils. We receive just 11.8% of your council tax. The biggest proportion, 74.9% goes to Cumbria County Council. This leaflet explains how your council tax is spent by each organisation.

Charitable relief for business rates
Registered Charities are eligible for relief from the rates on any non-domestic property that is wholly or mainly used for charitable purposes.

Council tax band charges 2013/14
This table shows you the amount of council tax you will have to pay for each band and district.

Other relief for business rates
Your business rates can be reduced if you qualify for Hardship Relief or have a rural business.

Discretionary rate relief
This is the form you need to complete and return if you would like to apply for discretionary rate relief on non domestic rates.

How to pay your non domestic (business) rates
Most people pay their non domestic/ business rates for the year by ten monthly instalments from April to January. You will find these instalments shown on your bill. However if you prefer you can opt to pay the full amount at the start of the year, or by two instalments (April and October).

Figure 10 – Information accessed from Council Tax button.

Wigan Council

This website groups the content into three main categories; Resident, Business and Council. This categorisation is logical and broadly reflects the three main areas of Council business. The site uses a simple style of presentation with clear, intuitive labels and icons. Figure 11 presents the primary navigation elements displayed from the Residents tab. Similar to the Manchester Council website, secondary navigation elements are displayed using an accordion style when selecting one of the links. Figure 12 shows those which are displayed when selecting the Bins and Recycling.

By grouping the content of the site into three logical areas, presenting all of the primary navigation elements of these categories on one page and displaying secondary navigation elements in an accordion without taking the user away from their first page, the information architecture of this website has the potential to be quick and effective for users to locate information they are looking for.

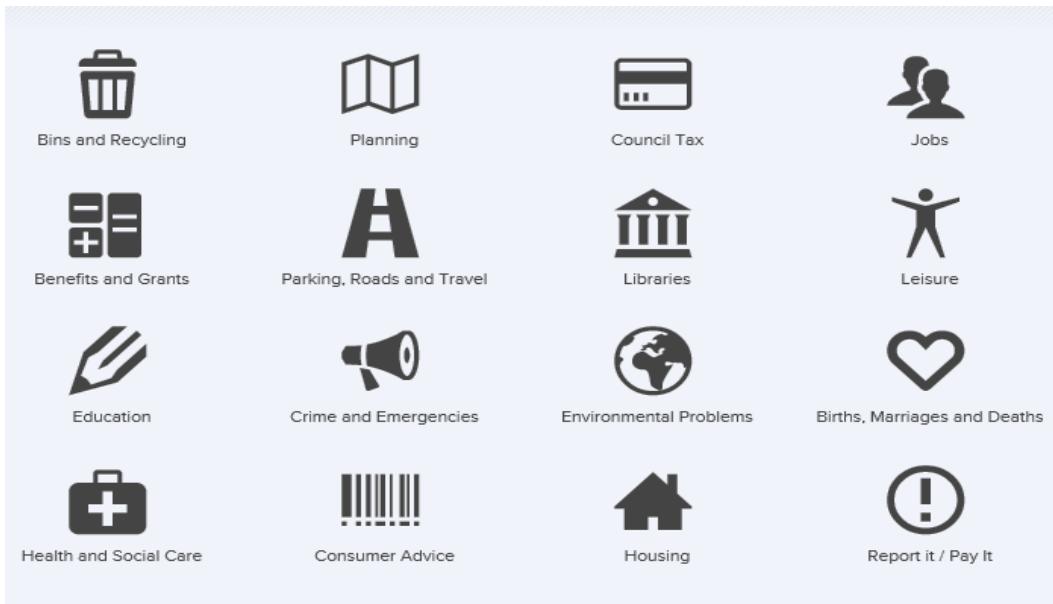


Figure 11 – Navigation elements; Resident tab.

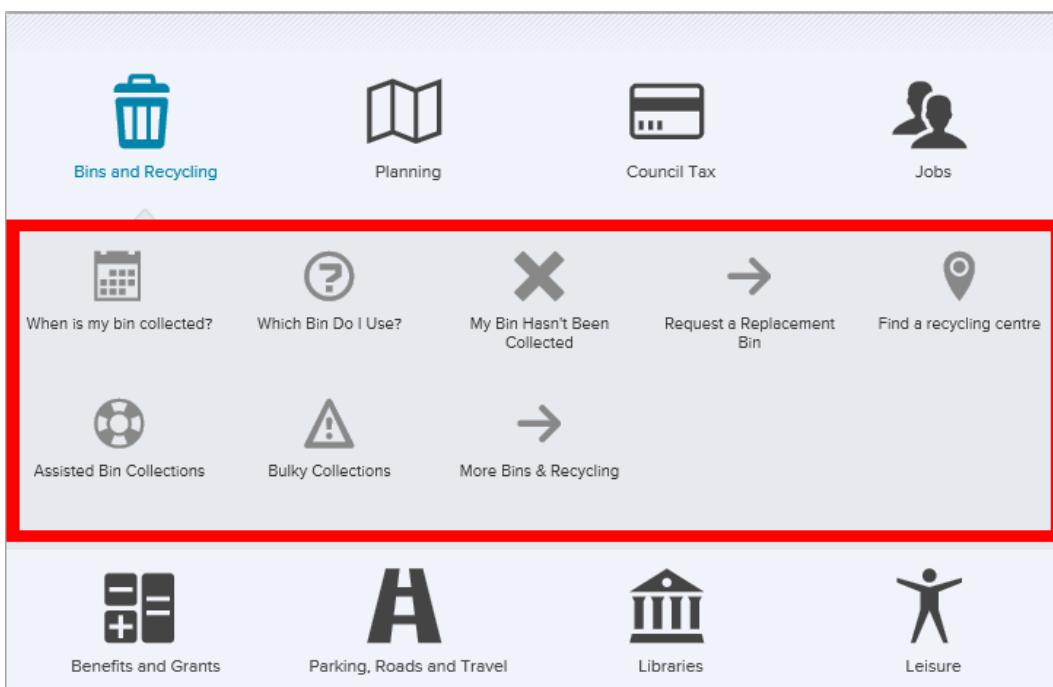


Figure 12 – Secondary navigation elements

The Wigan Council website also presents the user with an A-Z list of links so they have additional flexibility over how they navigate to more specific information (Figure 13).



Figure 13 – A-Z list of links.

One possible limitation of the design of the Wigan Council homepage is the presence of a scroll stopper. Figure 15 shows the homepage viewed on the machine used for testing. The visual design of the page suggests that this is all content available on the page; the A-Z list of links is positioned below the visible elements at the bottom of the page. A user may not be immediately aware that this is available.

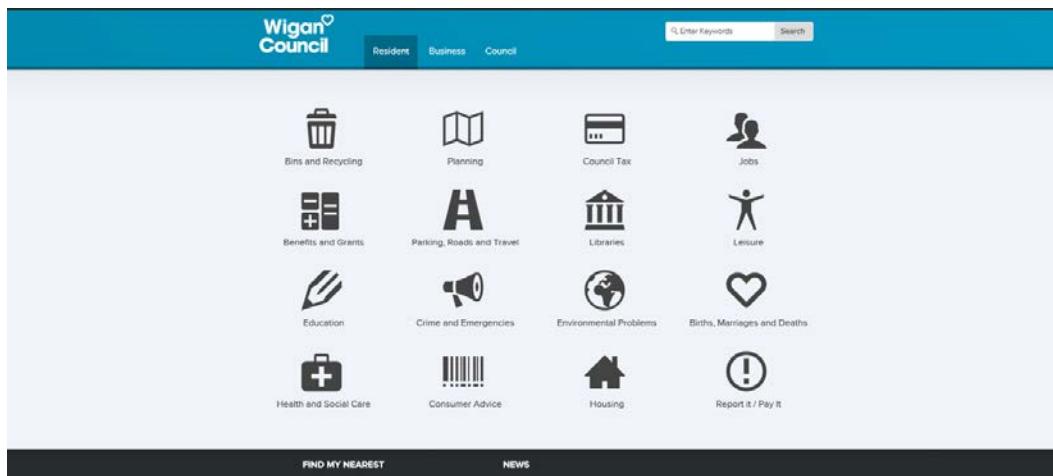


Figure 14 – Possible scroll stopper; Wigan Council homepage.

Coventry City Council

The Coventry City Council adopts a more conventional approach when presenting their navigation mechanism. This website offers the user flexibility over how they access content by providing a number of different ways for the user to access information.

The website groups the navigation elements into four main areas (Figure 15). At the top of the page (1) are four clearly labelled calls to action; Apply; Report; Pay Online and Feedback. The wording of these items provides a clear indication of their purpose and selecting them causes previously hidden navigation elements to appear (2) which provides the user with what we assume are the most commonly completed online tasks.

On the left of the page (3) we see that content is divided up into twelve clearly labelled categories (e.g.: housing, health and social care); this is supplemented by an A-Z list of links (4) which provides the user with the functionality to look for more specific information. In the middle of the page (5) we see that a list of seven items is provided. Again, we assume that these reflect the most commonly visited areas of the site. Providing links to these items in a prominent position on the home page should ensure that users can accomplish these common tasks efficiently.

While the homepage does contain a large amount of textual content when compared to the Manchester and Wigan homepages, there is sufficient space for items not to be too densely positioned and the screen does not appear too cluttered.

1

APPLY	REPORT	PAY ONLINE	FEEDBACK																																
2	<table border="1"> <tr> <td>Job vacancies</td> <td>Potholes</td> <td>Council tax</td> <td>Comments, compliments and complaints</td> </tr> <tr> <td>School places</td> <td>Streetlighting problems</td> <td>Penalty charge notice</td> <td>School complaint</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Planning permission</td> <td>Empty properties</td> <td>NNDR (Business rates)</td> <td>Social care complaint</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Housing</td> <td>Planning enforcement</td> <td>Other payments</td> <td>Food business complaint</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Housing Benefit</td> <td>Issues</td> <td>About online payments and security</td> <td>Have your say</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Parking Permits</td> <td>Noise nuisance</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Community Support</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>Grant</td> <td></td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>			Job vacancies	Potholes	Council tax	Comments, compliments and complaints	School places	Streetlighting problems	Penalty charge notice	School complaint	Planning permission	Empty properties	NNDR (Business rates)	Social care complaint	Housing	Planning enforcement	Other payments	Food business complaint	Housing Benefit	Issues	About online payments and security	Have your say	Parking Permits	Noise nuisance			Community Support				Grant			
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Housing Benefit	Issues	About online payments and security	Have your say																																
Parking Permits	Noise nuisance																																		
Community Support																																			
Grant																																			

3

Home

- [Advice and benefits](#)
- [Business and licensing](#)
- [Health and social care](#)
- [Housing](#)
- [In my area](#)
- [Jobs, employment and training](#)
- [Parking, travel and streets](#)
- [Planning and regeneration](#)
- [Recycling, rubbish and waste](#)
- [Schools, libraries and learning](#)
- [Sports, leisure and tourism](#)
- [Your Council and democracy](#)

4

A to Z of services

A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	
N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z

5

Welcome to Coventry City Council

- [Bin and recycling collections](#)
- [Term dates](#)
- [Roadworks](#)
- [Council tax](#)
- [Library catalogue](#)
- [Council meetings and decisions](#)
- [Car parking](#)

Find out about stop smoking services in Coventry

Figure 15 – Coventry Council; Grouping of navigation elements.

Liverpool City Council

As with the Coventry Council website, the Liverpool Council website adopts a more conventional approach to the way its presents its Information Architecture on the homepage (Figure 16).

It organises information into four main categories (1): Resident; Business; Council and Mayor. In the panel in the top-left of the homepage (2), quick links to areas of key functionality and information (e.g.: Fault Reporting; Refuse Collection dates) are provided.

In the main content panel of the page (3) six main categories and sub-categories of resident information are presented, with links to an additional nine main areas of the website below this.

An A-Z list of links (4) is presented below this to provide the user with the flexibility to find specific information not immediately visible on-screen.

1 liverpool.gov.uk Resident Business Council Mayor Search Liverpool City Council

2 **Lifestyles**
Get fit, healthy & active at a Lifestyles centre.
Find a lifestyle centre Go
Find an activity Join Lifestyles Anything else

Lifestyles: Leisure facilities
Libraries: Your library
Bins: Your collection dates
Report it: Faults
My Neighbourhood

3 **Council Tax**
Pay it Discounts & exemptions How much? Problems paying your Council Tax? View all

4 **a to z of services** a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

Leisure, Parks & Events
Lifestyles | Events | Parks & greenspaces | Markets | Tourists | [View all](#)

Libraries
Find a library | Join a library | Reserve & renew | Archives & family history | Children's resources | [View all](#)

Bins & Recycling
Bin collection dates | Bulky item collection | What goes in my bins? | Find a tip | Report an issue | [View all](#)

Parking, Travel & Roads
Pay a parking fine | Council car parks | Residents parking permit | Roadworks | Cycling | [View all](#)

Schools & Learning
School admissions | School term dates | Adult learning | Early years and childcare | [View all](#)

More...
Jobs & training | Planning | Benefits & grants | Births, marriages, deaths | Crime & emergencies | Health & social care | Housing | Pests, pollution & food hygiene | Consumer advice

support | sitemap | contact | news it's liverpool

Figure 16 – Grouping of elements; Liverpool Council homepage.

Shropshire Council

The Shropshire Council website adopts a similar approach to the Coventry Council website (Figure 17). ‘Top Tasks’ are accessed from a tab at the top of the page (1). This has the potential to give the user quick access to the most commonly visited areas of the site.

The main content of the site is organised into eleven categories (e.g.: Advice and Benefits; Leisure and Culture) and are presented on the left of the page with clear text labels (2).

Below this, are four clear calls to actions (3) with which the user can perform key tasks: Apply for it; Pay for it; Report It and Have your say. These are supplemented by additional links which describe the functions in more detail to provide the user with more clarity.

The screenshot shows the Shropshire Council website homepage. At the top left is the AbilityNet logo. To its right is the page title "Usability Investigation Report". Below the title is a navigation bar with links to "Home" and "Contact us". On the far right of the navigation bar is a "Top tasks" tab with the number "1" and a dropdown arrow. The main content area is divided into several sections:

- Top tasks** (highlighted with a red border):

Find a bus timetable	Services	Employment	Democracy
Find your bin day	Apply for it	Jobs at Shropshire Council	Future Council meetings
Find your councillor	Have your say	Jobs at schools	
	Pay for it		
	Report it		
- Advice and benefits** (underlined with a red border):
 - Business
 - Community and living
 - Council and democracy
 - Education and learning
 - Environment and planning
 - Health and social care
 - Housing
 - Jobs and careers
 - Leisure and culture
 - Transport and streets
- Newsflash: Teachers' strike action** (highlighted with a red border):

Find out which schools are to close on Tuesday 1 October 2013 as a result of strike action.
- Council Tax goes paperless!** (highlighted with a red border):

Would you like to receive your council tax bill by email in the future? Click here to find out more
- Apply for it** (highlighted with a red border):

Jobs, planning application, blue badge
- Pay for it** (highlighted with a red border):

Council tax, parking ticket, housing rent
- Report it** (highlighted with a red border):

Missed bin, child protection, benefit fraud
- Have your say** (highlighted with a red border):

Tell us what you think, consultations, feedback
- Shropshire Newsroom** (highlighted with a red border):

Looking for news? Find it in the new Shropshire Newsroom
- Spotlight on...** (highlighted with a red border):

Taxi licencing consultation • Licensing

Shropshire Council is proposing to vary the fees associated with the licencing of hackney carriages, private hire vehicles, operators and drivers. Have your say here.

Figure 17 – Shropshire Council website homepage.

One potential limitation of the design of this website is that the 'Top Tasks' are not immediately (or perhaps clearly) visible on entering the page. The relatively small size of control the 'Top Tasks' tab could mean that users may not immediately perceive the tab on entering the page. Given there is more than sufficient space on the page, the tab could be increased in size, be given additional visual emphasis or there is scope to have the content accessed from this tab permanently visible.

The screenshot shows the Shropshire Council website with a blue header bar. On the left is the Shropshire Council logo. To its right is a search bar with a "Search" button. Below the header is a navigation bar with links to "Home" and "Contact us". On the far right of the navigation bar is a "Top tasks" link with a dropdown arrow, which is highlighted with a red border.

Figure 18 – Top tasks link.

Edinburgh Council

This website offers the user the greatest degree of flexibility in terms of findability of information but would appear to have some fundamental usability issues. The page

presents a large amount of densely populated textual information (Figure 19). To enable users to better find content on a page, items should not be too densely positioned. Dense positioning causes clutter; excess items on a page leads to a degradation of performance when users are trying to find certain information. An uncluttered display means that all important targets are highly visible.

The dense visual design of the homepage contributes to the website having the potential for a high navigational burden. Navigational burden is a cognitive barrier to usability which considers how much effort the user must make to locate and operate relevant information and functionality. The more interface elements, controls and content that is on screen at any one time, the more effort the user must put into locating relevant content and the higher the navigational burden.

At the top of the page, links to key functionality (1) (e.g.: Pay it; Report it) are presented; many of these are duplicated in the panel of the right of the page (3). An A-Z list of links (2) is presented towards the top of the page. This has the potential to be more easily seen and accessed than on those websites which present this at the bottom of the page.

On the right of the page, the main information of the Edinburgh Council website is divided into twelve categories (4). Each of these has a clear label and is also supplemented by additional links to ensure they are more easily understood.

Below this is a feature to browse the website depending on a number of user groups (5), for example, Parents or Older People. This is unique to the Edinburgh website and it is unclear if this would be useful to users.

THE CITY OF EDINBURGH COUNCIL

1

Home Services A-Z Contact us Pay it Request it Report it Have your say

2

A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Browse by Topic **4**

- > About your Council
Councillors, Council Tax ...
- > Business and trade
Venues, Scientific Services ...
- > Community life and leisure
Libraries, Sports facilities ...
- > Education and learning
Adult Education, Schools ...
- > Housing
Applications, Repairs ...
- > Jobs and employment
Council Jobs ...
- > Law and licensing
Birth, marriage and death, Licences ...
- > Planning and the environment
Planning Applications, Conservation ...
- > Rubbish and recycling
Household rubbish, Recycling ...
- > Social care and health
Ask for support, Foster Care ...
- > Tourism and visitor attractions
Museums, Parks ...
- > Transport and streets
Parking, Roads ...

Browse by Audience **5**

- > Older people
- > Young people
- > Parents
- > Gàidhlig / Gaelic
- > New to Edinburgh

3

Most popular Report it Request it Pay it

- > Coalition Pledges
- > Apply for a Council job
- > Check bin collections
- > Comment on planning applications
- > Find leisure centres and swimming pools
- > Find parking zones
- > Pay Council tax
- > Renew library books
- > School term dates
- > View planning applications
- > Lord Provost's blog
- > Browse the adult education programme
- > Check recycling collections
- > Find your Councillors
- > Find out about parking
- > Find waste recycling centres
- > Pay parking tickets
- > Report a road/pothole or street light
- > Search Committee minutes

4



Older Persons Safety Events

Safety events aimed at keeping older people safe in their homes

1 2 3 4 5 Pause

5

Spotlight



Webcasting
Watch our webcast

Top Story

Hundreds of young people still to benefit from wage subsidy

Published 30 September 2013

A key objective of the Edinburgh Economic Strategy is to boost employment. The recent improvement in the Scottish economy means that small businesses in Edinburgh will look to expand and recruit.

[News centre](#) | [Council News RSS](#)

In your area

Find services Select...

Postcode

[Advanced postcode search](#)

Have your say

Comment on a current consultation

- > [Trees In the City](#) closes 23 September 2013
- > [Day Services Consultation](#) closes 14 October 2013
- > [Edible Edinburgh: a Sustainable Food City](#) closes 18 October 2013
- > [Joint Carers Strategy Consultation](#) closes 31 October 2013

Find out how to take part in the work of the Council

> [Have your say](#)

Figure 19 – Densely populated homepage.

Benchmarking Activity

In order to test the overall effectiveness of each websites Information Architecture we performed a benchmarking activity. To complete this we performed ten pre-defined tasks across the ten websites. The tasks involved the evaluator attempting to perform common tasks as well as find specific information. To reduce the learned effect, we performed each tasks in sequence across all ten websites rather than performing all ten tasks on each website in sequence. The tasks were:

- Pay your council tax
- Find out school term dates
- Find population and census information
- Report broken street lights
- Find information about the city's economic condition and strategy
- Find scrutiny committee reports
- Apply for council housing
- Complain about a missed bin collection
- Find out information about welfare reform
- Find where a leisure centre close to me is

For tasks which involved an action, such as paying council tax or reporting faults, we class the task as complete once we navigated to the correct page. For information finding tasks, we class the task as complete when we navigate to the page containing specific information.

When completing the benchmarking activity we captured three key usability metrics; task completion rate to measure effectiveness, task completion time to measure efficiency and number of errors to capture error rate. For the purposes of this investigation, an error was defined as the evaluator following an incorrect navigation path, for example by clicking on a link to a page which did not contain the required information.

A matrix containing the results of the benchmarking activity is presented on the following page. We then rank the websites according to the following criteria:

1. Task completion rate.
2. Total duration required to complete all tasks.
3. Average time taken per successful task.
4. Error rate.

Task/Website	Manchester	Copeland	Wigan	Coventry	Liverpool	Shropshire	Edinburgh
Pay council tax.	27.5 seconds.	32.5 seconds.	17 seconds.	19 Seconds	17 seconds.	32 seconds.	36 seconds.
Find out school term dates.	4 seconds.	Abandoned after 2 minutes.	14.5 seconds.	19 seconds	9 seconds.	8 seconds.	14 seconds.
Report broken street light.	14.5 seconds.	Abandoned after 1 minute 40 seconds.	30 seconds; 1 error.	42.5 seconds; 1 error.	8.4 seconds.	15 seconds.	9 seconds.
Find population and census information.	50 seconds; 2 errors.	Abandoned after 1 minute 45 seconds.	58 seconds; 2 errors.	30 seconds; 2 errors.	1 minute, 5 seconds; 2 errors.	20.5 seconds.	1 minute, 11 seconds; 2 errors.
Complain about a missed bin collection.	8 seconds.	Abandoned after 1 minute 30 seconds.	5 seconds.	25 seconds; 1 error.	8 seconds.	25 seconds.	32.5 seconds; 1 error.
Find nearest leisure centre	12 seconds.	28 seconds; 1 error.	27 seconds; 1 error.	15 seconds.	5 seconds.	8 seconds.	7.5 seconds.
Apply for council housing.	1 minute, 10 seconds; 1 error.	1 minute, 28 seconds; 2 errors.	21 seconds.	13.5 seconds	37 seconds.	13 seconds.	6 seconds.
Find out information about welfare reform.	10 seconds.	25 seconds (general information only).	13.5 seconds.	25 seconds.	25 seconds.	14 seconds.	1 minute, 22 seconds; 2 errors.
Find scrutiny committee reports.	5 seconds.	16.5 seconds.	15.5 seconds.	13.5 seconds.	14 seconds.	15.5 seconds.	35 seconds.
Find information about the city's economic condition and strategy.	26 seconds (General information only).	30 seconds (General information only).	22 seconds (General information only).	25 seconds; 2 errors (General information only).	20 seconds (General information only).	52 seconds; 1 error (General information only).	17 seconds (General information only).

Overall Summary of Results

	Manchester	Copeland	Wigan	Coventry	Liverpool	Shropshire	Edinburgh
Tasks Completed (%)	100%	60%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Total time taken	227 seconds.	635 seconds.	223.5 seconds.	227.5 seconds.	208.4 seconds.	203 seconds.	310 seconds.
Average time per successful task	22.5 seconds.	36.6 seconds.	22.5 seconds.	23 seconds.	21 seconds.	20 seconds.	31 seconds.
Number of Errors	3	3	4	6	2	1	5
Rank	3	8	4	5	2	1	7

Discussion

The results of the benchmarking activity indicate that the overall level of effectiveness was similar across five of the seven websites.

Shropshire Council performed best overall, closely followed by the Liverpool Council website. With the Shropshire website, the simple categorisation of links and clear labelling meant it was possible to complete most tasks within a few click of the homepage. For example, when finding a Leisure Centre, the following steps through the navigation mechanism was used.

1. Homepage (Leisure and culture link).
2. Leisure and Culture page (Leisure centres in Shropshire link).
3. Find a leisure centre page (Choose leisure centre drop down menu to complete task).

Similarly, although the Liverpool Council website presents a large number of links on the homepage they are presented in a large, clear font and the information is not too dense. As with the Shropshire website, it was possible to complete most tasks within a few clicks of the homepage. For example, when finding information on welfare reform the following navigation path was followed.

1. Homepage (Benefits and Grants link from footer).
2. Benefits and Grants page (Benefits and advice link).
3. Benefits and advice page (downloaded ‘Read more information about the Benefit Cap’ document to compete task).

The Manchester and Wigan websites both adopt a slightly different concept. They use simple text links supplemented by icons and an accordion mechanism to hide secondary navigation items while keeping the user on the same page. As such, the overall effectiveness of the information architecture was broadly the same. The fact that both websites place a large number of primary navigation items on the homepage means that it was generally possible to reach information quickly. For example, on the Manchester Council website is was possible to access commonly requested information quickly, in some cases, within one click of the homepage. When performing the task to find School Term dates, this was completed within one click as a ‘Holiday Dates’ was visible under a School and Education heading.

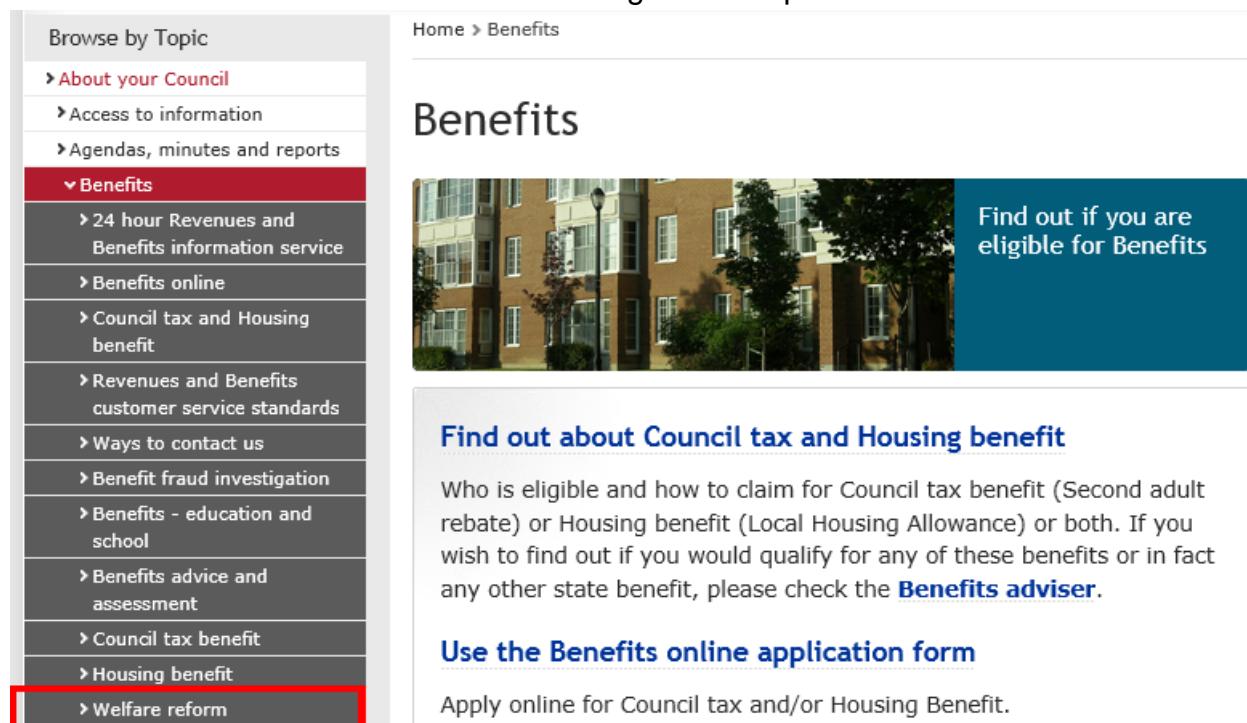
These websites performed less well for more complex tasks, for example when finding Population and Census information. On the Wigan Council website, it was necessary to use the A-Z index at the bottom of the page to complete the task as there was not an obvious link to this information in the main content of the page.

Both the Edinburgh Council and Copeland websites performed very poorly. With the Edinburgh Council website it was often the case that with the more complex tasks, the initial action to take to complete the task was not clear, and even when in the

right area of the site, the dense positioning of elements meant the correct item was not always clearly visible. For example when completing the task related to finding information on welfare reform, the evaluator performed the following actions:

1. Examine Home Page and selected Health and Social Care link from left menu.
2. Examined Health and Social Care page before returning to home page.
3. Examined Home Page and selected Social Care and Health from left menu.
4. Examined Social Care and Health page and returned to home page.
5. Retuned to Home page and examined it. Selected 'B' (Benefits) from A-Z menu at top of page and selected 'Benefits Online' link.
6. Select benefits home page link to go to Benefits main page.
7. Examined left hand menu and selected Welfare reform link (Figure 20).

Selected Information on benefit changes to complete the task.



Browse by Topic

Home > Benefits

Benefits



Find out if you are eligible for Benefits

Find out about Council tax and Housing benefit

Who is eligible and how to claim for Council tax benefit (Second adult rebate) or Housing benefit (Local Housing Allowance) or both. If you wish to find out if you would qualify for any of these benefits or in fact any other state benefit, please check the [Benefits adviser](#).

Use the Benefits online application form

Apply online for Council tax and/or Housing Benefit.

Figure 20 – Links not always clearly visible.

The Copeland website appeared to be very badly organised. The task to find School Term dates was abandoned after 2 minutes. The evaluator explored both the 'Services' and 'Community' drop-down menus and Quick Links page. They selected A to Z listings link from footer links and selected 'S' (school) and 'E' (Education) and then abandoned task.

The link was located in the 'Web Page' section of the Community quick links; however this is not clear, logical or intuitive. In addition, it was positioned in a large list of link it was difficult to locate easily.

Web page

[Going to university](#)
[Weddings and civil partnerships](#)
[The Copeland Community Fund](#)
[Whitehaven, Egremont and District Credit Union](#)
[Divorce and separation advice](#)
[The new Copeland website](#)
[The Home Heat Helpline](#)
[Volunteering, working abroad and gap year travel](#)
[Schools and childcare](#)
[Copeland's hidden gems](#)
[Divorce and legal costs](#)
[Further studying and other options](#)
[Family history](#)
[Impact Furniture Services](#)
[Divorce and children](#)
[Haven Sent - Cumbria's biggest WI group](#)
[I'm new to Copeland](#)
[Health, disabilities and young people](#)
[Work and money](#)
[Are you thinking of moving house?](#)
[First step](#)
[Copeland Youth Council and Youth Forums](#)
[Family mediation and counselling](#)
[Too young to vote?](#)
[Whitehaven Record Office and Local Studies Library](#)
[North Lakes Foodbank](#)
[Get your electric blanket checked for winter](#)

Figure 21 – Poor organisation of Information; large number of links under generic ‘Web Page’ heading.

Focus Group One

The first focus group was held in the afternoon of Tuesday 24th September; participant information and a summary of the key points from the discussion are described in this section.

Participant Information

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Demographic Information
1	Male	18	Undergraduate Student
2	Female	45	Council Tenant
3	Female	65	Council Tenant; Pensioner
4	Female	56	Part-time retail worker
5	Male	52	Council Tenant
6	Male	67	Pensioner; Private Housing

Participant Background

All participants had been lifelong residents of Birmingham. Local leisure facilities used by participants include museums, sports centres and leisure facilities and Sutton Park Nature Reserve. All but one participant used the internet on a daily business; the other described their web use as weekly.

All participants described themselves as competent when using the web. Typical activities the participants conduct online are banking, travel booking, motoring information, eBay and leisure information, particularly what to do in the local area.

Web Use

One participant commented that they liked the MSN homepage (Figure 22) as it had a range of content (e.g.: news, sport and videos) and was very interactive. They commented that they had become very familiar with it, so found it easy to use.

One participant commented that they particularly liked the navigation mechanism of the John Lewis (Figure 23) and NEXT (Figure 24) websites as they were clear and intuitive. Conversely, they commented that they didn't use the H&M website anymore (Figure 25) as they felt the navigation was very difficult and they could not find what they were looking for.

One participant mentioned that they found the Amazon website (Figure 26) very good as the navigation is clear, easy to use and intuitive in that you know what information is behind each link. One participant agreed, commenting that the website was 'idiot proof'.

One participant commented that speed of navigation was of great importance to them – they mentioned specifically that the Argos website was slow. Participants were encouraged to discuss navigation mechanisms in more detail and opinions were mixed. Some participants liked websites that displayed a large amount of links, especially along the top and left of the screen, however, others commented that they found these websites messy and cluttered. One user mentioned the IKEA website (Figure 27) as having a good navigation system as it was clear and easy to use.

Finally, one participant commented that they often accessed websites on an iPad and found drop-down menu difficult to use on these devices.

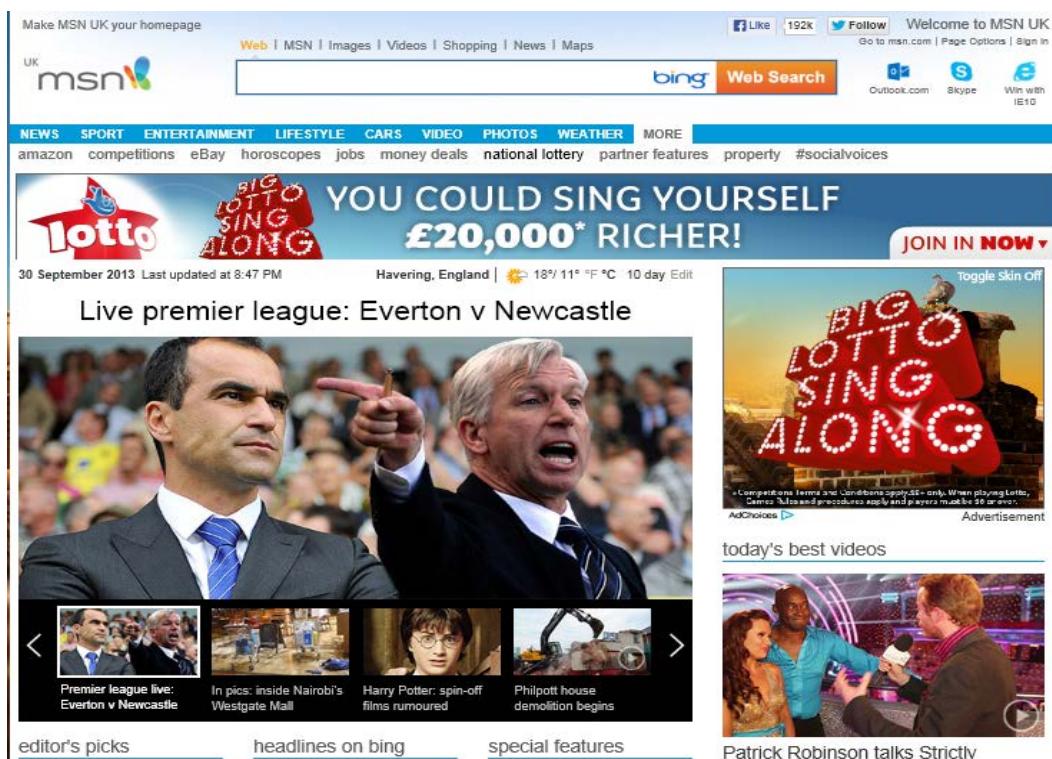


Figure 22 – MSN UK Homepage.

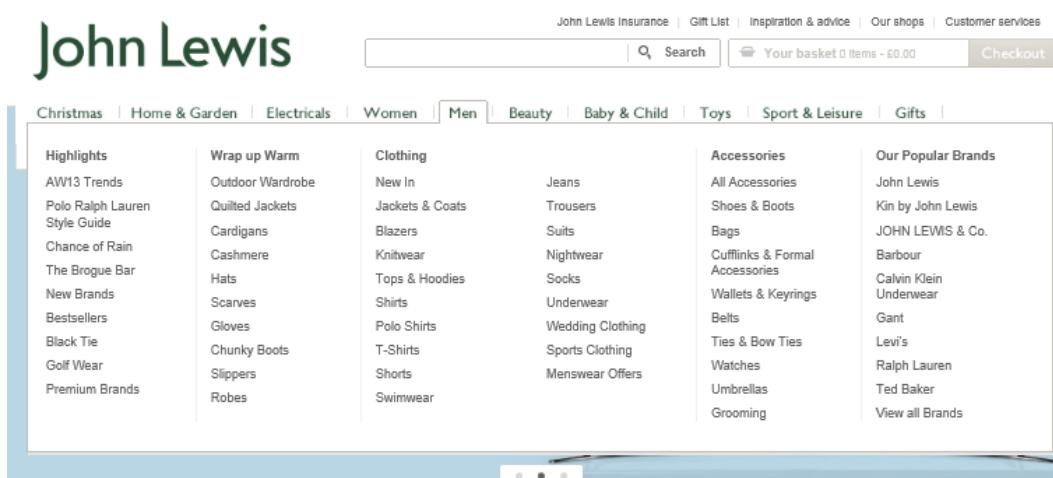


Figure 23 – John Lewis navigation menu.

The screenshot shows the 'next' website's navigation menu. At the top, there are links for 'My Account', 'Store Locator', 'Quickshop', and 'Help'. A search bar with a magnifying glass icon is followed by a link to 'Bag is empty' and a 'Checkout' button. Below the header, a navigation bar includes links for 'WOMEN', 'MEN', 'GIRLS', 'BOYS', 'SHOES', 'BRANDS', 'HOMEWARE', 'ELECTRICAL', 'FLOWERS', 'LIPSY', and 'CLEARANCE'. A dropdown menu titled 'BROWSE OUR Men SECTIONS' is open, showing categories like 'Tailoring & Suits', 'Shirt & Tie Collection', and 'Trousers & Shorts'. To the right of this menu is a grid of categories: CLOTHING (Coats & Jackets, Jeans, Knitwear, Shirts, Shorts, Sportswear, Suits, Sweat Tops & Hoodies, Swimwear, Tailoring, Ties, Trousers & Chinos, T-Shirts & Polos), ACCESSORIES (Bags & Wallets, Belts, Cufflinks, Fragrance & Grooming, Gifts & Gadgets, Hats, Scarves & Gloves, Jewellery, Luggage, Sunglasses, Watches, Beaverbrooks, Signature Collaborations), and UNDERWEAR & NIGHTWEAR (Nightwear, Socks, Underwear). There are also sections for FOOTWEAR, SHOP BY FIT, and Longer & Larger.

Figure 24 – NEXT navigation menu.

The screenshot shows the H&M website's navigation menu. At the top, there are links for 'LOG IN', 'MY H&M', 'SHOPPING BAG', and 'CHECKOUT'. Below the header, a navigation bar includes links for 'STORE LOCATOR', 'CUSTOMER SERVICE', 'ORDER FROM CATALOGUE', 'NEWSLETTER SIGNUP', 'United Kingdom', and 'All prices in GBP'. A dropdown menu titled 'H & M LIFE • LADIES • MEN • KIDS • HOME • SALE' is open, showing categories like 'View All', 'New Arrivals', 'T-shirts & Vests', 'Blazers & Suits', 'Jackets & Coats', 'Trousers', 'Jeans', 'Shorts', 'Sportswear', 'Swimwear', 'Underwear & Socks', 'Accessories', and 'Shoes'. To the right of this menu are sections for 'THIS WEEK' (Premium Quality products, Conscious - Sustainable Style, This Week's Bestsellers) and 'INSPIRATION' (David Beckham, Bodywear, Autumn hangout, Mauritz Archive Collection, Our Best Basics, Jackets & coats, Trousers, now £7.49). There is also a small image of a person's shoulder and hair.

Figure 25 – H&M website navigation.

The screenshot shows the Amazon.co.uk website's navigation menu. At the top, there are links for 'Your Amazon.co.uk', 'Today's Deals', 'Gift Cards', 'Sell', and 'Help'. A dropdown menu titled 'Shop by Department' is open, showing categories like 'MP3s & Cloud Player', 'Amazon Cloud Drive', 'Kindle', 'Appstore for Android', 'Digital Games & Software', 'Audible Audiobooks', 'Books', 'Music, Games, Film & TV', 'Electronics & Computers', 'Home, Garden, Pets & DIY', 'Toys, Children & Baby', 'Clothes, Shoes & Watches', 'Sports & Outdoors', 'Grocery, Health & Beauty', 'Car & Motorbike', and 'Full Shop Directory'. To the right of this menu is a section for 'Music, Games, Film & TV' with links for 'Music', 'MP3 Downloads', 'Musical Instruments & DJ', 'Film & TV', 'Blu-ray', and 'PC & Video Games'. Below this is an advertisement for 'amazontrade-in' featuring a PS3 console and a Xbox controller, with the text 'Looking to Upgrade? Trade in and get great value. It's free, easy and convenient to send your items.' and a link to 'Get started'.

Figure 26 – Amazon website navigation.



Figure 27 – IKEA website navigation.

When discussing how they would go about finding information two of the six participants would use a search engine, namely Google and Yahoo, and use a specific search term. One participant said they would always go to a specific website, select one of the categories and narrow down the search from there. One other participant agreed that they would use this in addition to using a search engine. The remaining participants commented they would go to a specific website and use the built in search function to find the information they want.

One participant commented that they would start to get frustrated if they could not find information they wanted within 2 minutes, but others commented that they had no problem with spending time on a website as long as they could find it eventually. One participant commented they would regularly spend 30 mins. – 1 hour on websites for tasks such as booking a holiday, for example.

Council Engagement

Participants commented that they had previously used the Council website to search for leisure activities and for adult education courses and other education related topics and had easily found the information they wanted.

By far the most common service used by participants was the bulky waste collection service; participants commented that they were very pleased with this service.

One participant commented that they often used the reporting function of the website to report – street lighting if one has gone out and finds this really easy. They would always use on-line services as they find phoning a complete hassle.

One participant had used the website to look for funding opportunities as they volunteer in the mental health sector. In the end they could not find the information online but contacted the Council by writing and telephoning.

One participant felt they were always directed to the website when they did try to call the council and finds getting to speak to someone difficult.

One participant commented that they enjoyed the 'What's On' feature that they received by email. They liked this information, particularly the photographs, but can't find this information on the website.

Typically, participants used the Council website to report problems or issues. Specifically, reporting potholes in the road, fly tipping and pest control. The outcome

of the reporting was always successful but they did not like having to pay for pest control services – others agreed with this.

One participant had previously contacted the council about having a dropped kerb installed – they commented this information was easy to find.

One participant commented that dealing with the council online is better than it ever has been. They also commented that when they do deal with people on the phone they are helpful and seem well trained. One other participant commented that they can generally find information quickly and they like the website.

One participant commented negatively about having to register with the website. They could understand this was necessary when a service is paid for, but not when it is free. They specifically commented that they didn't want to have to register and sign in just to get a sofa collected. They felt it was just another password they had to remember and they also remembered getting stuck with the CAPTCHA security mechanism and

One participant felt that they can find most information they want on the Council website – perhaps not 100%, but he would be 80-90% confident they could achieve anything.

Participants were generally of the consensus that they would use the internet to find information on Council services rather than phone and they were general happy with the online services. Even those that had a slight preference for speaking to people were happy with the current website. One participant did comment that there was a possible generation gap as older people would still rather speak to someone but they would have to keep up with using the internet as it is “the way of the future” and that landlines at least will be phased out soon.

Participants would primarily access the website on a desktop machine, but two had visited the website on their mobile phone. None of the participants were aware the Council had a mobile app.

All said they use the website fortnightly to once a month and only when they need specific information. None could remember a period when they used it daily.

Opinions on Council Websites - Existing Website

Participants were shown the existing Council website and asked for their likes and dislikes. By far the most popular feature in terms of the Information Architecture was the list of navigation links in the footer of the page (Figure 28). All but one participant commented that they would use these links to find the information that the wanted first – the other would use the left navigation links first.

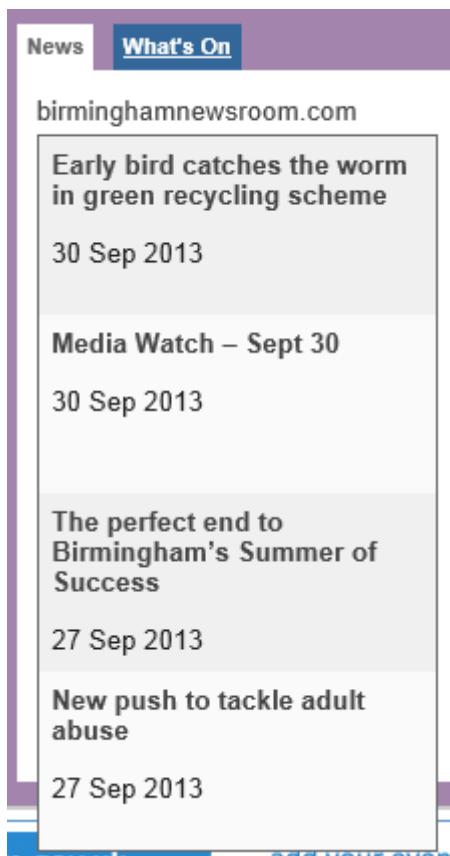
Participants felt it was a shortcut to find information as ‘it’s all there’ (referring to the content) and you are not waiting for a pop-up menu to appear. One participant

commented that they would only use the search function of this website if they could not see the link that they wanted.



Figure 28 – Footer navigation; existing website.

Participants commented that they liked the News links in the panel on the right of the page (Figure 29) as they would often see a link to a story that they would otherwise have missed.



News **What's On**

birminghamnewsroom.com

- Early bird catches the worm in green recycling scheme**
30 Sep 2013
- Media Watch – Sept 30**
30 Sep 2013
- The perfect end to Birmingham's Summer of Success**
27 Sep 2013
- New push to tackle adult abuse**
27 Sep 2013

SEARCH ADD YOUR EVEN

Figure 29 – News links.

Participants generally did not like the positioning of the advert in the middle of the page; also it was commented that it looked very unprofessional that the word 'Accessibility' was cut off (Figure 30).



Figure 30 – 'Accessibility' link cut off.

Participants also made very negative comments about the moving elements on the homepage. While the movement itself was distracting, it was more the fact that the movement was in two directions. The carousel in the middle of the page (Figure 31) moves horizontally, while the News ticker on the right of the page (Figure 32) moves vertically.



Start up loans

Are you aged 18-30? Thinking about starting your own business? Or are you already in business and trading for less than 12 months?

[1](#) [2](#) **[3](#)** [4](#) [5](#) [6](#) [7](#) [8](#)

Figure 31 – Carousel moves horizontally.

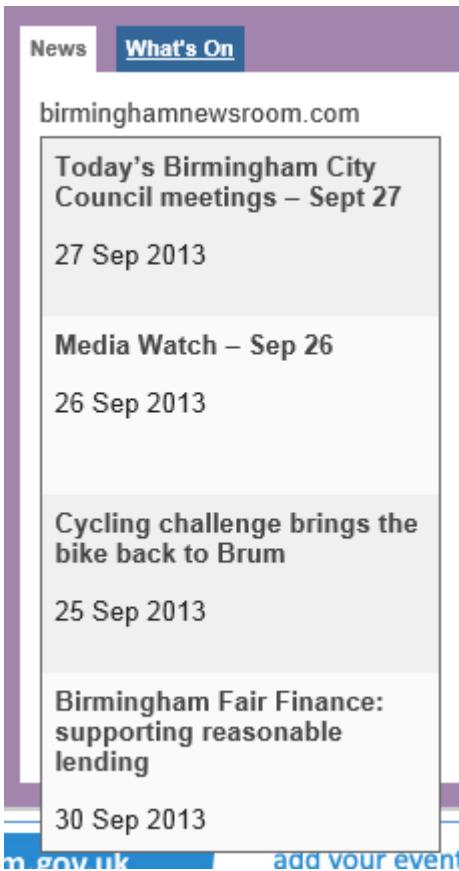


Figure 32 – News ticker moves vertically.

One participant commented that they liked the video links in the news feed – overall, they felt the website should be more visual. It was suggested that still images depicting Birmingham in the past and present would be interesting. It was commented that the website looked a bit boring and there was a general agreement on this point. This issue was briefly discussed; one person commented that the website doesn't need to 'jazzed up', however another commented that the visual appearance is important as the website represents Birmingham.

Opinions on Council Websites – Proposed Website

Participants commented that generally the new website had an enhanced visual appearance as it looked nicer, simpler and more modern. They were not immediately sure how the navigation would work as links were not shown.

Participants generally wondered where the list of links at the bottom of the page had gone. They liked the menu at the top of the page as it is easy to see and hoped this would be a sufficient replacement for the list of links.

Participants liked the Latest News panel (Figure 33) and commented the page was better with elements moving only in one direction.

Latest news

Early bird catches the worm in green recycling scheme
 Media Watch – Sept 30
 The perfect end to Birmingham's Summer of Success
 New push to tackle adult abuse
 Phoenix from the flames:derelict building to visual highlight
 Media Watch – Sep 27
 Today's Birmingham City Council meetings – Sept 27
 Media Watch – Sep 26
 Cycling challenge brings the bike back to Brum

Figure 33 – Latest news panel.

- Participants liked the way the content of the Residents was structured. They commented that the information was what they expected to see, for example, information on waste collection and council housing – generally issues that would impact residents only.
- When asked what content would be accessed from the Business link, they commented that it would be information for businesses in the City such as opportunities for business development and how they can help people opening a new shop.
- While the participants of this group commented they would not normally look at this section, one person commented the panels should be presented in alphabetical order (Figure 34).

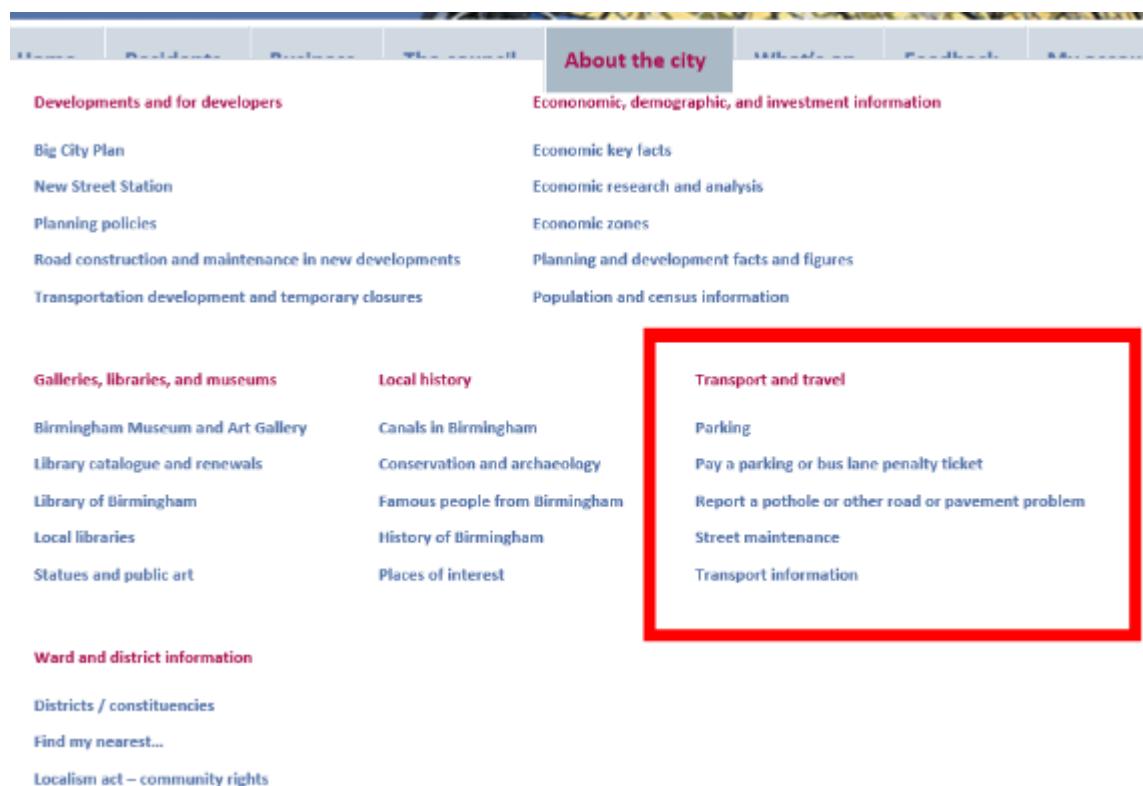
Business services	Support for businesses
Commercial Waste	New Economic Zones
Business Rates	Land and property grants for businesses
Commercial property available	Business Insight
Business opportunities with Birmingham City Council	Enterprising Communities
Licensing and regulation	Employment strategy
Gambling	Disability Employment Solutions
Markets and street traders	Employment Strategy Group
Taxis and private hire	Employment Access Team
Alcohol and entertainment	Birmingham Bridge Programme

Figure 34 – Present content alphabetically.

- When asked what information would be behind The Council link, participants agreed it would be meeting agendas and budget information.

- When asked what content would be located under About the City participants commented this would be primarily aimed at visitors but also contain information on local history, future development in the city and What's on.
- One participant commented information on the Canal network should be under the Leisure section instead of About the City because people primarily use it for leisure and not travel. Some thought this had scope to be categorised under several sections because it is strongly tied to the history of the City, is a current visitor attraction and also concerns leisure.

The most important point that was raised in this session was related to the location of the Transport and Travel section under the About the City link (Figure 35). The participants felt this would be better placed under the residents section.



About the city

Developments and for developers	Economic, demographic, and investment information	
Big City Plan	Economic key facts	
New Street Station	Economic research and analysis	
Planning policies	Economic zones	
Road construction and maintenance in new developments	Planning and development facts and figures	
Transportation development and temporary closures	Population and census information	
Galleries, libraries, and museums	Local history	Transport and travel
Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery	Canals in Birmingham	Parking
Library catalogue and renewals	Conservation and archaeology	Pay a parking or bus lane penalty ticket
Library of Birmingham	Famous people from Birmingham	Report a pothole or other road or pavement problem
Local libraries	History of Birmingham	Street maintenance
Statues and public art	Places of interest	Transport information
Ward and district information		
Districts / constituencies		
Find my nearest...		
Localism act – community rights		

Figure 35 – Transport and Travel section under About the City.

At the end of the session participants were asked where they could go to complete some of the tasks; the results suggest that the proposed Information Architecture may not yet have an optimal level of effectiveness.

- When asked where they would go to report a faulty street light, participants commented they would visit the residents section. This was despite them already been shown the navigation mechanism and discussing the placement of the transport and travel website.
- For information about Education one participant commented they would go to the What's On section. This is incorrect as this information is under the Schools, Children and families heading of the Residents tab. Others

commented they would use the A-Z index where we assume they would find the information.

- When asked where they would look for funding opportunities, participants suggested they would visit 'The Council' section. It is not clear from the prototype site if this would be correct.
- When asked where they would look for pest control, participants all correctly said they would visit the Residents section.

After this activity, one participant commented that they had realised the group had only guessed the correct place to find information once out of the four tasks.

Focus Group Two

The second focus group was held in the evening of Tuesday 24th September; participant information and a summary of the key points from the discussion are described in this section.

Participant Information

Participant Number	Gender	Age	Demographic Information
7	Female	58	Jaguar/Land Rover Employee
8	Male	43	Small Business Owner
9	Male	42	Property Developer
10	Female	39	Graduate Public Sector Employee
11	Male	37	Cadbury's Employee
12	Male	39	Graphic Designer/Small Business Owner

Participant Background

All participants had been lifelong residents of Birmingham. Local leisure facilities used by participants include sports centres and leisure facilities, particularly those for cycling, swimming, running and Zumba.

All participants described themselves as competent when using the web. Typical activities the participants conduct online are social networking, visiting on-line auction websites such as eBay and sites related to their occupation, for example, Construction News.

As with the previous session, participants mentioned Amazon as a website that had an effective navigation system.

Web Use

When looking for specific information, participants would generally use the Google search engine, even for finding local information. One participant gave the example of how they used Google rather than the Council website directly to find information on swimming pools.

One participant did comment they might try Google for general information, but would look directly on a website for specific information and they would use the website search function. One participant commented very strongly they would use the www.gov.uk website before the Birmingham Council website.

This group commented that their use of the web was split approximately 50/50 between home and work.

Council Engagement

All participants agreed that they had used the council website to look for information on refuse collection services. While a few had arranged collection online, they had tended to look for a phone number to call. One commented that they regularly used the Social Services information as they had an elderly relative. Another commented that they used the website for schooling information and could always find the information they wanted.

Generally speaking, all participants said they could find the information they wanted when using the website but it wasn't always very quick. As with the previous group, one participant commented that when she does ring she is encouraged to visit the website so now does visit the website first when looking for information.

One participant used the website for professional purposes as they look for building and planning information. They were very comfortable using the website for this as they were very familiar with it.

Some commented that they had found the Neighbourhood Offices very helpful but that they were not well advertised and thought that some had closed. None of the participants had visited a Neighbourhood Office recently.

Generally speaking, participants would not use the mobile app. They commented as it was not for pleasure and would waste space on their phone, particularly as they would be unlikely to use it.

Opinions on Council Websites - Existing Website

One participant felt there was too much information on the existing website and some should be filtered out – more specifically, there is too much information presented at once.

Another commented that you get used to it if you use it a lot, but if only using it occasionally - as they did - it can be tricky finding information. There was agreement from another participant that it was not user friendly as there was too many links presented at once.

When it was suggested that the website should be more interactive (as commented by the previous group) there was a consensus in this group that this would be pointless – one person commented that “you don’t go on a council website for entertainment”.

As with the previous group, participants regularly used the navigation links towards the bottom of the page to find information as it was clear and easy to find information. One participant even commented that it might be appropriate to put this on a dedicated page. This is the one element of the existing page that all participants would keep as it is.

Two participants disliked the moving news carousel as they found it annoying; the advertisement was something that especially annoyed people. Conversely, one person thought the news carousel should be more prominent.

One participant commented that the ‘What’s On’ section was a bit plain and boring as it is just text. They also thought the fact it overlapped with other page elements (Figure 36) was unprofessional.

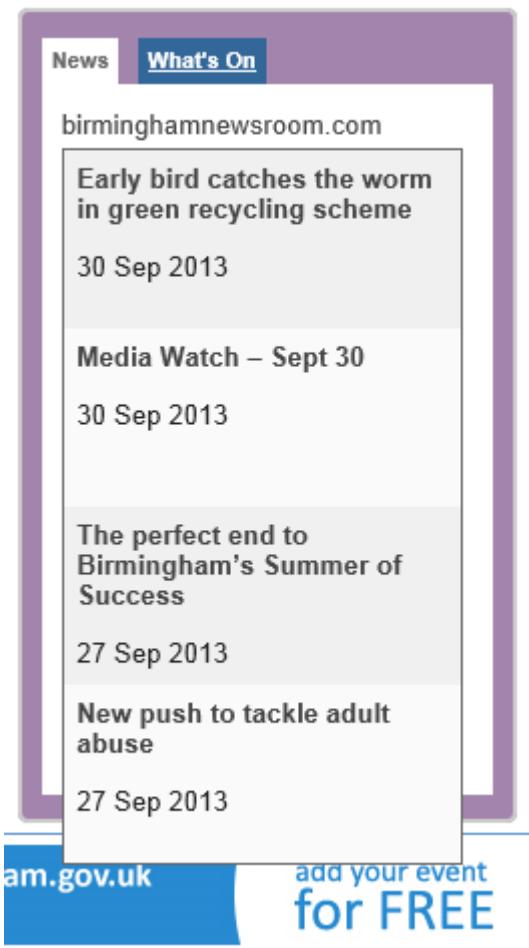


Figure 36 – News panel overlaps other elements.

Overall, the general impression was that the website was drab and did not make Birmingham seem very exciting.

Opinions on Council Websites – Proposed Website

When participants were shown the proposed website they expressed overwhelming disappointment. They commented that it looked exactly the same as the old website and was a bit drab. One participant commented that the website needs a whole new revamp and that they were just trying to ‘cover over cracks’ rather than rebuilding it from scratch.

One positive aspect was that generally speaking they would keep the navigation bar at the top of the page (Figure 37) and there was a consensus that the 'Do it Now' links at the left of the screen (Figure 38) accurately reflected common tasks users complete on the site.



Figure 37 – Top navigation menu.



Do it now!

- Jobs
 - Bulky waste collection - book
 - Benefits - apply
 - Council tax - pay
- Councillors
 - Dumped rubbish - report
 - Housing repair - request
 - Missed bin collection - report
 - Parking ticket - pay
- Pest Control
 - Planning applications
 - Pothole or other road problem - report
- School term dates
- Street cleaning
- Street lighting and signs
- Tree pruning - request

Figure 38 – Do it now tasks.

- When asked what content would be behind the Residents tab, participants guessed correctly that Refuse Information would be there. When showed the drop-down menu they commented it was comprehensive.
- Participants correctly guessed that information on business rates and general business services would be found under the Business link.

- When viewing the About the City pop-up menu participants were surprised that 'Transport and travel' was in this section. This supports the view of the previous group.

Opinions on Other Council Websites

Participants were briefly shown a selection of other council websites, some of which were examined as part of the benchmarking review. Here we summarise their comments.

Manchester Council

- Colours were not appealing but felt it represented Manchester well with a good design and layout.
- Icons were good. They were bold and clear and helped break up the text. Some should be incorporated into Birmingham website.
- Link labels were clearly and simple.
- The navigation concept was simple and easy to use.

Liverpool Council

- Noisy appearance and dislike of colour purple.
- Too much text
- Disliked how some link text wraps over two lines; they should be on one line.

Wolverhampton Council

- Modern look.
- Good use of images; simple design, not too busy.
- Participants generally liked 'Most Popular' links (Figure 39)
- Positive use of language; 'Our Place Our Plan' (Figure 40).

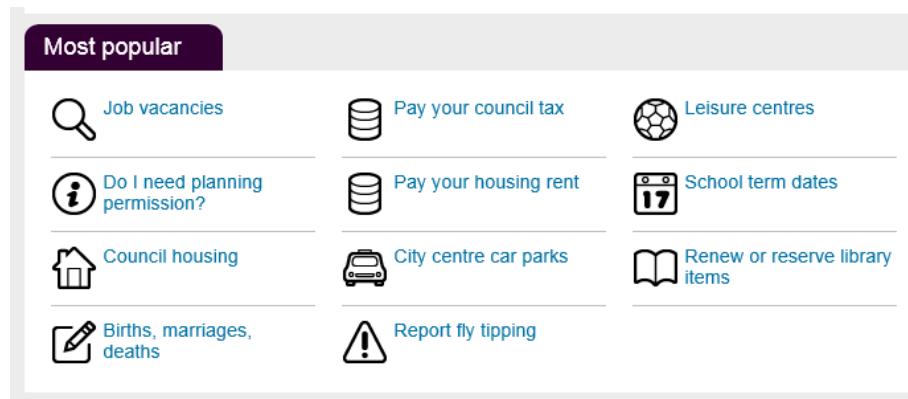


Figure 39 – Positive aspect; most popular links.

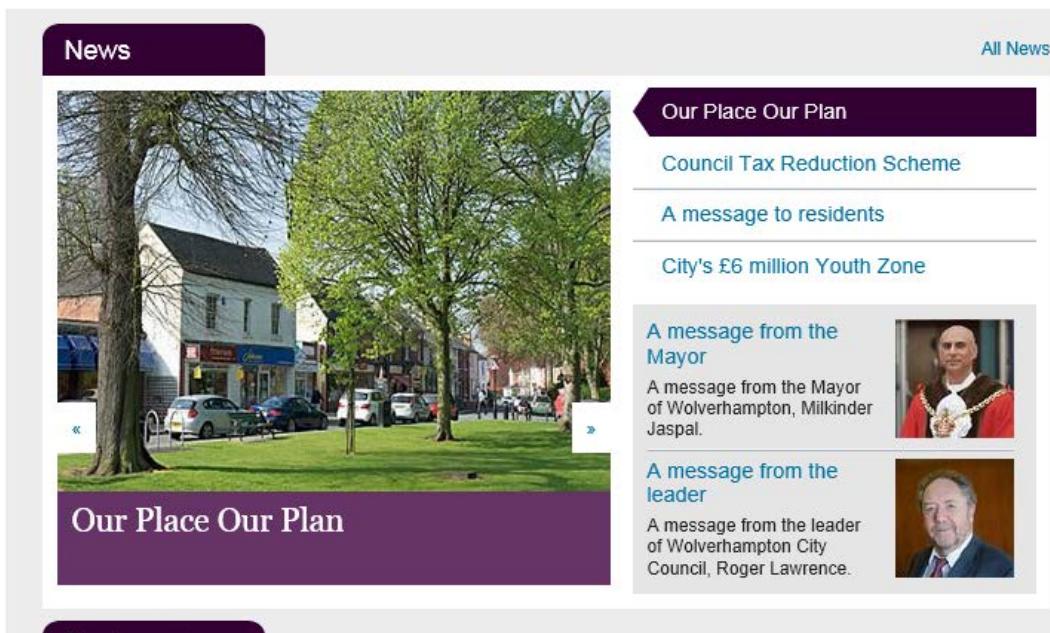


Figure 40 – Positive use of language; ‘Our Place Our Plan’.

Wigan Council

- Perhaps too simplistic, but works. One person commented “my mum could use that”.
- No identity; could be anyone’s council.
- One participant commented it was “like an iPhone, so modern and up-to-date”.
- There was a consensus that they liked the icons on this website.

Shropshire Council

- Participants commented that this was dull and very similar to the Birmingham website.

Copeland Council

- One person commented that they wouldn’t know it was a council website unless they had been told because services and icons not clear.
- Some found background image distracting.
- Didn’t think finding information was easy to find.

Conclusions

The usability review and benchmarking activity found that websites which use plain, text links and offer the user multiple ways to access information performed the best overall. Particular reference is made to the Shropshire and Liverpool Council website which offer three or four ways to access information, namely:

- Clear calls to action for important functionality (e.g.: Pay It; Report it, etc.)
- A short list of links to commonly performed task/key information.
- The content of the site is divided into 8-12 logical categories and clear links are presented on the homepage.
- An A-Z list of quick links.

It should be noted, however, websites which present a large number of short, text links on one page, supplemented by large clear icons also performed well in the benchmarking exercise. The concept and visual appearance of these sites was also praised by users in the Focus Group sessions.

All participants commented they would visit the website before contacting the Council by phone. Participants used the council website for a range of information finding tasks, such as adult education courses, school terms dates and leisure facilities. Users' would also perform a range of tasks online such as arranging bulky waste collection and reporting issues such as broken street lights and potholes.

Participants liked the navigation concept adopted by the Manchester Council website as well as the clear visual design and simplicity of the Wigan Council website. Despite performing well in the benchmarking activity, participants thought the Liverpool Council homepage contained too many text links. Despite the Shropshire website performing best in the benchmarking exercise, participants commented the visual design was quite drab and unexciting. The Wolverhampton Council website drew praise for its modern look and feel, good use of icons and positive use of language.

When commenting on the existing website, participants overwhelmingly liked the list of navigation links at the bottom of the page as it was clear and gave them quick access to areas of the website. Participants generally disliked having two moving elements on the page, especially as they moved in different directions. There were also issues with the layout of some elements that they did not think looked very professional.

When commenting on the proposed website, participants would keep the navigation bar at the top of the page (and there was a consensus that the 'Do it Now' links at the left of the screen accurately reflected common tasks users complete on the site. The inclusion of an A-Z list of links was also considered positive. The participants of

the second group were quite negative of the initial prototype as they did not consider it much of an improvement or enhancement on the existing website.

The most important point raised in both sessions related to the proposed navigational structure of the website was related to the location of the Transport and Travel section under the About the City links. The participants felt this would be better placed under the residents section.

Sometimes users' comments were slightly contradictory. They mentioned that a Council website did not need to be too innovative or 'flashy', but that the visual appearance was still important as it represented Birmingham.