

A common service standard for councils

May 2025

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Foreword

Things have started fast for digital government in 2025. This year has already seen the publication of the [AI Opportunities Action Plan](#), the [State of Digital Government Review](#) and [A Blueprint for Modern Digital Government](#) from the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology (DSIT). A key message from this analysis is that millions of people across the country rely on digital services to help them in their daily lives – delivered by their local authority, their hospital, their school and all parts of the public sector. And, when the UK’s public sector’s digital resources are deployed effectively, they can deliver outstanding results. But satisfaction with digital government services has dropped in the last decade, services are under-digitised, the public sector’s digital offerings are disparate, lack depth and opportunities to join-up are often missed.

Digital services across the public sector are most effective for users when they are easy to use, reliable and accessible. Poor services have the greatest impact on the most vulnerable, and increase the cost of failure demand. Service standards can help to tackle these issues. The government’s [Blueprint for Modern Digital Government](#) points to the former Centre for Digital and Data Office (CDDO, now part of the new GDS) success in transforming 50 of the top 75 government services to a ‘great’ standard; kickstarted by agreeing on a clear definition of what a ‘great’ service looks like and establishing a common framework for assessing service performance (see [What makes a service ‘Great’?](#)).

GDS admit this has been no easy task. But it is clear that a common approach to service standards has driven measurable improvement at scale – and has also acted as a mechanism for supporting service design teams. Our research confirms support for working towards a common service standard for local government. Widespread adoption of such a standard, supported by all sector stakeholders, and subject to regular peer reviews, could offer substantial benefits. With the digital agenda firmly at the heart of the government’s agenda for growth and change, and with local government reorganisation upon us, it’s the ideal time to implement a consistent approach.

Owen Pritchard

Head of Programme, Cyber, Digital and Technology
Local Government Association

Summary

Background

In May 2024, the Local Government Association (LGA) began a collaborative research project with West Berkshire Council into the use of a common service standard in local government. The research forms part of a workstream within the LGA's 'Sector Support Programme for Cyber, Digital and Technology' (funded by MHCLG) which aims to support councils with the design and delivery of public services in a digital age. Two questions we hear regularly from councils are how do we define 'good' (or 'great') and how do we measure quality?

Facilitated by a new partnership with [LocalGov Digital](#), we discovered that elected members at West Berkshire Council had posed similar questions. How could the council ensure services were delivered in a good and consistent way, finding efficiencies and improvements around their delivery, while also meeting the needs of the user? We decided it would be worthwhile working together to review use of the [Service Standard](#) within local government.

Key findings

- **Are councils using the Standard?** Not entirely. Across our data collection activities, we found inconsistent use of a common service standard. We found evidence that some principles of the Service Standard were used, and we heard about a range of barriers preventing its wholesale adoption.
- **Where is adoption greatest?** Of the 14 principles within the Service Standard, the most widely adopted elements were principle 1 (understand users and their needs) and principle 2 (solve a whole problem for users). The two principles with much lower levels of adoption were principle 8 (iterate and improve frequently) and principle 14 (operate a reliable service).
- **Would a common service standard for councils be useful?** Yes, for various reasons: it provides clarity, from a credible source, as to what good looks like and a standard for which to aim; it provides a common language and a set of guiding principles; it can help to deliver a more joined-up approach; it can improve confidence and assurance; it can help to provide a consistent set of experiences and quality; and it can help to control governance and financial approvals.

- **What, if anything, is challenging?** Participants pointed to various challenges of using the Service Standard within a local authority. These included: securing leadership buy-in; language misalignments; inconsistencies in agile working; limited resources for testing; end-to-end assumptions; issues relating to the software market, commercial-off-the-shelf products and services (COTS) and legacy technology; and missing nuances relating to the analogue components of local government.

Our recommendations

The LGA is committed to driving continuous improvement across the sector, and the Service Standard can support this by empowering councils to confidently and consistently meet resident needs while improving accountability. This report makes six recommendations to support the widespread adoption of a common service standard across local authorities, outlined in Table 1.

Table 1: Six recommendations

Adapt the principles	Share best practice	Embed into discovery and procurement
Open a community	Run peer reviews	Facilitate training

Introduction

Background

In May 2024, the Local Government Association (LGA) began a collaborative research project with West Berkshire Council into the use of a common service standard in local government. The research forms part of a workstream within the LGA's 'Sector Support Programme for Cyber, Digital and Technology' (funded by MHCLG) which aims to support councils with the design and delivery of public services in a digital age. Two questions we hear regularly from councils are how do we define 'good' (or 'great') and how do we measure quality?

Facilitated by a new partnership with [LocalGov Digital](#), we discovered that elected members at West Berkshire Council had posed similar questions. How could the council ensure services were delivered in a good and consistent way, finding efficiencies and improvements around their delivery, while also meeting the needs of the user? We decided it would be worthwhile working together to review use of the [Service Standard](#) within local government.

A bit of history

Service standards for transactional services within central government have been governed by a set of principles for about a decade (see Table 2). Version one, **Digital by Default Service Standard**, was developed by the GDS in 2013 and applied to all large service areas from April 2014 (unchanged until June 2015). It was intended as an assurance process for building a service with some form of technology element. It contained 26 principles and was supported by an 80 paged [Service Manual](#) (since revised) containing prompts and guidance (for a comprehensive overview and visualisations see [A brief history of the Service Standard](#)). While directly aimed at services to be hosted on the GOV.UK platform, there was some encouraging of local authorities to use the Standard.

Table 2: Service Standard timeline

2014	2015	2016	2019
Version 1	Version 2	Adaptation	Version 3
Digital by Default Service Standard	Digital Service Standard	Local Government Service Standard	Service Standard

In June 2015, GDS launched version two called the **Digital Service Standard** (unchanged until June 2019). The number of principles were reduced from 25 to 18, with a reduced focus on digital take-up, and removal of the words ‘by Default’. Four years later in 2019, GDS released version three called the **Service Standard** and an updated Service Manual. This version removed the word ‘digital’, placed more emphasis on end-to-end service design and reduced the number of principles from 18 to 14. A new principle of ‘solving a whole problem for users’ was added.

Version three aimed for broader reach: a) across the wider public sector and b) to internal and non-transactional services (no longer just public-facing transactions) – see [Welcome to the updated Service Standard – Government Digital Service](#)). The Standard and its related materials moved to the CDDO following its launch in 2021. There have been no further changes, but possible developments are detailed here: [take a look at our standards and guidance](#).

Table 3 outlines the Standard’s 14 principles, with links to additional guidance.

Table 3: Service Standard (current)

#	Principle	Read more
1	Understand users and their needs	Read more about point 1
2	Solve a whole problem for users	Read more about point 2
3	Provide a joined-up experience across all channels	Read more about point 3
4	Make the service simple to use	Read more about point 4
5	Make sure everyone can use the service	Read more about point 5
6	Have a multidisciplinary team	Read more about point 6
7	Use agile ways of working	Read more about point 7
8	Iterate and improve frequently	Read more about point 8
9	Create a secure service which protects users' privacy	Read more about point 9
10	Define what success looks like and publish performance data	Read more about point 10
11	Choose the right tools and technology	Read more about point 11
12	Make new source code open	Read more about point 12
13	Use and contribute to open standards, common components and patterns	Read more about point 13
14	Operate a reliable service	Read more about point 14

Source: [Service Standard - Service Manual - GOV.UK](#)

A local gov version

In 2016, in between version two and three, MHCLG published a version of the Standard called [the Local Government Service Standard](#) with 15 principles building on the GDS framework but considered more compatible with the needs of local authorities. Its principles are outlined in Table 4.

Table 4: Local Government Service Standard (retired)

#	Principle
1	Understand user needs. Research to develop deep knowledge of who the service users are and what that means for the design of the service
2	Ensure a suitably skilled, sustainable multidisciplinary team, led by a senior service manager with decision making responsibility, can design, build and improve the service.
3	Create a service using the agile, iterative and user-centred methods set out in the Government Service Design Manual
4	Build a service that can be iterated and improved in response to user need and make sure you have the capacity, resources and technical flexibility to do so.
5	Evaluate what tools and systems will be used to build, host, operate and measure the service, and how to procure them, looking to reuse existing technologies where possible.
6	Evaluate what user data and information the digital service will be providing or storing and address the security level, legal responsibilities, privacy issues and risks associated with the service.
7	Use open standards, existing authoritative data and registers, and where possible make source code and service data open and reusable under appropriate licenses.
8	Be able to test the end-to-end service in an environment similar to that of the live version, including all common browsers and devices.
9	Make a plan for the event of the digital service being taken temporarily offline, and regularly test
10	Make sure that the service is simple enough that users succeed first time unaided.
11	Build a service consistent with the user experience of government digital services, including using common government platforms and the Government Service Manual design patterns.
12	Encourage maximum usage of the digital service (with assisted digital support if required).
13	Identify performance indicators for the service, incorporating existing indicators and publishing to a performance platform, if appropriate.

14	Put a process in place for ongoing user research, usability testing to continuously seek feedback from users, and collection of performance data to inform future improvement to the service.
15	Test the service from beginning to end with appropriate council member or senior manager responsible for it.

The Local Government Service Standard later supported the launch of the Local Digital Declaration in 2018, a joint initiative from GDS and MHCLG (see [Launching the Local Digital Declaration](#)). The Declaration articulated a shared ambition for the future local of public services. Local authorities were encouraged by MHCLG to sign up to the Declaration thereby committing to digital transformation connected to the Declaration's principles – including use of the Standard 'where appropriate'. While not mandatory nor centrally assessed, the Standard acted as a guide for local government to build local public services.

Around this time, GDS invited a group of officers working in digital service teams within councils to help draft the current version of the Service Standard, which would replace both the Digital Service Standard and Local Government Digital Standard. Having two standards was, at the time, seen as a short-term solution and the aim was to have only one. Which brings us to this project.

Methodology

Our approach

There were four parts to our research: desk research; a survey of local authority officers; workshops with council officers/digital practitioners; and a series of case study interviews held at West Berkshire Council. These activities ran between July and September 2024. We also ran a check-and-challenge session with the Local Government Service Design Network in January 2025, chaired by Lambeth Council.

Our questions

Our questions focused on three main areas (see Table 5).

Table 5: Lines of enquiry

Line 1	Line 2	Line 3
What do current levels of awareness and adoption look like, and what has blocked or unblocked take-up?	Would a common service standard for local government be useful, and why?	What support, if any, would encourage wider adoption, if a common standard is feasible and desirable and viable?

Our participants

Our research was a deep dive into a specific topic. We did not achieve wide representation in our participation numbers, but we did gain detailed insights from people with a strong and/or active interest in local digital services. It is possible that a lack of exposure to the Service Standard may have contributed to low participation rates, as individuals may have been unaware of it and, therefore, were unable to provide meaningful feedback.

Later in this report, we present the triangulated findings of our research. We have combined the feedback from each data source to provide some answers to the questions outlined in Table 5. While our participants numbers are small, we think they

are strengthened by our multi-method approach. Importantly, we did not encounter any contradictory messages across the various methods employed (see Table 6).

Table 6: Participant numbers

Method	Number of participants
Desk research	N/A
Online survey	35
Online workshop	31
In-person workshop	22
Case study interviews	17
Check-and-challenge	39

Our desk research

Numerous blogs, authored by both civil servants closely involved with the Service Standard and individuals with direct experience using it, have been written. These blogs offered us valuable contextual information, and some are referenced in this report. We have also accessed some findings from the [LGA's Digital 360 review](#) – a new peer review offer that helps councils to review their digitalisation strategy, security culture, and overall digital maturity in a safe, constructive environment.

Our survey

In June 2024, we invited subscribers of our Cyber, Digital and Technology newsletter (approx. 2,500 readers) to take part in a short online survey to help us build a picture of the sector's awareness and usage of the Service Standard (see Annex A for a full list of questions asked). We also posted the same invite on our social media platforms (at that point, a following of about 500 people). The survey closed on 9 August. We received 35 responses, which gives us snapshot but not a representative sample. This level of response may be related to low level of knowledge about the Standard.

In this report, when describing our survey findings, we give both numbers and percentages as our participant numbers were fewer than 50 (percentages may not appear to add up to 100 per cent due to rounding). We list the number of people who were asked a question (unweighted), followed by their answer. We do not name any people, organisations or brands in any quotes. We have provided all open text responses in Annex B.

Our online workshop

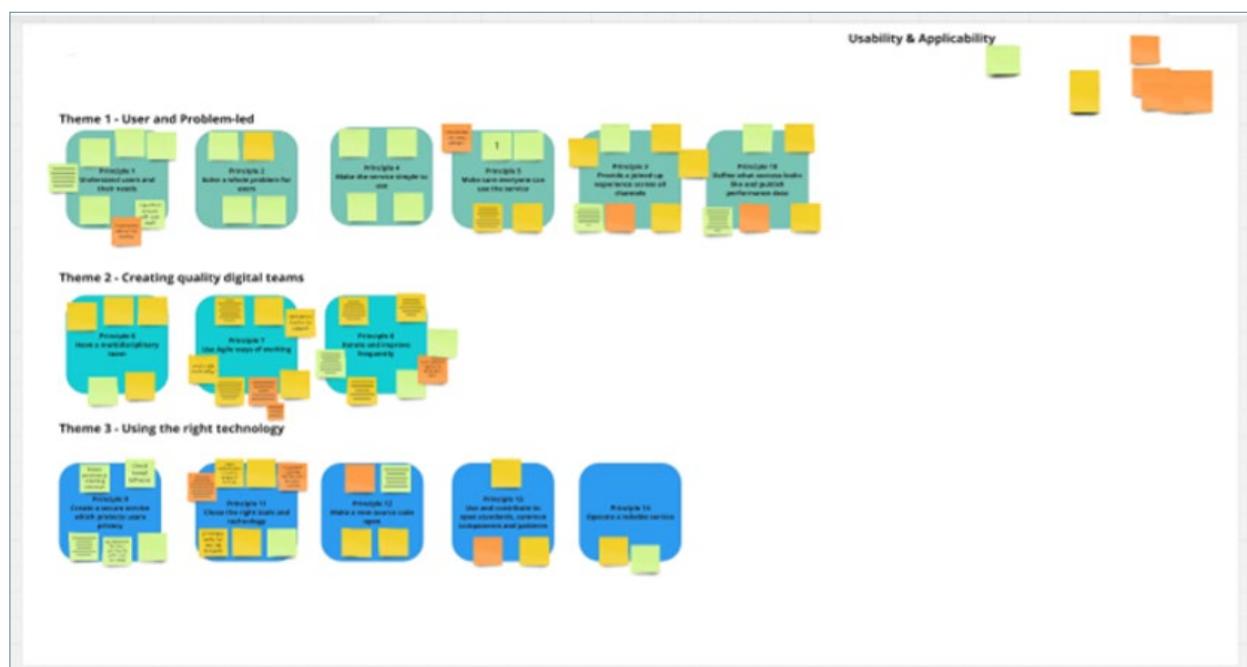
In July 2024, we ran an online workshop. Again, we invited subscribers to our Cyber, Digital and Technology newsletter to take part. An invite was also posted on our social media platforms. The workshop included presentations on some of the background to the Service Standard and its present-day format and application (delivered by CDDO), an common approach being taken in Wales (delivered by the Centre for Digital Public Services), and the potential benefits of a standardised approach to local service delivery (delivered by the University of Exeter).

We used the workshop to gain feedback from 31 participants on the usability and applicability of the 14 principles contained within the Standard. We grouped the principles into three themes:

- Meeting user needs.
- Using the right technology.
- Creating good digital teams.

Using red, amber and green Post-it notes, we asked participants to rate the applicability and helpfulness of each principle for guiding service design in local government. Red = limited use and applicability, amber = somewhat applicable and green = applicable and helpful to use. Officers were asked to expand on their reasoning during a discussion (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Online RAG Activity (for illustration)



Our in-person workshop

In September 2024, we held a workshop with 22 delegates at LocalGov Camp focusing on the usability of the Service Standard. The group were given time to note down the 'critical', 'medium' and 'lower-rated' challenges of using the Service Standard which they placed on a 'priority pyramid'. The critical challenges were placed at the bottom (the widest part of the shape), medium-rated challenges in the middle and lower-rated challenges at the top (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Priority pyramid (For illustration)



Our interviews

In May and June 2024, semi-structured interviews were conducted with officers at West Berkshire Council. The objective was to understand how different teams within the council established standards for their digital services. The interviews facilitated an in-depth exploration of the council's approach to digital service development, providing valuable qualitative data to complement our other data collection activities.

A total of 11 interviews were completed with 17 people across: Culture; Culture (IT); Development and Planning Economic Development; Development and Planning (IT); Digital Services; Education Services; and Revenues and Benefits. Ten were conducted using Microsoft Teams and one was in-person. Interview transcripts were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Coincidentally, in September 2024, the LGA conducted a [Digital 360 review](#) at West Berkshire Council – a new offer that helps councils to review their digitalisation strategy, security culture, and overall digital maturity in a safe, constructive environment. Some of the evidence emerging from this peer review process has provided helpful additional context.

Out of scope

Our research did not explore any of the following:

- Other guidance relating to the Service Standard (namely the Service Manual and its assurance community, or the service assessment process).
- Other GOV.UK standards (such as the [Technology Code of Practice](#), [Government Functional Standard for Digital](#), [Digital and Data Continuous Improvement Assessment Framework](#), [GovAssure](#); [Secure by Design Principles](#); or [Data Maturity Assessment for Government](#)).
- Previous mechanisms outside government used to evaluate elements of digital design such as [Sitemorse](#) or Better Connected (SOCITM's now retired annual survey of local authority websites) – or any methods for checking the [web content accessibility](#).

Awareness and adoption

This section outlines what we found out about levels of awareness and adoption of the Service Standard in councils.

Awareness

The current version of the Service Standard was written ‘...with the wider public sector in mind’ and was intended to be ‘easier to use with internal or non-transactional services’ (see [Welcome to the updated Service Standard](#)). Given this, we asked participants: What do current levels of awareness and adoption look like in local authorities, and what might be blocking take-up?

Of the 35 officers who completed our survey, 25 (71 per cent) reported being aware of the Service Standard. We asked the same question at our workshops. Awareness was, as might be expected, higher among officers directly involved in user research and service design. An example of feedback given by officers at our in-person workshop was:

“Teams that have evolved as a result of GDS work such as service designers [SD], user experience [UX] and user research [UR] are more aware and invested in the standard than IT teams who existed beforehand – technology, security, apps [applications] and architecture’, and another officer said, in their council, the Standard was followed by the IT and UX teams in different ways which exacerbated the design of services in ‘silos’.”

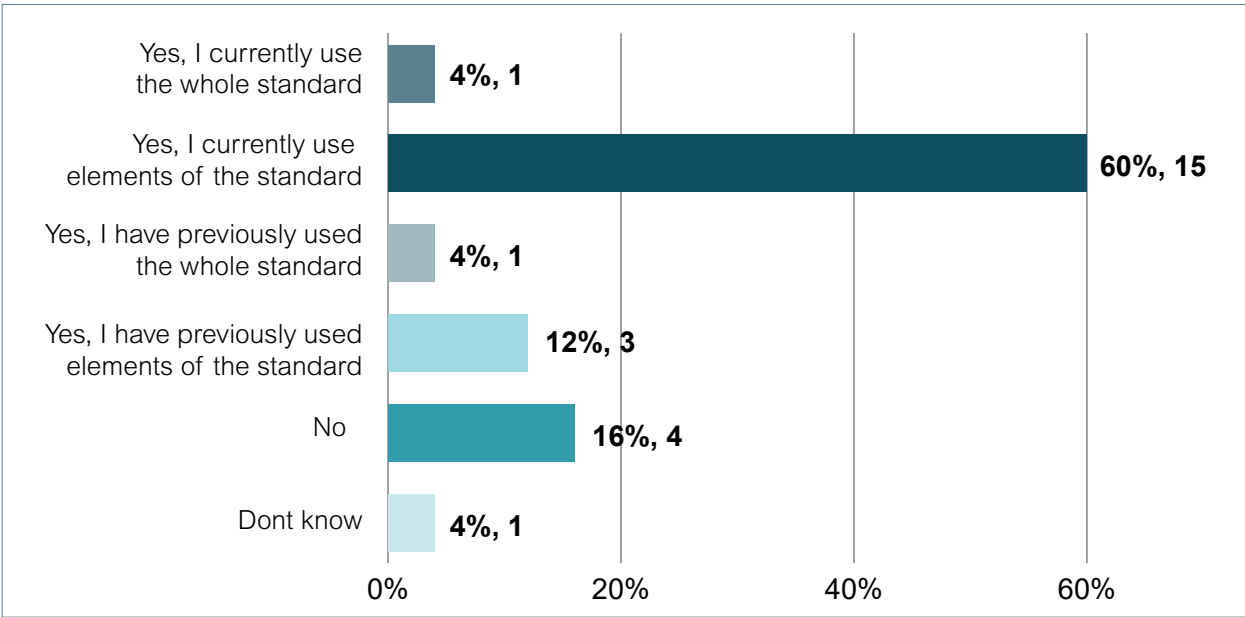
Outside of the Digital Services’ team at West Berkshire, interviewees were largely unfamiliar with the Service Standard, relying instead on departmental practices to address user needs. While these methods often covered accessibility, they lacked the consistency and comprehensiveness of a standardised approach.

Usage

Survey participants with awareness of the Survey Standard were asked if they currently or had previously used the tool. A total of 16 of the 25 participants (64 per cent) said they actively used all or some elements, while four (16 per cent) said this was previously the case (see Figure 3). Workshop participants who were aware of the Standard said they had used certain principles to guide their thinking, and a smaller number had used all the principles tailored to their local needs.

Despite its inclusion in the Local Digital Declaration, our research found no instance of the Service Standard being adopted as a cross-organisational assessment framework. Participants described using it primarily as accompanying guidance, often linking it to existing council processes and strategies.

Figure 3: Have you used the Service Standard?



Base: Participants who were aware of the Standard (25)

Like the survey, we asked participants at our online workshop about their current or previous use of the Service Standard. Figure 4 shows which of the principles were more readily used, using a red-amber-green method. We found that the Standard, where in use, tends to be used only partially by officers. The usability of the different principles are highlighted, with green indicating widely used principles, amber indicating principles that are somewhat used, and in red are principles that officers found the most challenge to use in practice. This highlights a consensus that currently, only some elements of the standard are used by officers.

Figure 4: Use of different principles

User and problem-led principles	Creating quality digital teams	Using the right technology
P1: Understand users and their needs	P6: Have a multidisciplinary team	P9: Create a secure service which protects users' privacy
P2: Solve a whole problem for users	P7: Use agile ways of working	P11: Chose the right tools and technology
P4: Make the service simple to use	P8: Iterate and improve frequently	P12: Make a new source code open
P5: Make sure everyone can use the service		P13: Use and contribute to open standards, common components and patterns
P3: Provide a joined-up experience across all channels		P14: Operate a reliable service
P10: Define what success looks like and publish performance data		

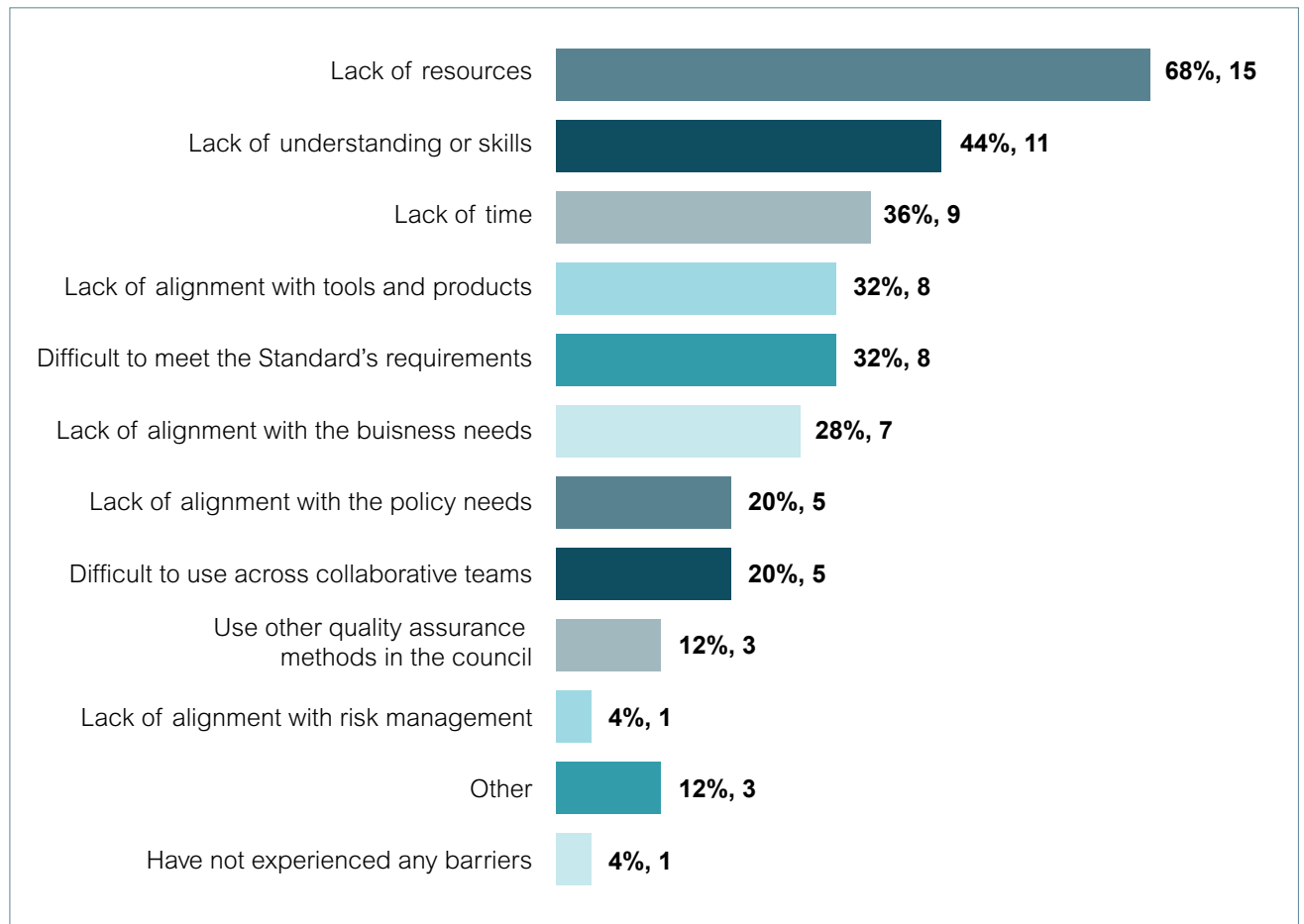
The next section of this report provides an account of some of the barriers officers reported as preventing their councils from using the Standard's principles more widely.

Main barriers

Using the list shown in Figure 5, we asked survey participants what, if anything, prevented them using the Standard. A total of 15 participants (68 per cent) said selected a **'lack of resources'** as a barrier, followed by **'lack of understanding and skills'** (11 participants, 44 per cent) and **'lack of time'** (9 participants, 36 per cent). Officers at our in-person workshop also placed 'lack of resources' as a most significant challenge in delivering against the Standard.

In the next section of this report, we unpack the challenges faced by our participants in meeting the 14 principles of the Service Standard which includes: developing agile capabilities (adoption, building, and investment), managing legacy infrastructure, addressing the scarcity of user-centred design (UCD) skills, clarifying the understanding of agile, navigating competing standards, improving multidisciplinary collaboration, and ensuring consistent standards with third-party suppliers.

Figure 5: What barriers, if any, have prevented you from using the Standard?



Base: all respondents (35). Please note: Participants were able to select more than one answer.

Benefits and barriers

This section outlines we found out about the usefulness (or otherwise) of the Service Standard for local authorities.

Benefits of the Service Standard

Our desk research and wider data collection exercises identified six positive outcomes of applying a common service standard: clarity, consistency, credibility, commonality, confidence and control – explained in Table 7.

Table 7: What does the Service Standard provide?

Theme	Outcome	Why this matters?
Clarity	Officers agreed that a well-defined common service standard could help encourage officers to focus on a set of core principles.	Clear principles can lead to more user-friendly and accessible services, better service experiences and improved citizen satisfaction – and can empower citizens in understanding where a service might be falling short.
Consistency	Officers agreed that a common service standard can help to ensure consistent service quality across a team, organisation and potentially across a sector.	Consistency impacts on fairness. It also impacts on an organisation's reputation and levels of public trust.
Credibility	Officers agreed that using a service standard can provide a way of measuring service performance.	Increases accountability, enables transparent reporting and demonstrates a commitment to continuous improvement. The regular monitoring and evaluating of a service against a common measure can generate data to drive improvements – benefitting those running a service and those in receipt.
Commonality	Officers agreed that a common service standard can make it easier to learn and share with colleagues in the same or in a different organisation – to solve a whole problem for users.	Reduced budgets across local government makes service design harder; there is limited time, money and people and an ever-shortening horizon in which to make change.
Confidence	Officers agreed that a common service standard can provide a framework for defining what good services look like, reducing uncertainty and ambiguity.	Standards help to build confidence across service teams that they are doing the right thing in their profession.
Control	Not mentioned by our participants, but there is evidence that a common service standard can save money – and help to monitor and manage expenditure through <u>spend controls</u> .	Standards help to streamline governance and financial approvals – freeing up hours for actual service deliver and saving taxpayer money.

Barriers to using the Service Standard

Principle 1: Understand users and their needs

- **Cultural resistance:** Officers said some senior leaders fail to see the value of UCD leading to a lack of support and underinvestment. Officers criticised ‘austerity by design’ which prioritises short-term, resource-constrained solutions over user-centred, long-term outcomes and service user experience. One exception was accessibility, which interviewees consistently said was always considered due to legal requirements.
- **Scarcity of UCD skills:** Officers said lack of senior buy-in limited the opportunities for championing UCD approaches and training – making it harder to understand users and their needs. We also heard about a shortage of UX skills across the sector.
- **Making the case:** Officers said securing resources for UCD required building business cases to show its value, but it was hard to demonstrate quantifiable financial returns.

Principle 2: Solve a whole problem for users

- **Complexities:** We read and heard about the complexities of user needs which presents a challenge to holistic problem-solving. This is worsened by siloed funding and budgets, service-specific time constraints, and a tendency to implement point solutions or ‘stitched together’ products that address only parts of the overall issue. The non-linear nature of service delivery in councils also makes holistic solutions difficult to achieve.
- **Language:** Officers found the Service Standard’s language too focused on transactional digital services, failing to address the complex, multifaceted problems users often face. Residents’ needs are intertwined with social, economic, and environmental factors, requiring holistic and relational approaches (see Table A3 in Annex B).

Principle 3: Provide a joined-up experience across all channels

- **Interoperability:** Officers said interoperability challenges – stemming from a reliance on legacy technology – limited their council’s ability to leverage new and more fitting innovations. There was also a view that the Service Standard did not address the unique challenges of improving existing services, but rather solely focused on the development of new services.

Principle 6: Have a multidisciplinary team

- **Smaller councils:** We heard that the limited resources of smaller district councils in England preclude them from maintaining a full, in-house multidisciplinary teams of user researchers, service designers, content designers, UX specialists and developers.
- **Service perceptions:** Our interviews found differing conceptions of a ‘good service’ across service areas, reflecting their varying customer bases. For example, the Culture department prioritised visual appeal, while the Planning department prioritised transparency.

- **Communication:** Our interviews found communication barriers between teams within the same department hindering the adoption of a common standard. Additionally, no one was clearly designated as responsible for ensuring adherence to the Service Standard.
- **Cross-team working:** Our interviewees said a lack of collaboration between departments prevented the development of shared working practices. This was partly due to the sheer diversity of services delivered by councils (over 800), many with analogue components, and some with conflicting demands. Officers at our workshop said the Service Standard is frequently seen as a 'digital standard' by non-digital teams, reducing its ability to be adopted at scale within a council.
- **Third-party suppliers:** Interviewees noted that acquiring COTS products and services limited their ability to meet certain aspects of the Standard due to minimal buyer involvement during discovery and development. While customisation is sometimes possible, opportunities for modifications were said to be limited.

Principle 7: Use agile ways of working

- **Inconsistent approach:** A discovery, alpha, beta, live approach is atypical for councils, and may be too strict or unsuitable in cases. Officers referred to a lack of shared understanding of agile principles, and inconsistencies in their adoption. For example, one officer working in a team using an agile Scrum framework was also accountable to a rigid, two-year roadmap mandated by their council's governance process, preventing the team from realising the benefits of agile adaptability.
- **Use of other approaches:** Similarly, two survey participants said they were prevented from using the Standard because their councils used other quality assurance methods: 'Our formal governance processes currently guide project/ programme delivery approaches and assurance', and 'With PM [project management] we use other methods other than agile which sometime provides a conflict.' Our interviews also revealed that internal standards sometimes superseded those listed in the Standard.

Principle 8: Iterate and improve frequently

- **Agile capabilities:** Officers said achieving principle 8 was difficult because they lacked the resources to invest in user research, testing, and development. This underinvestment, combined with inconsistent agile implementation, made it difficult for officers to establish benchmarks for effective digital service design.
- **Organisational priorities:** Officers said it was not unusual for resources to be diverted from digital service improvements to more urgent needs (such as social care, education, housing and public health). This diverted potential funding away from investing in agile capabilities. One officer spoke about working in a small digital team 'who ended-up being reactive'.

Principle 11: Choosing the right tools and technology

- **Legacy infrastructure:** Officers said their council lacked the funds (among other barriers) to modernise outdated systems making it hard to integrate with modern tools and technology.

Principles 12 and 13: Make new source code open, and use and contribute to open standards, common components and patterns

- **Proprietary software:** Officers reported that councils' reliance on proprietary software, with its often closely-guarded source code and closed APIs, significantly hindered their ability to meet principles 12 and 13.
- **Transparency and collaboration:** The reluctance of proprietary software vendors to embrace open-source creates significant challenges for councils – limiting their ability to fully adopt open-source principles, integrate systems, avoid vendor lock-in, and foster innovation.

Principle 14: Operate a reliable service

- **Legacy technology:** We heard from officers that the reliability of council services can be hampered by the inadequate integration of front-end user interfaces with back-end systems, further complicated by the coexistence of legacy and modern architectures within their infrastructure.
- **Lack of resources:** We heard about insufficient investment into the maintenance and upgrades of IT infrastructure further hindering councils' efforts to maintaining a reliable service.

Recommendations

Summary

Our recommendations aim to address existing barriers to the Service Standard's effectiveness in local authorities (summarised in Table 8). They focus on improving guidance, adaptability, integration, and tailoring. Crucially, our six recommendations are underpinned by the need for greater internal buy-in (but not top-down imposition). This means embedding the Standard within an organisation and ensuring that teams, non-digital and senior leaders, can see its importance and requirements. For example, understanding why a seemingly 'good enough' product might not meet the Standard. Beyond these internal improvements, government promotion and endorsement of the Standard's benefits is needed. This promotion should leverage existing guidance on topics like digital innovation and accessibility.

Table 8: Six recommendations

Adapt the principles	Share best practice	Embed into discovery and procurement
Open a community	Run peer reviews	Facilitate training

Recommendation 1: Adapt the principles

This recommendation focuses on increasing the Service Standard's adaptability to better accommodate the diverse needs of local contexts. Participants suggested several approaches. One participant, for example, suggested: '....making the Service Standard less specific for central government or publishing a version that uses same principles but with guidance more aligned to local government constraints.' Another highlighted the need for more 'digitally-neutral' language to enable the Standard to more easily integrate with other professional standards that local authority officers must adhere to, such as those in social work and housing.

Several participants highlighted the challenges of implementing the Standard due to limited budgets and staff, a problem particularly acute in smaller councils. These constraints were said to impact a council's ability to build diverse teams with all the skills required to adhere to the Standard's principles. Creating bespoke, open-source applications, along with employing dedicated user researchers, data specialists, and

service assessors, becomes significantly more difficult with limited resources. Looking forward, participants stressed the importance of the Standard addressing emerging technologies such as AI.

Table 9 outlines our proposed adaptations to the Service Standard’s wording, designed to address the aforementioned points. Existing adapted versions of the Standard, tailored for specific sectors like the NHS and public services in Wales and Scotland, demonstrate the feasibility and value of such modifications.

Table 9: Suggested revisions

Current principle	Revised application for LG
Use agile ways of working	Use agile methods where appropriate
Iterate and improve frequently	Continually test and learn
Make a new source code open	Share and reuse code openly with councils
Choose the right tools and technology	Choose scalable technology
Use and contribute to open standards, common components and patterns	Contribute to working in the open where possible
Operate a reliable service	Operate a reliable service with an empowered service owner

Recommendation 2: Share best practice

To encourage wider adoption of the Standard, we recommend developing tailored guidance and resources for local government, addressing the specific needs and challenges of different council sizes and contexts. The feedback we received indicates that real-life examples within various service areas would improve accessibility and relatability. Some government departments have integrated the Service Standard into their web content to promote its appropriate application within their specific contexts, such as [defence](#), [justice](#) and [education](#).

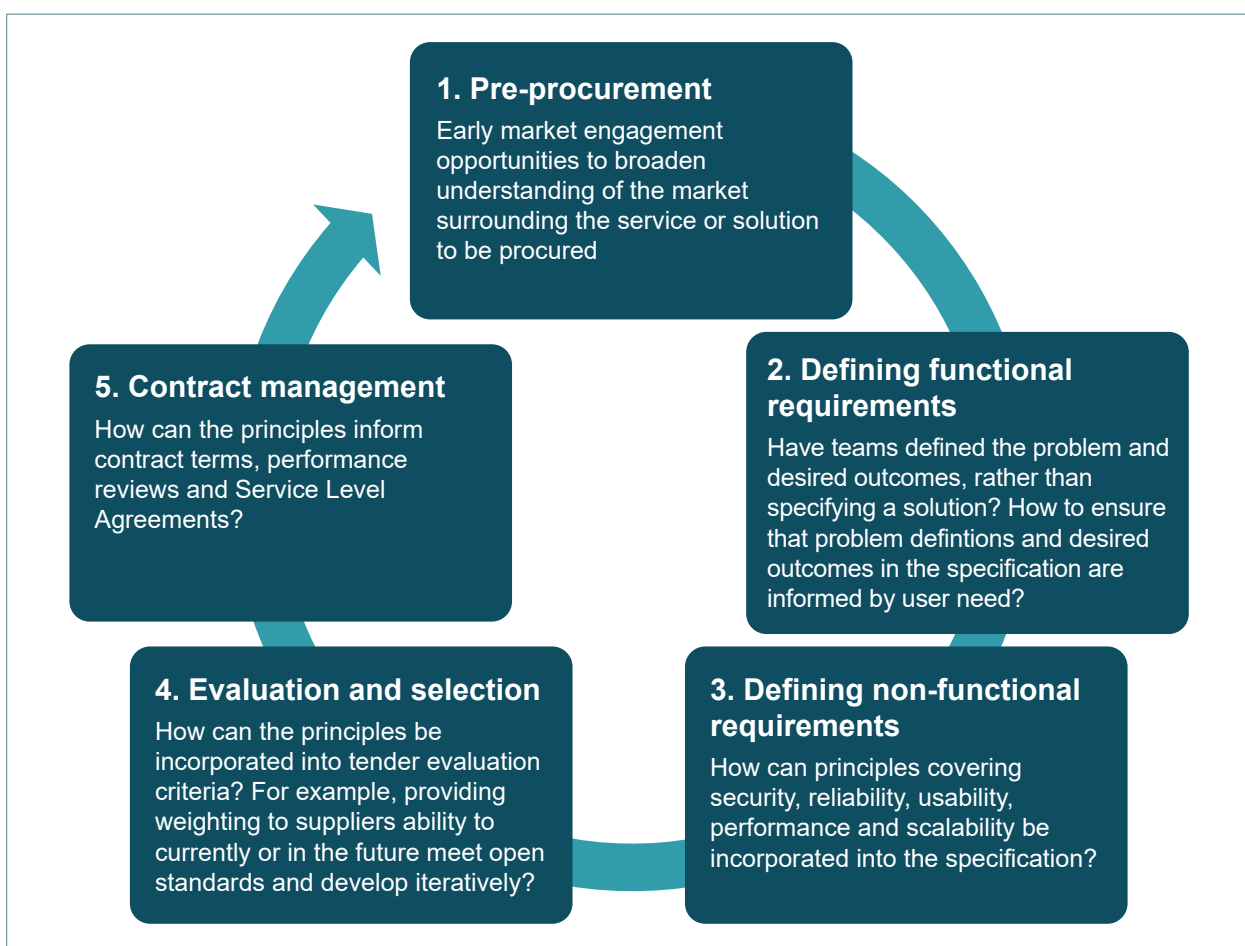
These practical illustrations would demonstrate the Standard in action, showcasing how it can guide and shape service improvements. One participant said: ‘We are looking at putting together some templates and best practice examples alongside some use cases to help make this more accessible, in terms of understanding the process and the benefit to service managers.’ Achieving this on a wider scale would have significant benefits. Furthermore, integrating these resources into broader learning packages, such as staff inductions, would extend their reach beyond design teams to ensure their usefulness for a wider range of staff.

Recommendation 3: Embed into discovery and procurement

To promote wider integration, we recommend further exploration on how the Standard can be applied to project discovery changes, and when procuring commercial products. For the latter, participants highlighted challenges in using the Standard when procuring third-party applications, as well as applying it to less clearly defined services, such as web content. This aligns with the CDDO's recognition of the need for clearer guidance on utilising the Standard with COTS services.

Beyond COTS, we recommend developing methods for applying the Standard more broadly when working with suppliers, including strategies for evaluating solutions when in-house evaluation is not feasible. For example, as illustrated in Figure 6, the Standard's principles could be incorporated into the procurement process with new suppliers.

Figure 6: Using the Service Standard in procurement



We acknowledge that councils currently find it difficult to engage with multiple suppliers and particularly SMEs for tenders, due to a number of reasons beyond the scope of our research. We understand therefore it may not be practical to mandate the Standard into procurement processes – however, we recommend councils incorporate some of the foundational principles when defining requirements and selecting vendors that ensure an accessible, secure service is provided. This could include principles such as Principle 1 (Understand users and their needs), Principle 5 (Make sure everyone can use the service), Principle 9 (Create a secure service which protect users’ privacy), and the adapted principles in Table 9.

Another suggestion mentioned by officers was the integration of the Standard’s principles into project discovery. For example, adopting principles such as ‘have a multidisciplinary team’, from project’s inception to ensure key stakeholders can be engaged, informed and understand the purpose of the project from its outset. It could also be further incorporated into discovery phases, working out how adapted principle such as, ‘using agile methods were appropriate’, ‘working in the open where possible’ and ‘test and learn’ could be incorporated into project planning and timelines.

Recommendation 4: Open a community

To accelerate adoption, we recommend joining and supporting existing community of practices, and for the LGA to support cross-network collaboration and amplification. Building upon existing networks, such as the Local Government Service Design Network (see some of its work [here](#)), this community would leverage prior work and avoid duplication, enabling faster progress and appropriate scaling. It would focus on best practice and solutions for overcoming constraints such as the adoption of UCD methods. Members would benefit from opportunities for peer reviews, collaboration on shared challenges, and a regular ‘show and shares’ to foster continuous learning and improvement. The community could also benefit from the expertise of civil servants experienced in using the Service Standard and related assessments.

Recommendation 5: Run peer reviews

To help improve ways of working, we recommend establishing a ‘critical friend’ approach to assessing service design. One participant said: “The Standard is good, but the relationship between the Standard and local governance arrangements is where we see challenges around its implementation.” The LGA would manage a cohort of peers (supported by LocalGov Digital and GDS) to run informal ‘peer reviews’ or ‘health checks’ to assess if a service meets the Service Standard. The LGA would serve as the central hub for supporting service teams, peers and peer reviews, potentially integrating into existing initiatives like the [LGA’s Digital 360s](#).

Our research highlights the need for a coordinated, sector-wide solution to ensure effective service delivery. Peer reviews would be a significant step toward sharing knowledge, providing constructive feedback, and promoting the design of consistent digital services across local government. Furthermore, as we heard from participants, integrating the Service Standard with a council's own governance arrangements can be a major hurdle, and a peer review process would provide valuable assurance to project or governance boards, confirming that a service has undergone external review by experts.

This approach could offer a dynamic alternative to a tick-box approach. Instead it would foster deeper conversations about whether a service truly prioritises user, organisational, and policy needs. Additionally, it need not take linear timeline, but could allow for continuous development and adaptation throughout the project lifecycle. This flexibility would enable iterative improvements at any stage, facilitating more rapid progress and prioritising the riskiest aspects of delivery through a safe space. This is an [example from London](#) of a similar approach tried some years ago, and an [example from the Centre for Digital Public Services](#) (which has generously provided us with further examples of how this process works in practice).

Recommendation 6: Facilitate training

To support the adoption of agile methodologies within councils (including discovery, alpha, beta and live phases), in collaboration with partners, we can expand our learning and development offer to include training on agile implementation. While agile is not a universal solution, it can be a particularly effective approach for councils due to the often evolving nature of their projects, the need for quick iteration, and the strong emphasis on stakeholder collaboration and feedback. Furthermore, our research identified a specific need for training in user research methods, with several officers asking for guidance on best practice techniques. We could incorporate this into our expanded learning offer to provide consistent and tailored training.

To further support the principle of holistic problem-solving for residents, beyond user research skills, we could offer additional support and resources on holistic service design. While existing resources such as the [LGA's service design method and maturity guidance](#) and the government's [Design Principles](#) are available, they would benefit from practical guidance and real-world examples of applying these methods to entire services, and a greater focus on the importance of designing digital services to a specific standard.

Finally, we will work to promote the value of UCD in council services within relevant LGA training offers for senior leaders and chief executives. Our research underscores the importance of senior support for using agile methods, where appropriate, and securing support for developing work iteratively.

We are keen to work with partners to broaden our training offering to include more targeted, bespoke training specifically for smaller councils with limited resources, enabling them to effectively implement these methodologies and experience their benefits.

Annex A: Survey questions

Surveying the Standard

Created in 2019 by the Government Digital Service, the [Service Standard](#) helps teams to create and run great public services. It replaced the previous Local Government Digital [Service Standard](#) to create a common standard across central and local government.

The LGA and [LocalGov Digital](#) are keen to understand the level of take-up and effectiveness of the Service Standard in councils, and establish a working group to review the findings. Even if you weren't aware of the Standard before reading this we'd like your views.

This survey is very short and should only take a few minutes to complete. The survey will close on 28 June 2024.

- Thank you for taking the time to complete this survey.
- Use the buttons at the bottom of each page to navigate through the questions.
- Use the 'previous' button if you'd like to change an earlier response.
- To preview the questions, you can access a PDF here: <link>
- Please complete this survey in one go – your answers may be lost if you exit before finishing.

All responses will be treated confidentially. Information will be aggregated, and no individual or authority will be identified in any publications without your consent. Identifiable information may be used internally within the LGA but will only be held and processed in accordance with our [privacy statement](#). Non-identifiable data will be shared with LocalGov Digital. We are undertaking this survey to aid the legitimate interests of the LGA in supporting and representing authorities.

Please enter your details below to help us with our analysis.

Name _____

Authority _____

Job title _____

Department/Service _____

Email address _____

Q1: Are you aware of the Service Standard?

Yes

No

If you answered 'No' to Q1 please go to Q6

Q2: Have you used the Service Standard?

Yes, I currently use the whole Standard

Yes, I currently use elements of the Standard

Yes, I have previously used the whole Standard

Yes, I have previously used elements of the Standard

No

Don't know

If you answered 'No' to Q2 please go to Q6

Q3: What, if anything, do you find helpful or unhelpful about the Standard?

Helpful _____

Unhelpful _____

Q4: What steps did you go through to be able to use the Standard in your council?

Q5: How do you use the Standard for your online services, including those which you procure?

Q6: What barriers, if any, have prevented you from using the Standard?

- Not heard of it
- Lack of time
- Lack of resources
- Lack of understanding or skills
- Lack of alignment with business needs
- Lack of alignment with policy needs
- Lack of alignment with risk management
- Lack of alignment with tools and products
- Difficult to use across collaborative teams
- Difficult to meet the Standard's requirements
- Use other quality assurance methods in the council (Please specify below)

- Other (Please specify below)

- Have not experienced any barriers

Q7: Do you have any suggestions for improving the Service Standard (we will explore these things in upcoming workshops)?

Q8: Would you be interested in joining a working group or workshop to explore the next steps?

- Yes
- No

Q9: Please confirm your email address so we can contact you regarding a working group or workshop.

Once you press the 'Submit' button below, you will have completed the survey.

Many thanks for taking the time to complete this survey. You are in control of any personal data that you have provided to us in your response. You can contact us at all times to have your information changed or deleted. You can find our full privacy policy here: [privacy policy](#).

Annex B: Open text responses

Table A1: What, if anything, do you find helpful or unhelpful about the Standard?

Helpful
Concept and guidance for best practice.
Easy to understand.
Good practice guidance to base our service design practice around. Something to refer service leads to with questions about the what and the why, in terms of what we do.
Having the standard coming from GOV.UK / GDS gives it credence.
Helps to guide officers for service design.
I agree with most of the underlying thinking/content in terms how to make digital services work well.
It creates a framework to allow you to create a digital strategy that meet not on the needs of our customers but as an authority.
Iterate and improve frequently.
It's a set of best practice principles that have been tried and tested in the government context, that provides assurance and builds confidence around user-centred design/ digital approaches.
It's clearly laid out into sections, so you can dip in and out of the bits relevant to you.
It's easy to understand, easy to follow. The language is good and easy to adapt to our current ways of working.
It's good to see it listed, it acts as a constant reminder.
It's simple to use and easy to follow; I also like the links to other guidance/resources.
Standardised ways of doing things.
That it exists and provides a reference point to say this is good practice.
The headers are useful principles to follow when designing services.

Helpful

The standard has been a useful framework to plan around. It has informed some decision making around team structures, skillsets, Agile development approaches, the importance of user research and more.

User centred design merged with agile project management principles, how to build a good service and use the right technology.

When setting our own service standards it helps to have a Government Standard to follow and to back up our own standards.

Written in Plain English.

Unhelpful

Appropriateness at scale (especially for a district).

At <Council name> the standard isn't bound tightly into our organisational governance and funding mechanisms, so we don't have the 'teeth' of spend controls. At present the standard is really a set of guiding principles for our UCD teams, rather than a wider control mechanism for quality assurance as originally envisioned.

Feels like there is some duplication, 4 and 5 could easily be merged and Plain English mentioned. Needs one definitive Plain English standard (<Council name> have one we can share). If the thing is accessible it's simple to use by default. Doesn't mention using MoSCoW to assist /control prioritisation, nor creating a minimum viable product to iterate on if/when resources allow. Needs senior management to buy in to this which involves culture change which can be slow! Agile doesn't work well with procurement because that's a more linear process with fixed steps, so more waterfall or hybrid approach is needed here. (Only mentions agile which isn't always fully achievable for councils because of the multi-disciplinary team constraints or absence in some cases. Doesn't link to the design councils double diamond or Thomas Loosemore's definition of digital, digital mindsets etc.

I don't think the language, or framing, of the standard is applicable to most colleagues in local government. Those working on digital products will probably find it useful and relevant. However most local government services have a much larger "analogue" component. I don't think there's much in the service standard that would make sense to a manager of social workers, or a housing officer, or a team processing council tax complaints. These people are absolutely central to implementing any changes to local government services beyond small transactional pieces that can be conducted via the website. I basically think the service standard is unfit for purpose as a wider service transformation tool in local gov, though it is useful for teams building digital products.

Unhelpful

It's designed for the Civil Service who have loads of multidisciplinary teams. Local Gov is not flush with service designers, never mind all the other disciplines!

It's not enforced. In central gov a few years, you couldn't get a service live without evidencing the adherence of it. When it's not enforced, project pressures make it too easy to pay lip service to it.

Look to refresh and provide a standard on AI use.

References agile methodologies which we aren't able to fully use.

Some elements aren't achievable – 'Make new source code open'.

Some of the standards are difficult for us due to lack of resources and being a small council (e.g. 6. Multidisciplinary team).

The reality of the local government software market makes it hard to meet several principles, like iteration, security, and open-source code. The detail of each principle isn't always relevant to local government. e.g. smaller teams with fewer specialist roles, spend control being irrelevant, involvement of GDS.

The standard is still very focussed on what can be developed from scratch rather than working within the limitations you may have in resources, infrastructure, 3rd party systems and time. While it is a very good standard to work towards, it's very hard to deliver consistently against it when have these limitations. It also focusses more on clearly defined end to end services like forms or functions, but it has been harder to apply to broader services like information and guidance on websites which doesn't always have a measurable end point.

There's a lot of it. It seems to assume you have a team with lots of different roles (user researchers, content managers...) and you are already using agile, which isn't the case for our LA.

There's no real-life examples.

This isn't driven within local authorities- feels like is aimed at central government services which makes it difficult to get teams on board. Some of the terminology used is for those who are more familiar with building digital services and less accessible to service managers who are key to making decisions.

Table A2: What steps did you go through to be able to use the Standard in your council?

1. Signed local digital declaration.

2. Built digital team with working style and practices inspired by principles.

3. Tested and iterated approach through transformation projects.

Discussion and agreement with project board.

I am using the standards to create a new customer contact strategy.

I have never used the Standard in my council for the above reasons. I previously used it in a role that was focused on building digital services in the third sector. There I used it mostly as a way of explaining what a good quality user-facing website for our organisation would look like to senior stakeholders. It was somewhat helpful for that purpose!

I have only used it myself on a few occasions.

Included in our digital strategy that went through the approval process via cabinet so had member buy in.

It was already in place when I joined, and was listed on the job advert as a requirement. It's well socialised within my Research & Design team but we don't use it consistently.

It was part of a project and led by other parties.

It's more of a nice to have than a must follow. So, no real controls are put round it.

New digital and customer service strategy that is aligned with the standard.

Our Digital team had already adopted the standard as part of our service design strategy, playbook.

Service simulation, prototyping.

Signed the Digital Declaration.

The standard has been embedded as far as possible in both our digital transformation team and digital communications team. Embedding in procurement has not been as successful.

We attached the service standards to parts of our end-to-end design process

We committed to adopted the standard when we signed the Local Digital Declaration and as part of our Digital Vision Delivery work which was signed off by Cabinet.

We have been using the standard to guide our professional practice since the inception of <Council name>'s digital team in 2017. As above, it's not tightly bound into our organisational governance, so we haven't been through a formal process to get permission.

We included reference to this within some of our core design principles for example customer experience. We have also adopted a number of the recognised practices in a smaller focussed delivery team.

We only use aspects of it quite loosely so nothing has been properly formalised.

Table A3: How do you use the Standard for your online services, including those which you procure?

Again, I don't use it currently. My work on online services involves weaving them together with analogue service delivery and, as discussed, I don't find the service standard useful for this purpose.

Again, we use aspects in quite a loose fashion so it's hard to answer this question. We just try to apply the bits that make sense to us.

As far as possible we aim to apply the standard to all development work that we do in house. This isn't always possible because of limitations mentioned before but we certainly aim to do as much as we can. As of yet the standard isn't embedded in our procurement process but certain elements are.

Build our processes from the outside in ensuring they are easy to use and that they are geared from a customer's point of view. Whilst we don't push digital first (our demography is one third aged 65 and over) we do ensure we channel shift as much as possible to digital and have set a 65% KPI for digital contact/interaction.

Don't currently.

I am currently using the Standard to create a new customer contact/digital strategy. It helps to build the framework and drive the move to providing a good service to our customers.

I don't think we do – which isn't great – procurement of digital service when it's a project we're involved in is better, but we have no oversight / control of services outside our department that procure without engaging us.

I have only used it for gathering info/methods, not actually guiding any development.

It's embedded in our version of the design council's double diamond design thinking/ problem solving model

It's often overlooked. There's only one or two of us that try and follow the standard rather than it being adopted by the council as a whole with controls placed round it

Measuring and comparing.

Principles included in digital team's practices and working styles. Procurement requirements inspired by principles, sometimes compliance with service standard is included as a requirement.

Using web analytics and other data that's available.

We have built our teams practice around most of the elements within the code when supporting services to transform. We include reference to some specifics within procurement questions (i.e. accessibility and usability) and also promote practice with COTS products.

We have issues within our governance and therefore we don't apply it every time to our online services, this is due to the use of standards not being mandatory and driven from within our Digital team. We are currently looking at ways in which we change this moving forward.

We run light-touch internal service assessments as a way of quality assuring our work on online services. We point to the service standard when procuring consultancy or technology solutions as an expectation around approach and ways of working. We also tend to use digital marketplace frameworks (G-Cloud, DOS) which ensures suppliers have already committed to the use of the standard.

We try and focus every with the customer at the centre, designing any service with them in mind making sure services are simple and easy to use.

We use elements of the service standard. The design standard is sometimes not included when procuring, as it's a small element in the grand scheme – value and priority is difficult when the suppliers don't apply them and would severely limit the market.

We use it as a guide to design and deliver online services, and help to provide rationale to business users about why we need to do things differently. We include key elements such as accessibility in our mandatory non-functional requirements for procurement.

**Table A4: What barriers, if any, have prevented you from using the Standard?
Other answers provided**

Lack of consideration in the standard of analogue components of services and the staff who deliver them.

Managers and colleagues not being aware of them, we are in the process of trying to rectify this with marketing our service better, I've personally had business partners blocking agile project management ceremonies in projects which goes against the standards.

No governance to enforce control.

Trying to apply the standard to content delivery (website information) has been challenging because there isn't always a clear end to end.

Would be difficult here to go through an assessment each time we wanted to put a process or service live, so many would be in Beta.

Lack of consideration in the standard of analogue components of services and the staff who deliver them.

Table A5: Do you have any suggestions for improving the Service Standard?

As a small council with a small workforce it is hard to meet some of the standards. E.g. it can be difficult to have a team made up of people with a diverse mix of skills if we only have 1 or 2 people in the team. This can also be restricted in recruitment and how many applicants we receive for posts.

Different versions of the standard depending on the Council (District, County, Unitary).

Enforcement for all authorities to meet the standard, which will impact the market and enforce suppliers to adhere.

Sharing research and funding across LAs.

Either making the Service Standard less specific for central government or publishing a version that uses same principles but with guidance more aligned to local government constraints.

Give clearer guidance on methods LAs can use and adapt depending on the make up and size of their own teams.

How to make this work with 3rd parties i.e. applications not developed by your organisation. How to access expertise to evaluate that might not be within your organisation. Getting services (non-digital teams) to understand why this is important what each thing means (i.e. why we might not want to go live with something they perceive as good enough).

I think it serves a purpose in its current form, working collaboratively with others may generate some great ideas as to how it can be improved so I would be interested in being part of the workshop to understand how others have used it and what they would change. I think the changes we are looking for in <Council name> is more around our own governance and how we can better embed this into our services.

I think the Service Standard is a good framework but for many Local Authorities who don't have budgets to create bespoke, open-source applications, have dedicated user researchers, data specialists and service assessors makes delivering against the service standard is a little out of reach. Procurement is also a challenge as it's not clear how to use the standard when you are mostly procuring off the-shelf-systems. It's also challenging the apply the standard to less clearly defined services like web content. Sorry, these are not suggestions for improvement... but things that we find a challenge.

I think you should rethink it to be a genuinely digitally neutral product. A lot of this would be about language. Some of it would be about substance – e.g. more on how it might intersect with the various professional standards that local authority staff also adhere to (such as social work or housing regulations).

I would encourage real examples to be added – make it come alive a bit.

If the standard is going to be used by LAs just make sure it's a realistic proposition. For example, we'd love to get away from using legacy systems / have loads of APIs but the reality is that we're locked into contracts with suppliers (some owned by venture capitalists) who may not be interested in our customers need / do not provide us with APIs / offer poor support.

Look at whether we have options around using the agile steps, e.g., Discovery, Alpha, Beta, etc. Our Council doesn't have the resources/funding to work fully agile. Look at how/if project boards/governance can sign off the service without having to have an external service assessment to move to live.

Proactive offer of learning resources for policy colleagues (perhaps this exists? Should it be included in all CA induction programmes?).

Promoting it – there are lots of conversations going on in my authority around digital innovation and accessibility.

Real life case studies and more outreach from LGD on the ground to critique our approach.

Revamping, making more accessible.

The standard is good, but the relationship between the standard and local governance arrangements is where we see challenges around its implementation.

The standards themselves are fine. Its more about how it gets truly embedded in councils that are constantly looking to cut corners.

Update to include an AI standard – how keeping human in the loop is critical element in the augmentation between machine learning/AI and generative AI.

We are looking at putting together some templates and best practice examples alongside some use cases to help make this more accessible, in terms of understanding the process and the benefit to service managers.

We don't use the service assessment as too time consuming/detailed for Local Gov, but I did commission <region name> audit to provide a health check about how well we were progressing in terms of adopting the Standard.



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