

2025

# Computer says no

**The  
New Britain  
Project**

*A Britain that's got your back*

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## **The New Britain Project**

The New Britain Project is an independent progressive think tank focused on bridging the gap between politics, policy and practice.

As a female-led organisation, we confront the lack of women in policymaking, bringing new perspectives to the table.

Our focus is on bringing frontline voices into policymaking, so that their insights can drive pragmatic solutions.

Guided by those with first-hand government experience, we effectively navigate the complexities of policy implementation.

Together, we aim to understand the root causes of past policy failures and provide practical measures to drive successful change in the months and years ahead

## **About the author**

**Anna McShane** is the Founding Director of The New Britain Project

## **Acknowledgements**

A huge thank you to everyone in the local government sector and NHS who shared their insights.

The arguments and any errors that remain are the authors' and the authors' alone.

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# 1

## Introduction

*"We are experiencing high call volumes at the moment. Your call is important to us."*

If there's a soundtrack to life in broken Britain, this might be it.

What started as a joke, 'Computer Says No' culture, now feels all too real.

This isn't a headline grabbing crisis like NHS waiting lists or the housing crisis. It's by no means as important either, but it is a persistent problem that shapes daily life, testing our patience and, over time, eroding our trust in the institutions designed to serve us.

It's the inconvenience of the online form that never submits properly, the chatbot that repeatedly asks you through endless irrelevant questions without offering real help, and the calls where you have to explain your issue again and again.

The issue isn't always the final outcome, appointments get booked, bills get paid, problems get resolved. But the process of getting there is what wears people down: the wasted time, the needless obstacles, and the feeling of being stuck in a system that doesn't seem to work as it should.

This report is about that process. About the wasted time, the unnecessary friction, and the quiet resignation that has become part of daily interactions with both public and private services.

Getting this right won't transform health outcomes (although it would make a serious dent) and it certainly won't make electricity bills cheaper, but it **can** help address some of those unnecessary annoyances that often jade our views of the services the country relies on most. Most importantly, it's something government can and should get to grips with.

Public services shouldn't be judged solely on outcomes but also on how easily people can access them. A government serious about reform doesn't just talk about efficiency, it delivers systems that value something even more important: people's time.

## 2

## The hidden cost of frustration - Wasting time, losing trust

Our data shows a clear gap between public and private sector customer service, one that points to deeper structural issues.

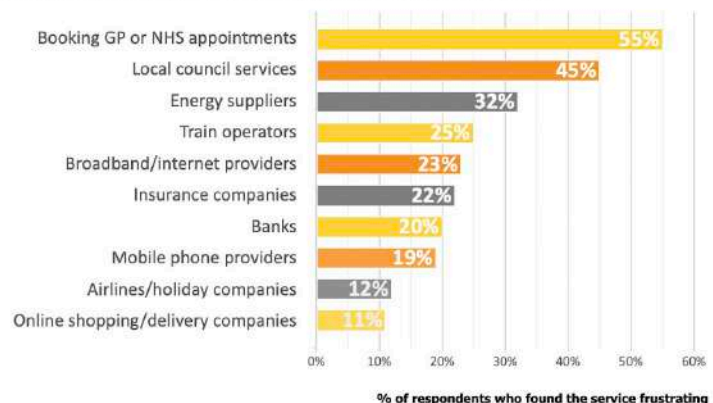
GP and NHS appointments sit at the top of the 'frustration index', with 55% of respondents describing their interactions as frustrating or extremely frustrating. Following closely are local council services (45%) and then energy suppliers (32%).

In contrast, services like online shopping and delivery companies (11%) and airlines/holiday companies (12%) register significantly lower frustration levels.

### GP appointments are the most frustrating public service, while energy suppliers top frustrations in the private sector

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Thinking about your own experiences, how frustrating have you usually found dealing with customer service for the following services?



A nat rep online poll of 2009 adults in Great Britain undertaken for The New Britain Project by More in Common between 24th and 27th January 2025

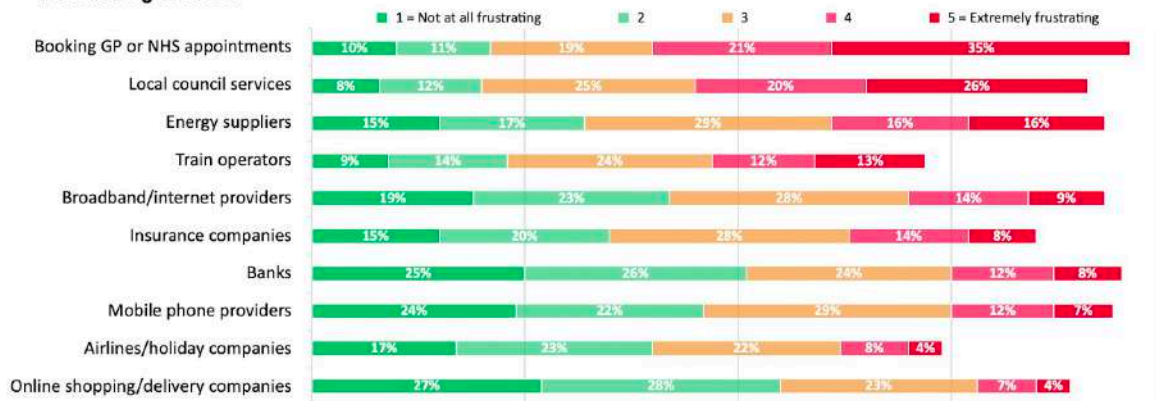
Full question: Thinking about your own experiences, how frustrating have you usually found dealing with customer service for the following services? This includes tasks like making payments, booking appointments, reporting problems, making complaints, or switching providers. Consider all contact methods (phone, online, apps, or in person).

It's perhaps no surprise that the services people have the least choice over tend to be the most frustrating. When alternatives are limited, as with the NHS or local councils, improvements can be harder to drive. Energy suppliers, while technically offering choice, often compete primarily on price rather than service quality, which may explain why they rank high in frustration levels. As for trains, although they operate within a private framework, the lack of viable alternatives for many routes means passengers often face the same frustrations, with little ability to seek a better option.

## Public services are more frustrating to deal with than private companies

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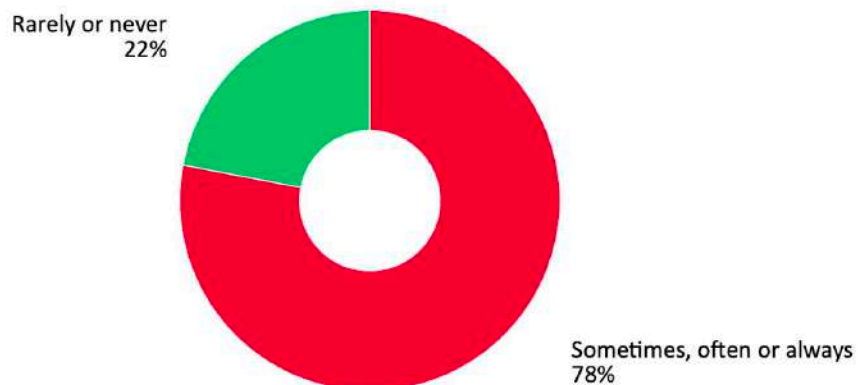
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When it comes to dealing with customer service, **78% of people** say they regularly experience frustration.

## Customer service frustration is the norm: 78% experience it regularly

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How often do you find customer service tasks frustrating or unnecessarily difficult, even when the issue is resolved?



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On average, Britons lose between **28 to 41 minutes every week** battling inefficient systems, a seemingly small figure that quickly adds up.

Middle-aged adults and women bear the brunt of this burden, disproportionately affected by the time drain.

Add it all together, and the scale of the problem is striking: across the adult population, that's **1.52 billion hours** lost every year, often during working hours, because many essential services, from GP bookings to council helplines, are only

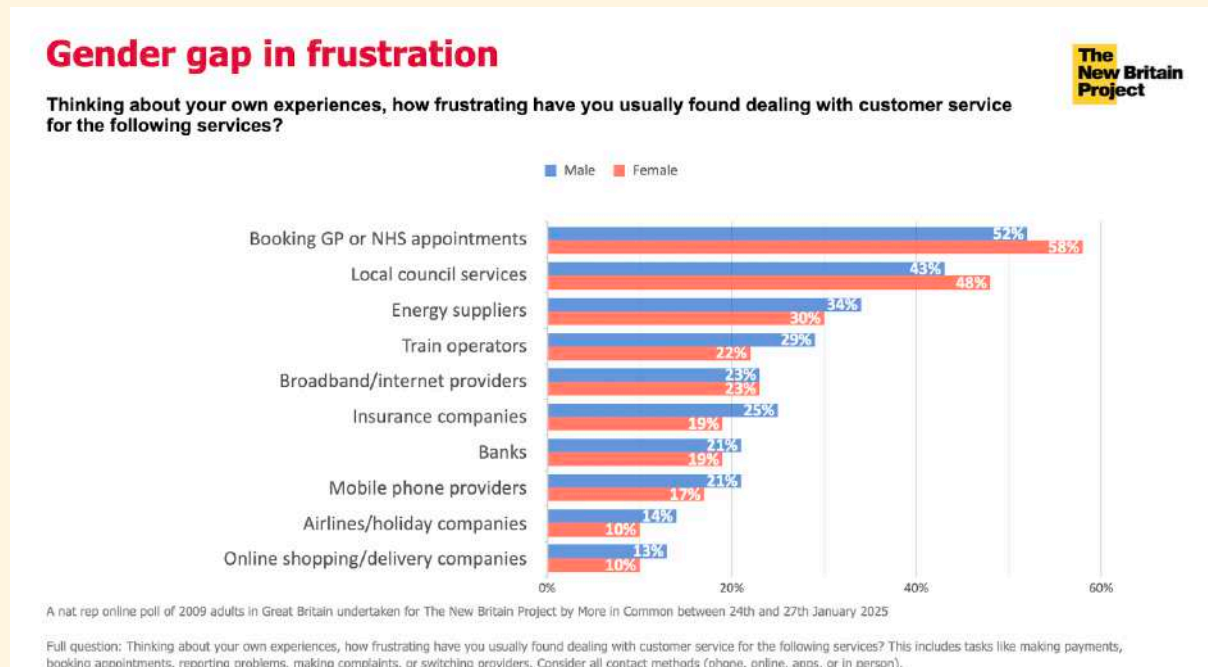
available during the standard 9-to-5, leaving people with little choice but to deal with them while they should be working.

## The everyday gender gap

Interestingly, **women reported a higher level of frustration in key service areas**. For example, **58% of women** find booking GP appointments frustrating, compared to **52% of men**.

This gender gap may reflect differences in service usage patterns, with women often managing more administrative and care-related tasks, increasing their exposure to these inefficient systems.

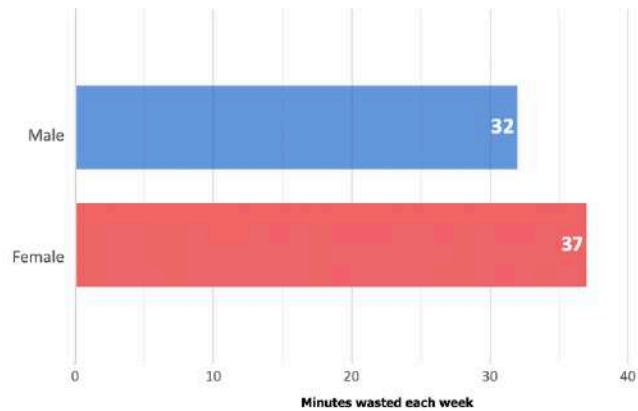
The data also shows that this frustration isn't just emotional, it's measurable in time. Women report wasting an average of 37 minutes per week dealing with customer service issues, compared to 32 minutes for men.



## Women report wasting more time on customer service than men each week



In a typical week, how much total time do you feel is wasted dealing with customer service tasks and issues, even if you successfully resolved the issue? This includes time spent on hold, navigating automated systems, waiting for responses, or dealing with unnecessarily complicated processes.



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## Stuck in the middle

Frustration peaks among those aged **35-54**, many of whom juggle work, family, and parental and other caregiving responsibilities. This age group faces higher demands on their time, amplifying the impact of inefficient customer service. Younger respondents (18-24) in comparison report slightly lower frustration levels, potentially due to greater digital literacy and fewer interactions with complex services.

## Stuck in the middle: Brits aged 35-54 are the most fed up



	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65-74	75+
Booking GP or NHS appointments	55	51	61	59	58	55	43
Local council services	43	43	50	57	51	39	29
Energy suppliers	30	32	42	36	33	26	20
Train operators	23	23	26	32	29	22	18
Broadband/internet providers	26	22	23	26	21	23	20
Insurance companies	29	22	23	19	21	17	19
Banks	22	16	23	22	18	21	16
Mobile phone providers	22	20	20	23	17	15	12
Airlines/holiday companies	17	15	13	13	9	7	7
Online shopping/delivery companies	13	14	12	14	9	6	8

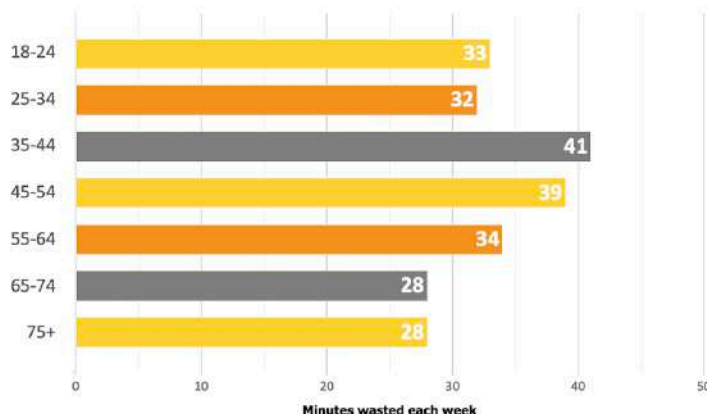
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Full question: Thinking about your own experiences, how frustrating have you usually found dealing with customer service for the following services? This includes tasks like making payments, booking appointments, reporting problems, making complaints, or switching providers. Consider all contact methods (phone, online, apps, or in person).

## Middle-aged adults waste the most time each week



In a typical week, how much total time do you feel is wasted dealing with customer service tasks and issues, even if you successfully resolved the issue? This includes time spent on hold, navigating automated systems, waiting for responses, or dealing with unnecessarily complicated processes.



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## Regional frustration

The West Midlands and Wales are the frustration hotspots, with residents reporting the highest levels of dissatisfaction.

However, when it comes to time wasted on customer service, the picture shifts. According to our data, residents in the South East of England report an average of 41 minutes wasted each week, which is the highest in the country. This is significantly more than regions like the East of England (27 minutes) and the East Midlands (29 minutes).

## Frustration hits hardest in Wales and the West Midlands



	East Midlands	East of England	Greater London	North East England	North West England	Scotland	South East England	South West England	Wales	West Midlands	Yorkshire and the Humber
Booking GP or NHS appointments	63	55	53	52	54	49	59	55	65	54	49
Local council services	53	42	47	37	49	42	40	39	54	53	46
Energy suppliers	37	32	30	34	36	26	32	31	29	36	31
Train operators	22	21	24	24	36	18	25	29	25	27	20
Broadband/internet providers	26	24	21	12	29	24	18	24	28	23	23
Insurance companies	22	19	18	21	28	19	22	24	21	23	20
Banks	19	19	21	16	28	9	21	18	21	18	22
Mobile phone providers	27	15	22	13	28	12	14	22	16	20	12
Airlines/holiday companies	11	10	14	12	13	16	12	15	10	10	6
Online shopping/delivery companies	11	9	14	12	18	7	9	14	10	10	6

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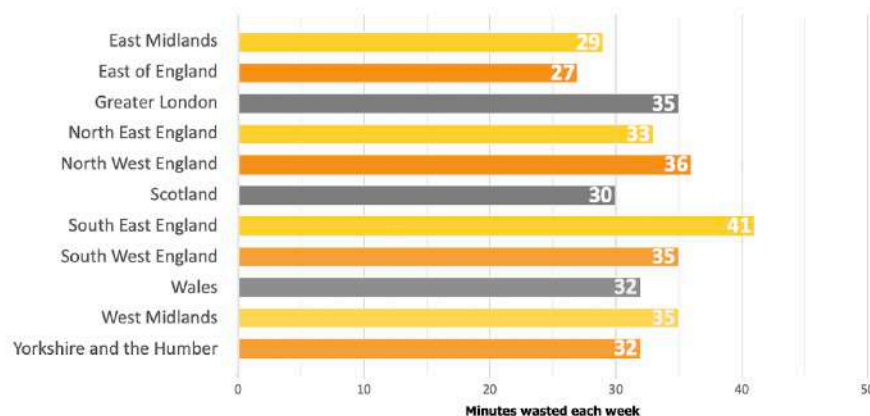
Full question: Thinking about your own experiences, how frustrating have you usually found dealing with customer service for the following services? This includes tasks like making payments, booking appointments, reporting problems, making complaints, or switching providers. Consider all contact methods (phone, online, apps, or in person).



## People in the South East report wasting the most time each week

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In a typical week, how much total time do you feel is wasted dealing with customer service tasks and issues, even if you successfully resolved the issue? This includes time spent on hold, navigating automated systems, waiting for responses, or dealing with unnecessarily complicated processes.



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### Political divide

Public dissatisfaction with everyday services is not just a matter of personal inconvenience, it's increasingly helping shape political attitudes. Our data shows a distinct pattern: supporters of Reform UK and the Green Party report the highest levels of frustration when dealing with both public and private services. Conservative voters, by contrast, tend to express lower levels of dissatisfaction.

For Reform UK supporters, this frustration appears to extend beyond complaints about long wait times or bureaucratic inefficiencies. Instead, it points to a deeper sense of institutional disengagement, with many feeling that the government is distant, unresponsive, and failing to address everyday concerns. The data suggests that dissatisfaction with service provision is reinforcing a wider political narrative, one that taps into grievances about state capacity and governance more broadly.

This has political implications. Frustration with essential services is not simply a latent grievance, where trust in public institutions erodes, so too does confidence in government, influencing how voters engage with politics and, ultimately, how they cast their ballots.

And so this isn't just an abstract decline in trust, it's beginning to show up in where people turn politically. Our data shows that supporters of Reform UK and the Green Party report the highest levels of frustration, not just with the state but across all service interactions. These voters come from different ideological traditions, but what they share is a growing sense that mainstream politics has failed to deliver on the basics.

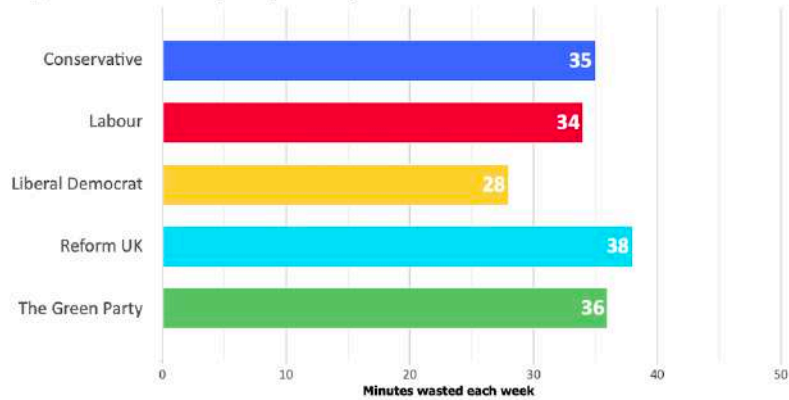
This frustration is becoming a gateway to political disengagement, or radical alternatives. For some, it's leading them away from the centre ground. And for others, it's feeding a broader resignation: that government just doesn't work anymore. If public services continue to waste people's time and wear down their

patience, it's not just their trust in government that declines, but their belief that anyone in power can make things better at all.

## Reform UK and Green Party supporters feel like they waste the most time each week

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In a typical week, how much total time do you feel is wasted dealing with customer service tasks and issues, even if you successfully resolved the issue? This includes time spent on hold, navigating automated systems, waiting for responses, or dealing with unnecessarily complicated processes.



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## Reform UK supporters are the most frustrated

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	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat	Reform UK	The Green Party
Booking GP or NHS appointments	52	54	53	61	58
Local council services	40	43	38	54	38
Train operators	30	30	28	31	31
Energy suppliers	27	35	29	38	38
Broadband/internet providers	22	25	32	24	18
Insurance companies	22	23	24	25	31
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# 3

## Fixing the Frustration

For millions of people across the country, interactions with the public sector are often frustrating, nowhere more so than with GP appointments and council services, as our data shows.

Accessing these services shouldn't feel like a fight, nor should it require five different logins.

But the problem isn't a lack of innovation, some councils and GP surgeries do get it right. The issue is that the best ideas often don't spread, or providers are locked into contracts that are too costly or restrictive to escape.

### Why fixing GP access matters

GP services are the number one source of public frustration, yet digital tools, rather than fixing the issue, are often inconsistent, confusing, and inefficient.

At their best, digital platforms can make it faster and easier for patients to get the right care, helping to triage demand and direct people to the most appropriate service, whether that's a GP appointment, pharmacy support, or self-care advice. However, this only works if digital systems are designed properly and used consistently.

Right now, the experience varies hugely across the country:<sup>1</sup>

- Some GP practices process online requests in minutes, while others take hours or fail to respond at all.
- Only about 10% of GP surgeries have fully adapted their operations to handle digital requests efficiently. Many simply layer online tools on top of outdated processes, making it harder, not easier, to get help.
- The NHS doesn't track digital response times across GP practices, meaning there's no accountability for slow or inconsistent access.
- The NHS App and NHS.uk are widely used, but the design, functionality, and workflow still vary depending on the GP practice, creating confusion for patients.
- Many practices turn off digital channels outside of certain hours, despite the new GP contract requiring them to stay open during core hours, yet this isn't being enforced.

### Vendor lock in and costly procurement <sup>2</sup>

For council services in contrast one of the main issues they face is that they rely on a handful of large IT firms to supply the technology that powers their websites and services behind them.

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Whilst many council websites might look the part, the real frustration isn't the front-end, it's what happens behind the scenes. The real costs and inefficiencies lie in business software, payment systems, and workflow tools that councils rely on to deliver services.

Payments are a good example: The online payment systems used by local authorities are often clunky, slow, and poorly integrated, leading to frustration for residents trying to pay for things like council tax or parking.

One of the drivers of this is the fact that each supplier often has its own requirements on the format data is collected in. This makes it difficult to change suppliers but also means that different data systems within a council, such as housing needs and safeguarding, cannot easily talk to each other. Clearly this has knock-on effects for council officers but also adds to the frustration for residents who are being asked to submit the same information multiple times to different parts of the council.<sup>3</sup>

But the problem isn't just about technical limitations; it's also about a lack of meaningful competition in the local government IT market.<sup>4</sup>

A handful of large suppliers dominate the sector, locking councils into long-term, expensive contracts with little flexibility. Because there is no collective approach to procurement, each council negotiates separately, often on weak terms, leading to inflated costs and outdated systems. Smaller, more innovative suppliers struggle to enter the market because procurement rules favour larger, established firms, reinforcing a cycle where the same few providers control critical digital infrastructure.

Known as vendor lock-in, it can become prohibitively expensive to swap suppliers even at the end of a contract.

Councils are also often left negotiating these complex, high-value contracts on their own, often without the bargaining power to demand better terms. This can leave each council to reinvent the wheel, and often ends up with them paying over the odds for systems that don't fully meet their needs. Even when councils want to modernise, risk aversion slows everything down. Many councils fear that switching systems could cause service disruptions, particularly as digital expertise is often lacking at leadership levels

Equally with each authority operating independently, lessons from one area, whether good or bad, don't always make their way to others. This lack of coordination means that instead of pooling resources or learning from what works elsewhere, councils can also end up locked into inefficient systems simply because they don't have visibility of better alternatives.

### **Digitisation isn't a silver bullet**

The act of putting something online or digitising it doesn't suddenly make a system better.<sup>5</sup>

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GP bookings are a good example. While some surgeries do offer seamless online access, for too many digital triage tools often act as a barrier rather than a solution, and even when they work, they rarely link up with other NHS services, leaving patients still chasing referrals and re-entering information.

Councils face similar issues. Online portals often just replicate bureaucracy rather than streamline it. Residents still get stuck submitting the same details multiple times or are forced back to phone lines when systems don't deliver. Poor integration between departments means services still operate in silos.

A common refrain in digital transformation circles is that "a bad system put online is still a bad system." Without real reform, digital services risk making life just as frustrating, only with extra tech headaches

### **Five ways to fix the frustration**

Right now, the reorganisation of local government and NHS England creates a rare opportunity to modernise digital services and tackle inefficiencies that have built up over decades. However, too often, when new authorities or NHS structures are formed, they default to consolidating the least-worst parts of existing systems rather than using the moment to set a higher standard for what good looks like. Instead of patching together outdated components, this reorganisation should be seen as a chance to reboot digital services properly.

At the same time, the increasing threat of cyberattacks means a more coordinated, centrally protected system is essential to prevent local public services from being exposed to security failures.

These reforms wouldn't just improve services and security, a more joined-up approach would also drive down costs, improve efficiency, and provide better value for taxpayers.

#### **1. Create a gov.local.uk platform - a shared website standard for all councils**

- Develop an open-source platform for council websites, ensuring a consistent, user-friendly digital experience, similar to GOV.UK.
- Councils can choose to build their own websites, but if they don't meet a minimum usability and accessibility standard, they should be mandated to use the gov.local.uk platform or components instead.

#### **2. Break vendor lock-in for local government systems by increasing competition and reforming procurement**

- While gov.local.uk would standardise the look and feel of council websites, the real challenge is fixing the back-end systems that power key services like housing, social care, and planning, where most of the inefficiencies and costs lie.
- Enable joint procurement across councils, giving local government stronger bargaining power and reducing reliance on a few large IT suppliers.

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- Simplify procurement rules so smaller, more innovative suppliers can compete, rather than being shut out by complex and costly bidding processes.
  - Move away from rigid, long-term contracts, allowing councils to switch providers more easily if a system isn't delivering value.

### **3. Mandate common data standards across public services to ensure systems can work together**

- Public services, including different departments within councils and the NHS, use systems that don't work together. This makes it harder to coordinate services, modernise, and often traps providers and councils in restrictive IT contracts.
- Develop a single set of common data standards across councils and the NHS, to ensure seamless integration.
- Then require all new IT contracts to allow data portability, so councils and NHS providers aren't locked into outdated or fragmented systems.
- In the longer term, mandate full adoption of open standards across all public services, so no new system is built in isolation and phase out legacy systems that don't comply, with support for councils and NHS providers to transition smoothly.

### **4. Make the NHS App and NHS.uk the universal entry point for GP services**

- End the postcode lottery of GP booking systems by making the NHS App and NHS.uk the default platforms for appointments, referrals, and prescriptions.
- Ensure all GP practices keep digital channels open throughout core hours, in line with the new GP contract, and introduce clear enforcement mechanisms to prevent unnecessary restrictions.
- Require all GP software suppliers to adopt a standard NHS design system, ensuring a consistent, user-friendly experience and reducing confusion for patients.
- Measure and track digital response times, so practices can be held accountable for how effectively they handle online requests.
- In the longer term develop the NHS App as a 24/7 digital front door, allowing patients to access urgent care, out-of-hours support (formerly 111), and pharmacy services in addition to GP services.

### **5. Expand the proposed government digital wallet to include local services**

- A single, secure login for all local government and NHS services, integrated with GOV.UK accounts.
- Ensures continuity when people move between councils or GP practices, reducing admin for both residents and local authorities.
- Eliminates the need for multiple logins and passwords.
- Strengthens security and reduces fraud, replacing outdated, fragmented authentication systems with a centrally managed, high-security model.

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