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UK LOSI assessment findings

Executive Summary

This report applies the United Nations Local Online Services Index (LOSI) to a representative sample of 12 UK local authorities, assessing the digital maturity, accessibility, and inclusivity of their municipal government portals (MGPs). The study supports international benchmarking efforts and identifies strengths and gaps in local digital service delivery. The LOSI assessment was carried out by the UCL Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose.

Councils were evaluated across six categories using the LOSI framework: Institutional Framework, Content, Services, Participation, Technology, and E-Government Literacy. Overall, UK local authorities demonstrate strong foundations in institutional frameworks, digital literacy, and core service provision. Most councils provide comprehensive online services such as social welfare applications and consultation tools, alongside robust user support features.

However, technical compliance and advanced digital capabilities remain areas for improvement. Many portals lack sophisticated search functions, full adherence to web accessibility standards, and integration of real-time data or smart city initiatives. Citizen engagement tools are present but limited, with few councils offering participatory budgeting or AI-enabled services.

The LOSI framework suggests for UK local authorities the need for enhanced technological capabilities. Recommendations include prioritising accessibility compliance and expanding advanced digital features. Meanwhile, we suggest to the LOSI framework better weighting of categories, refinement of the framework to reflect local government responsibilities and adopting user-centred design principles to ensure services meet local needs.

1. Introduction

Our objective is to apply the UN Local Online Services Index (LOSI) to a representative and diverse sample of 12 local authorities in the United Kingdom. This aims to triangulate LOSI results with existing national indicators and assess digital maturity, inclusion, and accessibility of local public services.

The LOSI framework is used by the UN to evaluate the digital presence and service delivery capabilities of local governments around the world; this report supports international benchmarking efforts toward digital transformation worldwide by encouraging local governments to adopt inclusive, transparent, and user-friendly municipal government portals (MGPs). It consists of a questionnaire with 97 applicable questions concerning parameters from one of 6 categories:

- Institutional Framework (5 questions): municipal e-government strategy, organisational structure and legislation governing access to information and privacy and open data policy.

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- Content (30 questions): extents to which essential public info and resources are available online.
- Services (30 questions): availability and delivery of targeted local government services.
- Participation and Engagement (10 questions): availability of mechanisms and initiatives for interaction and opportunities for public participation in local governance structures.
- Technology (10 questions): features such as advanced search and compliance with technical standards.
- E-Government literacy (10 questions): digital inclusion measures such as public Wi-Fi and tutorials for navigating local government services.

UK local government is administered by 382 local authorities across the four nations of England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. In England, there are five different types of council: county councils, district councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan districts and London boroughs. Where unitary authorities provide all local government services in their areas, metropolitan districts collaborate with city-wide services such as fire and civil defence, police, waste disposal and passenger transport. District and county councils exist under a two-tier system with overlapping responsibilities: district councils are usually responsible for local services where county councils manage social care. Scottish, Welsh, and Northern Irish local government systems consist entirely of unitary authorities. Local government is also more limited in Northern Ireland: councils are not responsible for roadbuilding or housing.

The UN, represented by its Department of Social and Economic Affairs, and the UK, represented by GDS (Government Digital Service), signed a memorandum of understanding agreeing to apply the methodology to local government in the UK.

2. Methodology

2.1. Assessed Local Authorities

This study analysed 12 local authorities, listed below in table 1, with geographical locations represented in figure 1. They were selected with the idea of representing the four nations of the UK, alongside a diverse range of population sizes and socioeconomic characteristics. Only unitary authorities and metropolitan districts were considered: district and county councils have been excluded. Their overlapping nature means that they have different sets of responsibilities to unitary authorities and metropolitan districts. This study emphasises councils having similar remits so that they can be compared against each other. London boroughs were also excluded as the UN e-government survey already explores digital capabilities in capital cities.

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| Council | Rationale |
|------------------------------|---|
| Leicester City Council | Medium-sized, high-deprivation unitary authority in the Midlands; ethnically diverse population. |
| Portsmouth City Council | Mid-sized urban council on the south coast of England with socio-digital challenges; representative of port cities. |
| Glasgow City Council | Scotland's largest city; key for national representation with high urban deprivation. |
| Cardiff Council | Capital of Wales; large urban authority with mid deprivation and digital maturity. |
| Belfast City Council | Northern Ireland's largest council; urban, high-deprivation context important for national coverage. |
| Middlesbrough Council | Post-industrial, high-deprivation area in northeast England; illustrative of digital exclusion issues. |
| Wigan Council | Urban, metropolitan borough in northwest England with strong local digital strategies; mid-level indicators. |
| Leeds City Council | Large, metropolitan area in the north of England with digital innovation and inclusion efforts. |
| North Yorkshire Council | Recently reorganized, large rural unitary authority in the north of England; strategic inclusion for council reform dimension. |
| Brighton & Hove City Council | Progressive and digitally advanced unitary authority on the south coast of England; part of current council reform agenda. |
| Rutland County Council | Smallest council in England; rural authority with unique service delivery challenges at low scale. |
| Bracknell Forest Council | A unitary authority in South East England, mostly rural; They have adopted GDS' "Local Government Digital Service Standard"; high-level indicators. |

Table 1: Rationales for local authority study inclusion.
Information sourced from Index of Multiple Deprivation (2019) and TechUK.

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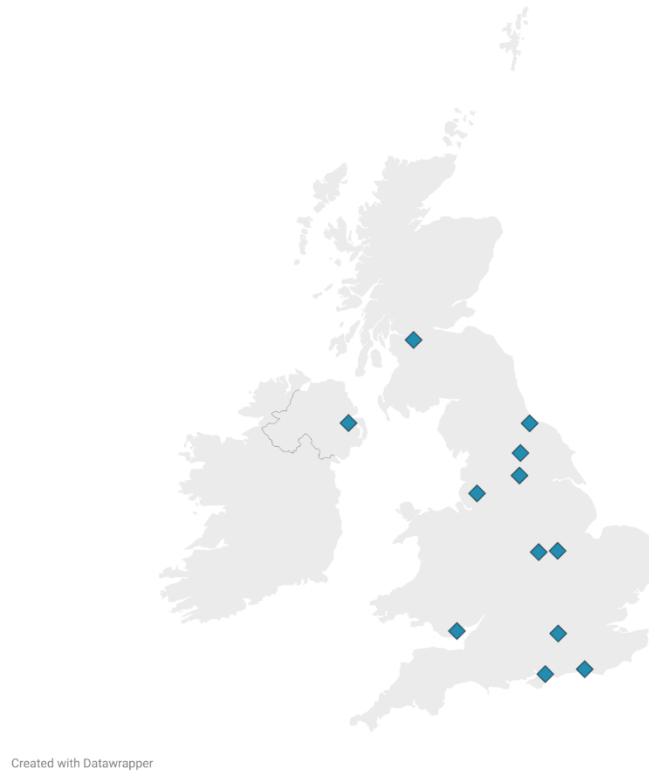


Figure 1: Map of local authorities

2.2. UN LOSI questionnaire

The UN provided a questionnaire with a list of 103 questions with yes/no answers pertaining to an aspect of e-government provisions. Of those, 97 are applicable to the UK context. The sum of 'yes' answers composed the LOSI score. In May 2025, two teams of reviewers filled in the LOSI questionnaire for each council: any differences were resolved by a third reviewer.

6 questions were excluded from the questionnaire because they concern services which are outside the remit of local authorities in the UK, instead falling within the remit of national governments or private companies. They include processes such as applying for drivers' licenses or paying for utilities.

3. Results

Figure 2 below shows the aggregate LOSI scores for each council, broken up into the categories that parameters are labelled with on the questionnaire. There is one parameter (referred to as 'other') that does not belong to one of the 6 core categories, concerning the indication of use of emergent technologies (e.g. AI) by municipalities.

According to this metric, Wigan performs the best, with 83 out of 97 parameters fulfilled, followed closely by Brighton & Hove City, Leeds City and North Yorkshire.

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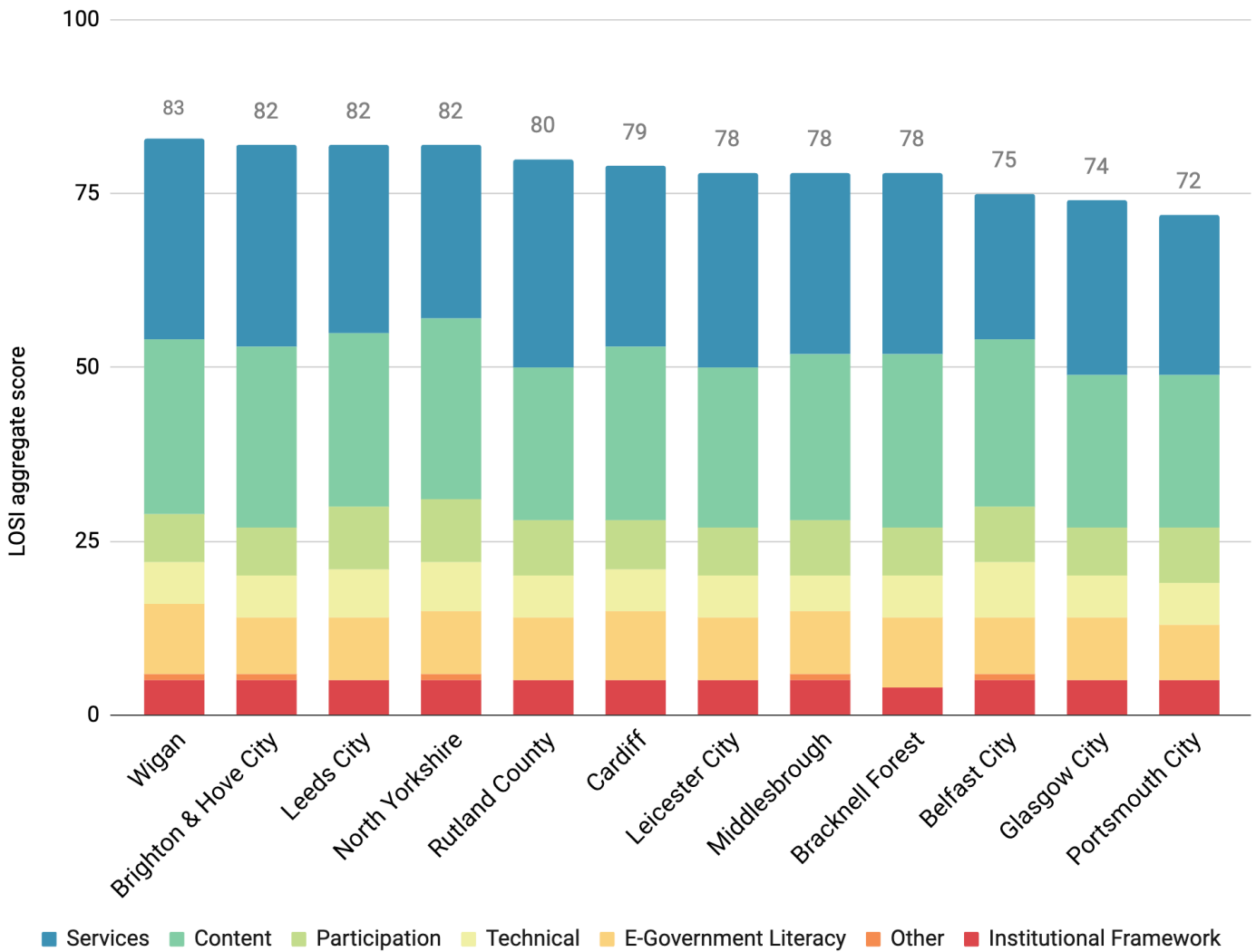


Figure 2: LOSI aggregate scores by local authority

Councils are mostly consistent with regards to how well they do with the institutional framework and e-government literacy categories, with higher variance in performance for the content and services categories. Limitations of the metric mean that this doesn't necessarily imply consistency under some categories and variance in others: firstly, the questionnaire only accepts binary outputs: councils could still wildly vary in the quality of their institutional frameworks even if common characteristics exist. Secondly, the categories which exhibit the highest variance are also the categories which have the highest number of questions. If smaller categories were expanded to include more granular parameters, this may result in the higher level of variance.

Some of these shortcomings can be mitigated if the results for each county are understood by category rather than through an aggregate LOSI score. The results can be seen in table 2 below, where the percentage reflects the number of 'yes' answers to questions in proportion to the total number of questions asked for each category. The 'other' category has been

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omitted as it only involves one category. Some questions have been struck off for being outside the scope of local government and therefore do not contribute to the percentage scores.

| Municipality | Institutional Framework | Content | Services | Participation | Technology | E-Govt Literacy |
|---------------------------|-------------------------|---------|----------|---------------|------------|-----------------|
| Wigan (1) | 100% | 86% | 91% | 70% | 60% | 100% |
| Brighton & Hove City (=2) | 100% | 90% | 91% | 70% | 60% | 80% |
| Leeds City (=2) | 100% | 86% | 84% | 90% | 70% | 90% |
| North Yorkshire (=2) | 100% | 90% | 78% | 90% | 70% | 90% |
| Rutland County (5) | 100% | 76% | 94% | 80% | 60% | 90% |
| Cardiff (6) | 100% | 86% | 81% | 70% | 60% | 100% |
| Leicester City (=7) | 100% | 79% | 88% | 70% | 60% | 90% |
| Middlesbrough (=7) | 100% | 83% | 81% | 80% | 50% | 90% |
| Bracknell Forest (=7) | 80% | 86% | 81% | 70% | 60% | 90% |
| Belfast City (10) | 100% | 83% | 66% | 80% | 80% | 80% |
| Glasgow City (11) | 100% | 76% | 78% | 70% | 60% | 90% |
| Portsmouth City (12) | 100% | 76% | 72% | 80% | 60% | 80% |
| Overall Score | 98% | 83% | 82% | 77% | 63% | 88% |

Table 2: Local authority performance by category

UK local authorities appear to be particularly strong with institutional frameworks, e-govt literacy, content and services, with more work to be done with technical capabilities.

This nuances the aggregate LOSI scores; Wigan, the top performer under the aggregate measure, is seen to be slightly behind in the technical and participation categories. Any aggregate scores in future should consider how much each category should be weighted in proportion to others. Weighting different categories is a practice used in other digital government indexes.

4. Discussion

4.1. Institutional Framework

Councils consistently share legal and governance information: static compliance tasks are easily filled, often being tied to statutory mandates such as the Freedom of Information Act.

4.2. Content

Councils publish a wide range of information, including council services, policies, and open data. However, multilingual support is missing as well as emergency or weather push notifications. There are also limited mechanisms that measure and/or publicize user satisfaction with MGPs. Evidence of smart city initiatives and progress with SDGs is limited, with only a few councils highlighting such projects.

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4.3. Services

Online applications for social welfare, parking permits, hiring of public facilities, and bulky waste collection are widely supported. Most councils provide online consultation services for affordable housing, a major UK local government function. Digital dashboards for tracking service requests are available in most councils, but not universally. However, online public transport payment systems are missing across councils, likely due to the privatisation or decentralisation of public transport systems from local governments. Real-time parking availability is also generally not provided; most councils only offer static information.

One question asks where a person or business can file tax online: most tax filing is managed centrally by HMRC and falls outside local government responsibilities. However, some councils offer the ability to pay council tax online: whilst it doesn't meet the strict definition of tax filing, it is still a relevant and important local service in the UK that may merit recognition as a service offered to citizens. We kept this question in consideration when compiling our scores to give credit to those councils that provide that service, but note that further clarification may be advisable for further iterations of the LOSI questionnaire.

4.4. Technology

Although most, if not all, councils' portals are compatible with major web browsers, are designed responsively for mobile devices, have sitemaps and search features, councils overall struggle to meet web standards and usability features. Search features are generally primitive and do not allow for the specification of specific text or of date ranges (#207). Portals generally lack compliance with the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) CSS style sheet and markup validity standards. This could potentially lead to unintentional variations across internet browsers that, without markup or CSS validity, may interpret the same code differently. Many councils also fail to comply with Web Content Accessibility Guidelines. Open data and metadata are generally available, but the depth and consistency of metadata vary.

4.5. E-government literacy

Councils are inclusive, supporting users well in navigating services: help features, FAQs, and user guidance are widely available, supporting digital literacy. All councils provide free Wi-Fi in public libraries. Meanwhile, tutorials and step-by-step guides for navigating MGPs are present on most portals, though the format and accessibility differ. This indicates a strong investment in user help tools, social media and onboarding.

4.6. Participation

Councils generally exhibit strong commitment to digital civic engagement and participatory tools; consultation, e-petitions, ways to report occurrences in public spaces, and feedback mechanisms feature across the board. However, no councils have e-voting functionalities for local government decisions, whilst online opportunities for participatory budgeting are rare across councils. Only two portals have AI enabled chatbots.

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4.7. Overall Performance

Generally, local authorities in the sample perform well according to the LOSI framework. The councils that perform the best with the LOSI questionnaire (e.g., Wigan, Brighton & Hove, Leeds, North Yorkshire) score highly due to comprehensive digital services, strong support features, and good transparency. Lower scores are typically due to gaps in advanced features (e.g., real-time data, smart city initiatives, or unified dashboards). There also appears to be little correlation with digital experiences and levels of deprivation or population size, though further empirical study with larger samples would be better able to verify whether this is the case.

The overall high performance can be attributed to legal standards like General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), or the Freedom of Information (FOI) act of 2000, that enforce a legal mandate for some level of data maturity such that data privacy can be achieved. The Equality Act 2010 also ensures that all digital infrastructure is inclusive. It can also be attributed to information sharing networks for open source software, like Drupal, that are used by many local authorities.

5. Conclusions & Recommendations

Most local government portals have strong digital foundations and provide a broad range of online services and support. According to the LOSI framework, the main areas for improvement are in advanced digital features (real-time data, smart city integration), compliance with WC3 technical standards, and deeper citizen engagement in budgeting and planning.

As it stands, the LOSI framework may provide a useful means to uncover what capabilities MGPs ought to have. It also enables comparison across specific parameters, which is especially useful because room for improvement can most likely be found in areas that some councils fulfil where others do not. However, where no councils have adopted a service, this is likely either because user needs do not require it, such as explicitly reporting upon progress to the UN SDGs. Some questions have limited pertinence for UK MGP performance, excluding questions which are outside the remit of local authorities is part of a solution. However, not only might there be blurriness with what the remit of local government even is, but different types of local authority have different responsibilities; excluding a question for one council but not another hampers the comparative potential for the LOSI survey.

The Local Government Questionnaire serves as an important method to collect qualitative data to help understand a local authority's particular needs whilst also providing nuance to the binary parameters of the LOSI questionnaire. We recommend either that the UN develops a qualitative framework to nuance LOSI scores collected that can be conducted by researchers themselves, or that the UN develops the parameters further to allow for results between 'Yes' and 'No', as is the case for the UN's Online Services Index where questions relating to the ability of users to complete government services transactions uses a more detailed scale.

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Different categories do not appear to be weighed against each other. Similarly, all questions weigh the same (being worth one point) despite having varying levels of importance: a question asking if there even is a Municipality Government Portal weighs the same as a question asking whether the MGP provides online access to parking availability information.

Some services are also provided despite not being mentioned in MGPs: whilst Rutland County libraries provide free Wi-Fi, this is not mentioned in the unitary authority website. Although we gave Rutland County the point for the question, further clarification concerning whether information must be available on the MGP website, even if available on other council-run websites (like the Rutland library service), would be helpful.

Ultimately, the LOSI framework presents an optimistic outlook for UK e-government standards. The numerical results from the LOSI framework are of interest and can enable comparison within and between member states.

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Appendix: selection criteria

The 12 councils were selected based on six key criteria to ensure a balanced and representative sample.

- Geographical Distribution: Inclusion of councils from all four UK nations: England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. There is also representation from northern, midland and southern regions of England.
- Population Size
- Type of Authority: inclusion of Unitary Authorities, Metropolitan Boroughs, and Councils within two-tier systems.

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- Environment Type: councils in urban, rural, coastal and semi-rural areas were included to reflect differing service delivery realities.
- Socioeconomic or Digital Maturity Level: these are based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation and techUK's Local Digital Index.
- Participation in Reorganisation or Reforms: councils that are part of or undergoing structural reform (e.g., forming new unitary authorities).

| Council | Region/ Nation | Authority Type | Environment | Socioeconomic/ Digital Level | Reorg. Status | Population Size |
|------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|-------------|---------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|
| Leicester City Council | East Midlands of England | Unitary Authority | Urban | High Deprivation / Low Digital | Inactive | Medium (150k–500k) |
| Portsmouth City Council | South East England | Unitary Authority | Coastal | High Deprivation / Low Digital | Inactive | Medium (150k–500k) |
| Glasgow City Council | West Central Scotland | Unitary Authority | Urban | High Deprivation / Mid Digital | Inactive | Large (>500k) |
| Cardiff Council | South East Wales | Unitary Authority | Urban | Mid Deprivation / Mid Digital | Inactive | Large (>500k) |
| Belfast City Council | Northern Ireland | Unitary Authority | Urban | High Deprivation / Mid Digital | Inactive | Large (>500k) |
| Middlesbrough Council | North East England | Unitary Authority | Urban | High Deprivation / Low Digital | Inactive | Medium (150k–500k) |
| Wigan Council | North West England | Metropolitan District | Urban | Mid Deprivation / Mid Digital | Inactive | Medium (150k–500k) |
| Leeds City Council | North of England | Metropolitan District | Urban | Mid Deprivation / Mid Digital | Inactive | Large (>500k) |
| North Yorkshire Council | North of England | Unitary Authority | Rural | Mixed / Mid Digital | Active | Large (>500k) |
| Brighton & Hove City Council | South East England | Unitary Authority | Coastal | Low Deprivation / High Digital | Active | Medium (150k–500k) |
| Rutland County Council | East Midlands of England | Unitary Authority | Rural | Low Deprivation / Mid Digital | Inactive | Small (<150,000) |

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| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|----------|------------------|
| Bracknell Forest Council | South East England | Unitary Authority | Semi-rural | Low Deprivation / High Digital | Inactive | Small (<150,000) |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------|------------|-----------------------------------|----------|------------------|

Table 3: Local authority characteristics