

FROM PROBLEM - SOLVING TO CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

How local government in the UK
can become more responsive
to digital citizens

Introduction

Technology development puts pressure on all forms of government to modernise services, become more responsive to public needs, provide efficient problem-solving and to be more open and transparent. This in turn leads to more effective and meaningful democratic participation.

Local government is at the centre of this transformation, in their relationship with businesses, other public service organisations and directly with citizens. But they inevitably struggle to keep pace with technological development, the expectations of digital citizens and the risks and challenges associated with these changes.

Local government is playing an important role in the development of smart places and smart cities, bringing together technology and new data sources to help to create intelligent networks and infrastructure for the public good.

However, citizen engagement remains a complex challenge, but one that, if achieved will build public trust as well as more targeted services that meet needs. It requires a rigorous and systematic approach, yet one which is also personal and targeted. High quality digital services are essential for this, not only to meet the expectations of smart-phone owning digital citizens, but also to work within increasingly constrained budgets.

According to novoville experience and research in Europe, if citizens are allowed to monitor policy-making, budgets and decisions themselves, they are more likely to trust their public services. And if they are given the necessary digital tools to report problems, pay their bills or avoid bureaucracy, they will be more satisfied with public services. More importantly, they will also be more willing to get involved in civic matters and to voice their concerns and preferences on the important social and economic issues of their local community.

The big challenge for local government decision-makers in the 21st century is how to harness the creativity and the energy of the local community, the businesses and associations, yet not create new cost and support burdens. That challenge moves beyond individual citizens and includes smart cities, digital services in general, and the exploitation of open data.

The starting point on this journey is to build a mutually beneficial relationship between the citizens and communities with local public service providers. Technology based digital tools, if well-designed, can enable this, offering ways to construct fast, open, responsive and participatory public services fit for the 21st century. Digital methods also offer the potential for efficient yet customised services based on common digital components which reflect the needs of the individual and the diversity of our communities.

Our Survey

Our survey* was designed to record the frequency, the type and the quality of current and preferred interactions between citizens and local councils.

Our key findings demonstrate significant willingness and demand from citizens in general to embrace digital services from local government in the UK. But it depends on councils being willing and able to implement citizen-facing, modern, digital solutions placed at the heart of their service models.

2,500 residents

Areas covered:

England & Scotland

10 cities and boroughs in England (Swindon, Southampton, York, Reading, Oxford, Nottingham, Norwich, Milton Keynes, Bristol, Brighton)

2 cities in Scotland (Edinburgh, Dundee)

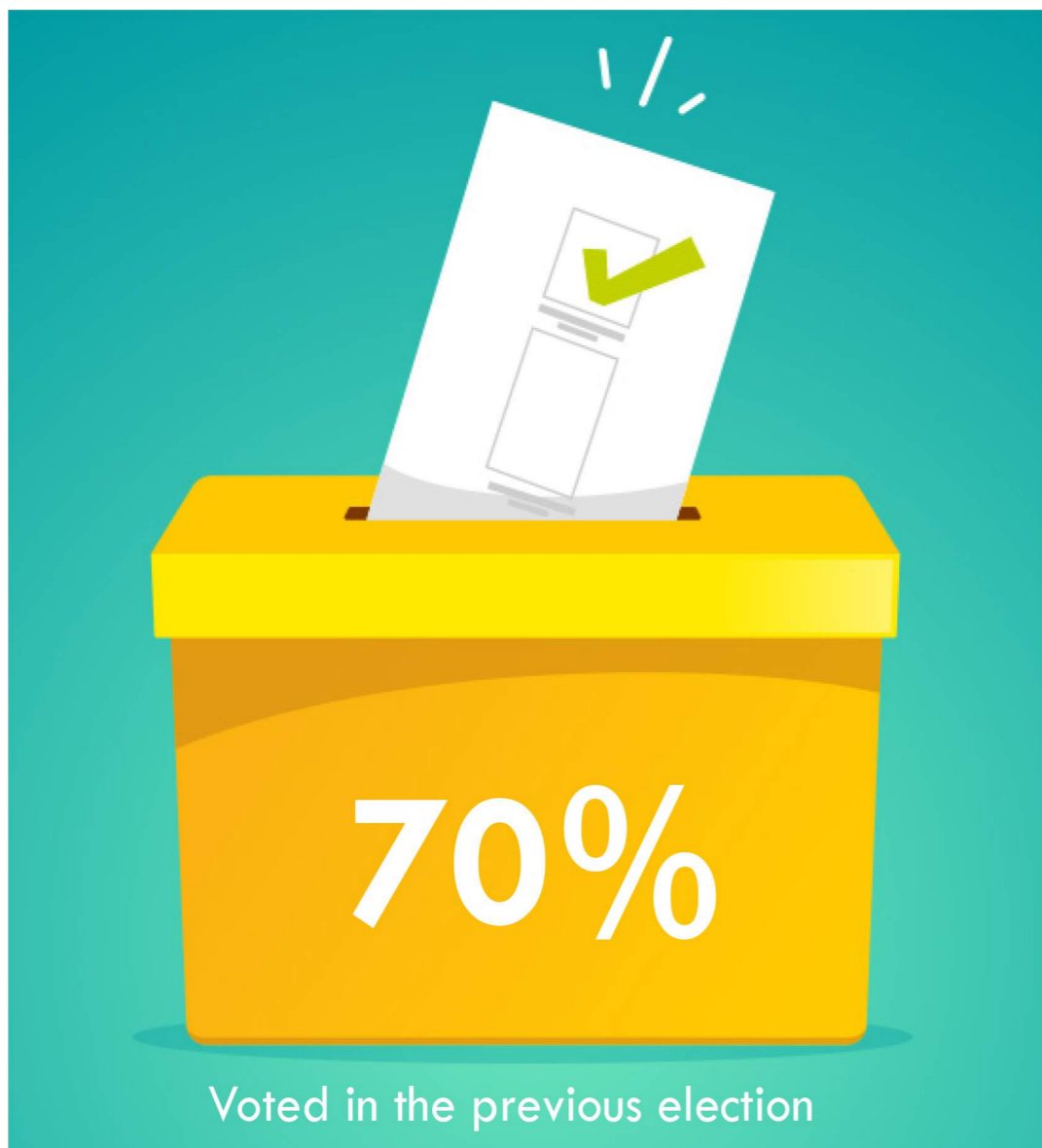
Period / time span:

February –April 2017



**online survey by Pollfish*

Key Findings



Turnout in local elections is higher than for national elections (66% in 2015). Respondents aged over 45 years are more likely to vote (86%) compared with younger voters (41% of 18-24 year olds voted), indicating a known intergenerational divide in traditional democratic engagement.

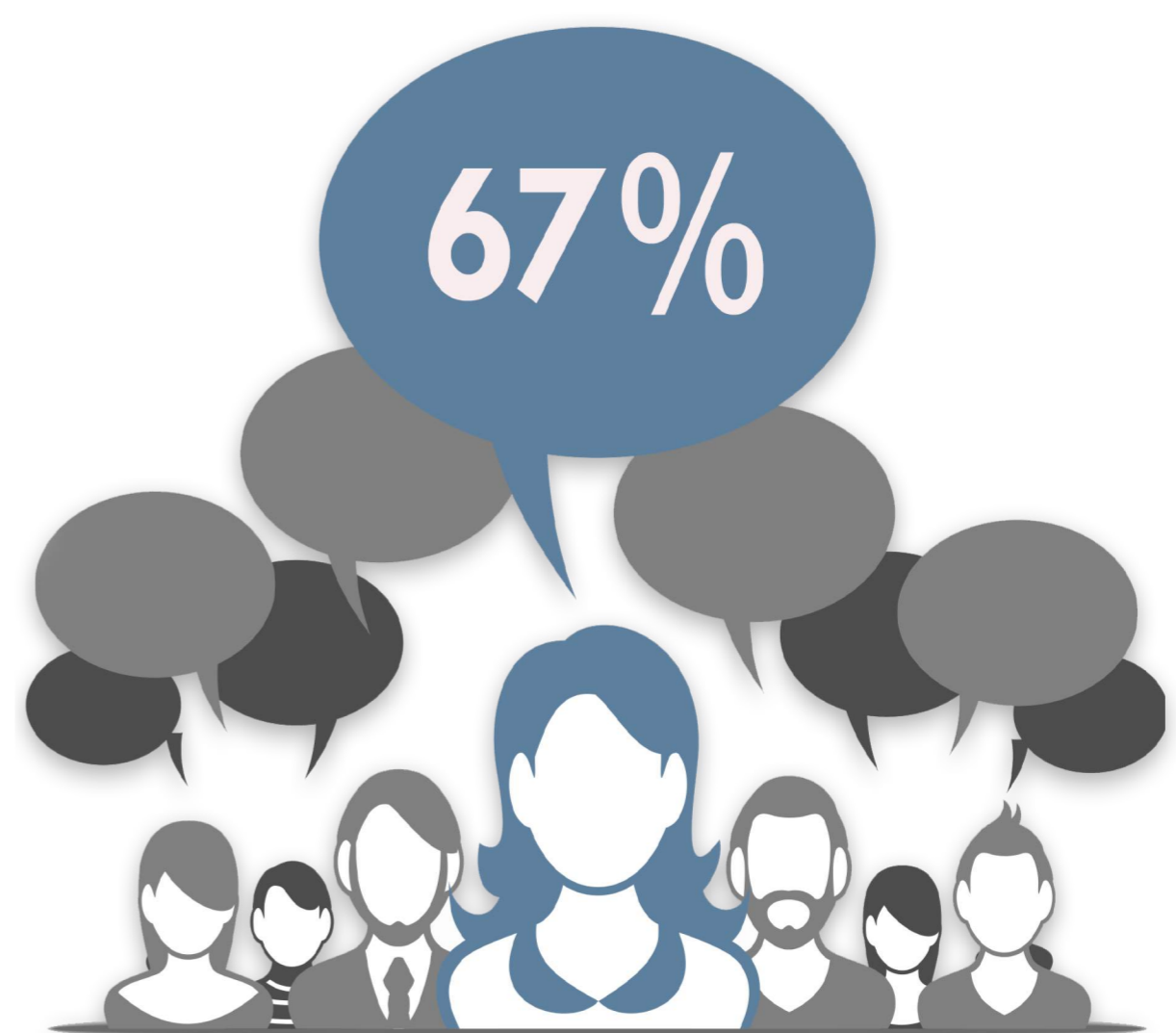
So, whilst people are in general willing and able to become involved in democratic processes, the younger generation is relatively excluded, and new means should be adopted to recognise the way in which they wish to engage. This is most likely to be simple, smartphone-enabled interactions.

Hello, it's me

Two thirds of citizens have been in touch with their local council over the last 18 months, with nearly 50% interacting 1 to 3 times, and 18% of citizens being in touch with their local council more than four times.

Analysis of the survey data demonstrates that people with higher education tend to interact more often, but higher income citizens do not. Among the age groups, the young (18 to 24) are less interactive compared to the 35-44 age group who tend to seek services more often.

A high proportion of the population seeks support from local government, and inevitably those demands are greater from older people. It is therefore important to ensure that digital services reflect the interests and expectations of that demographic group.



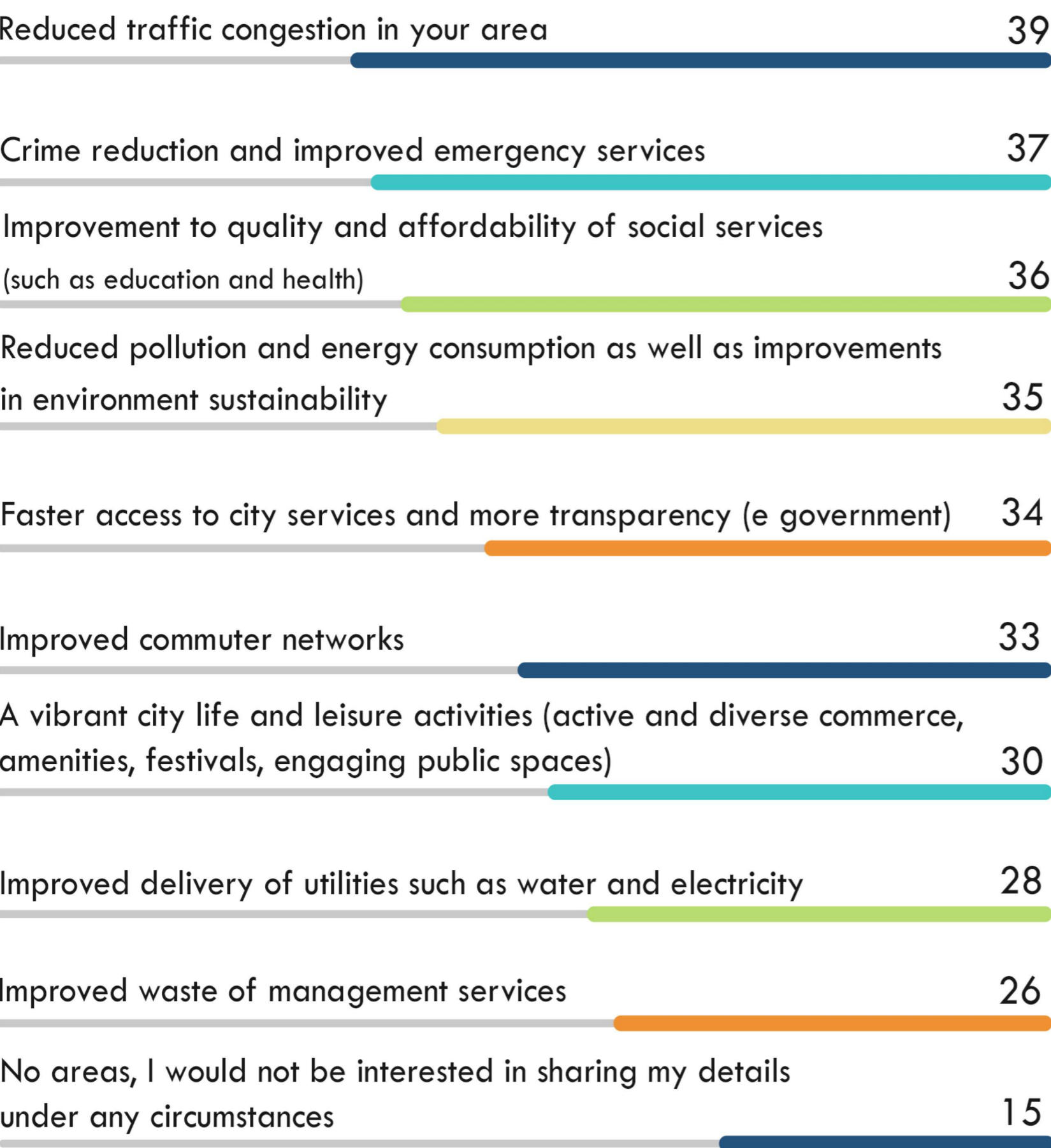
Key Findings

Rubbish Collection matters most

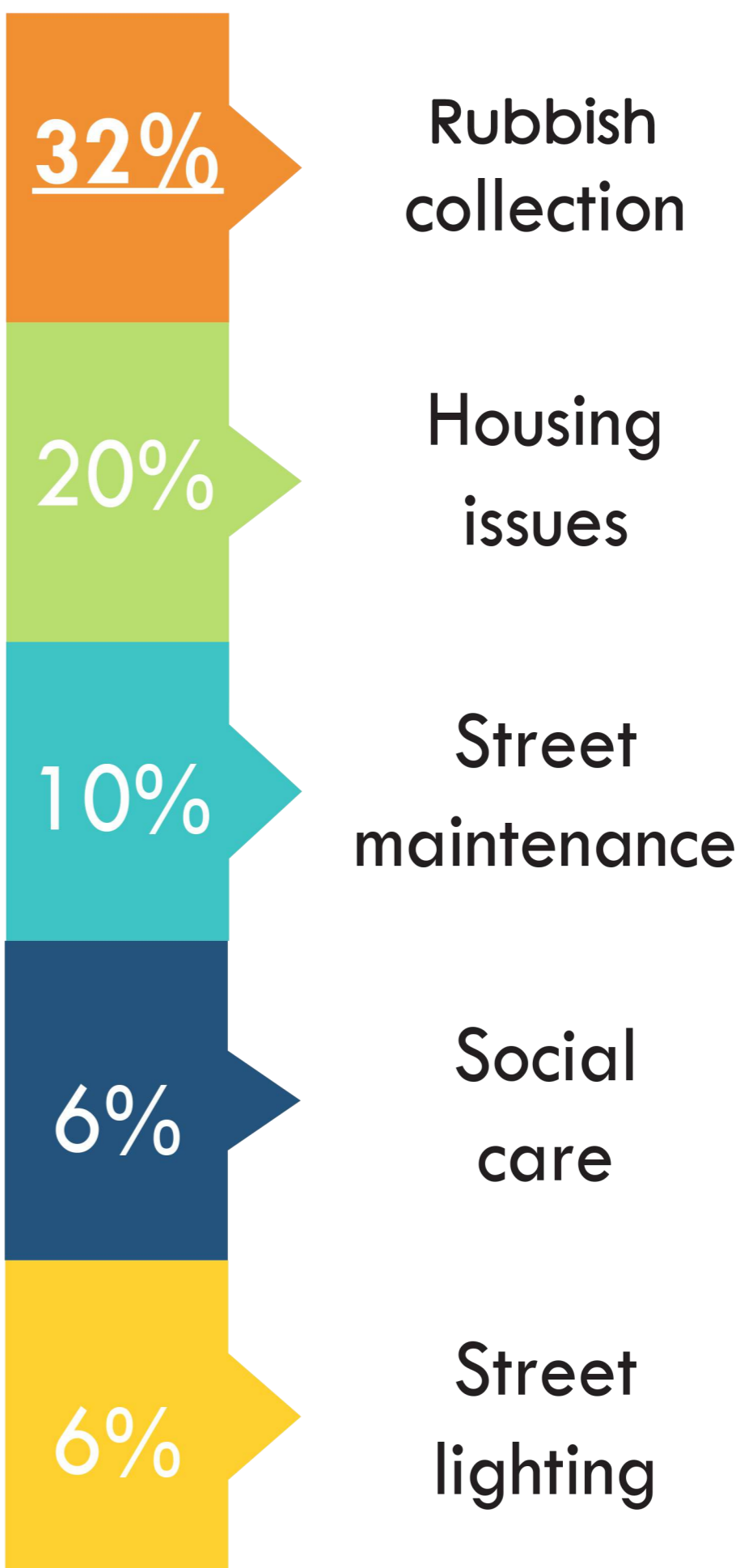
Rubbish collection is the most common reason for contact and is seen as the highest priority across all age, gender and education groups. However, the lower income groups are more interested in housing. Within this, citizens are prepared to share personal information to get better services. Regardless of differences, recent studies (see ‘The Economist Intelligence Unit’) confirm this (see table)

The key point here is not about “what matters most” (after all, you cannot compare bin emptying with social care services in terms of priority), but it does indicate which services which should be prioritised where possible for digital interaction.

The areas in which citizens would be prepared to share personal data (eg. travel patterns, spending habits) with city government for the express purpose of making improvements to infrastructure and services. (Respondents could select all that apply)



Source: The economist Intelligence Unit, 2016



Key Findings

Looking for a 21st century administration

In the survey we asked the public to say what they consider most important for their council. Our findings could not be more encouraging: respondents are looking for an administration that is transparent, customised, focused and innovative.

Transparency

39% are concerned about how their money is spent



Locality

35% want a high focus to be given in their neighborhood



Customisation

11% want personal communication



Innovation

10% expect the adoption design should bear these principles in mind



Key Findings

I can't get no satisfaction

The survey result suggests that councils do not meet the expectations of the majority of citizens in our survey results. Only 45% say that they are satisfied with their council services, 39% consider them just acceptable and almost 15% consider services to be unacceptable.



These frustrations are equally distributed across age groups, but men record significantly higher levels of approval than women (50% of men are satisfied compared with 41% of women). Lower income population and mid-level educated groups are the most dissatisfied groups among the respondents (around 25% approval rating in our survey).

This level of dissatisfaction is not easily solved by technology. But well-designed digital interactions can empower and engage citizens:

- Faster and cheaper
- More designed around individual needs and preferences
- Allow more direct control by citizens
- Easier access, which reflect how citizens want to access services

These factors will certainly help improved perceptions and the reality of council service quality. Digital must therefore have an important part to play.

Key Findings

Time to innovate

Among the respondents, the retired people prefer accessing a Council website as the best platform to interact, whereas the unemployed and the lower income residents prefer to use the telephone.

This was not expected - typically older people, we are told, are resistant to using technology and prefer face to face interaction. It may also indi-

cate concerns for some people, about using digital methods when they have complex needs. The findings suggest a need to design more around the expectations of lower income family's needs and the unemployed in a shift to digital delivery.



40%

Use the City Council website to interact



37%

Use the telephone



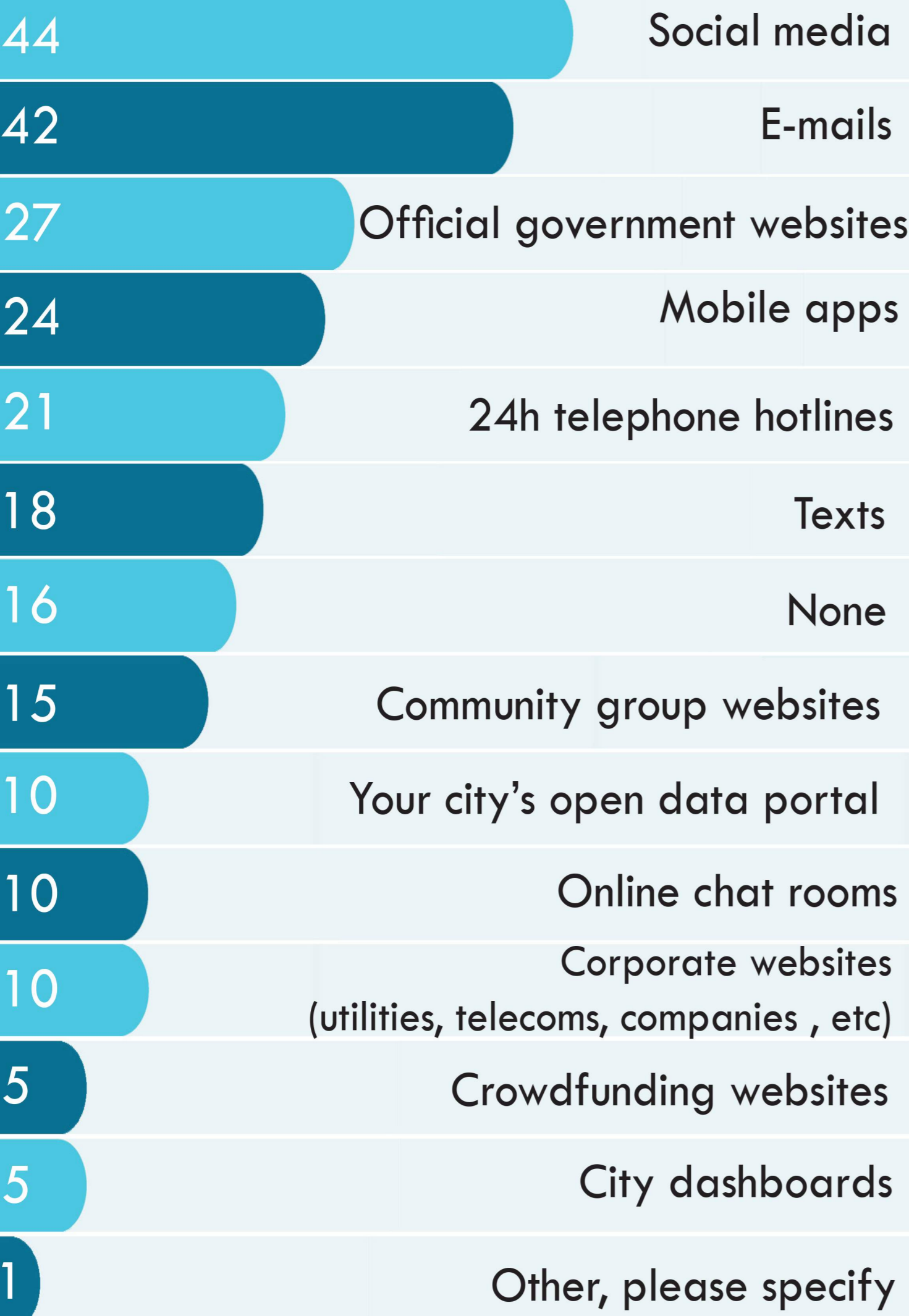
13%

Prefer physical presence

10% use other methods (email, letters etc)

Key Findings

The available channels and platforms citizens use for engaging and participating in your community, or the city at large. (Respondents could select all that apply)



Source: The Economist Intelligence Unit, 2016

Time to engage

The challenge for local government policy makers is to create digital methods which can facilitate meaningful civic participation and which genuinely drive digital adoption.

This survey indicates that there is still a long way to go in this, with almost 7 out of 10 respondents feeling excluded or not well-served by existing methods. However, at the same time, roughly half of all citizens who do use council services or are involved in council activities, prefer to use digital means.

68% do not express an opinion on city-related issues through official channels (website, email, letter). The percentage is higher among women (73%), the less educated (77%) and the unemployed (76%)

Among those who expressed an opinion, **45% preferred to use social media & Council websites** , whereas 38% preferred discussions with friends and family and 16% preferred letters and emails to local authorities.

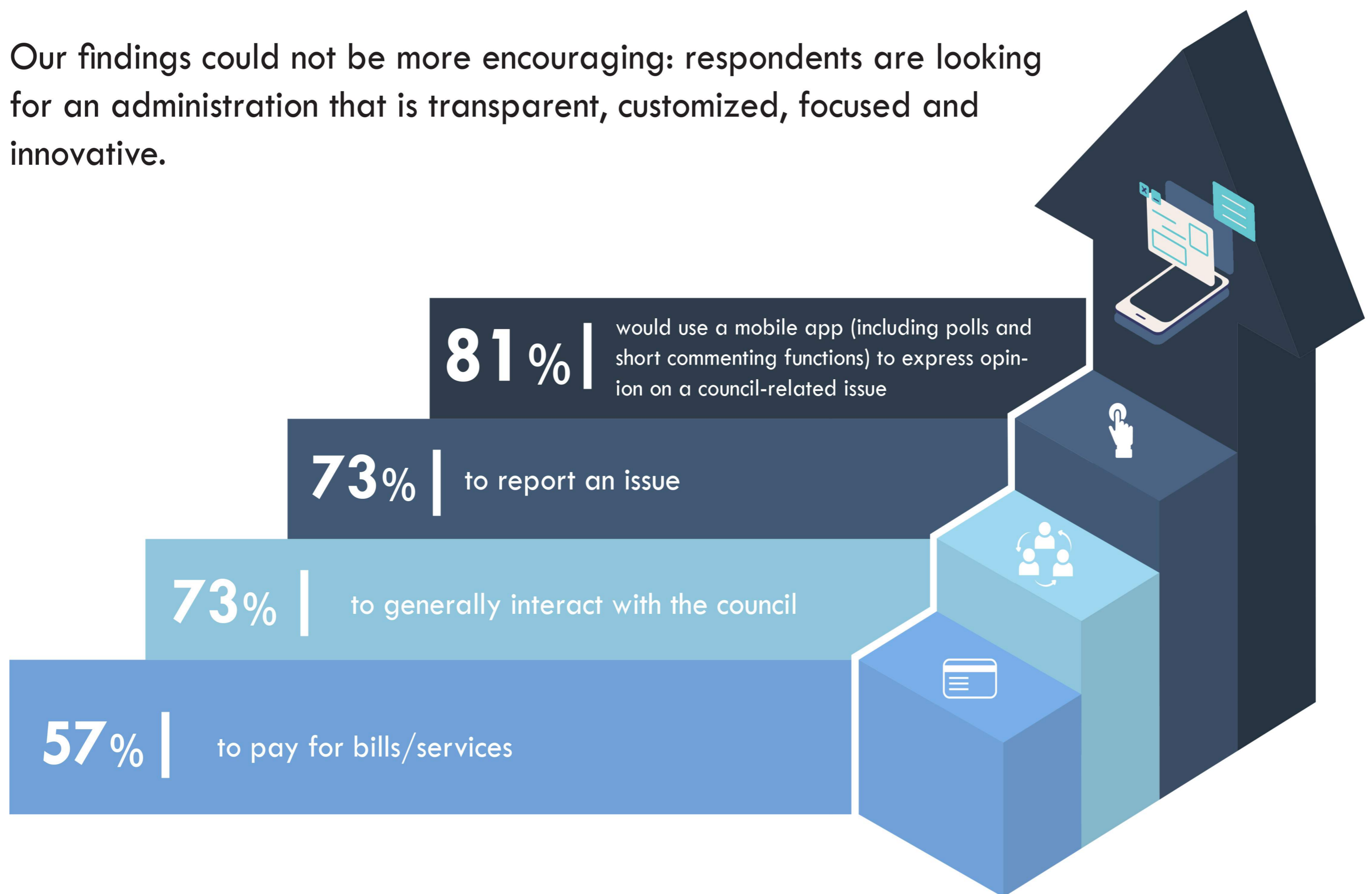
Similar trends are identified in more surveys (see table)

Key Findings

Empowering a digitally-friendly audience? Go mobile!

We asked the public to declare what it deems important for a city council.

Our findings could not be more encouraging: respondents are looking for an administration that is transparent, customized, focused and innovative.



Final Comments

Can digital transformation pave the path to improved citizen engagement and an enhanced democratic participation at the local level? Our survey suggests that the answer is a resounding “yes”, but it also demonstrates low satisfaction with some local government services.

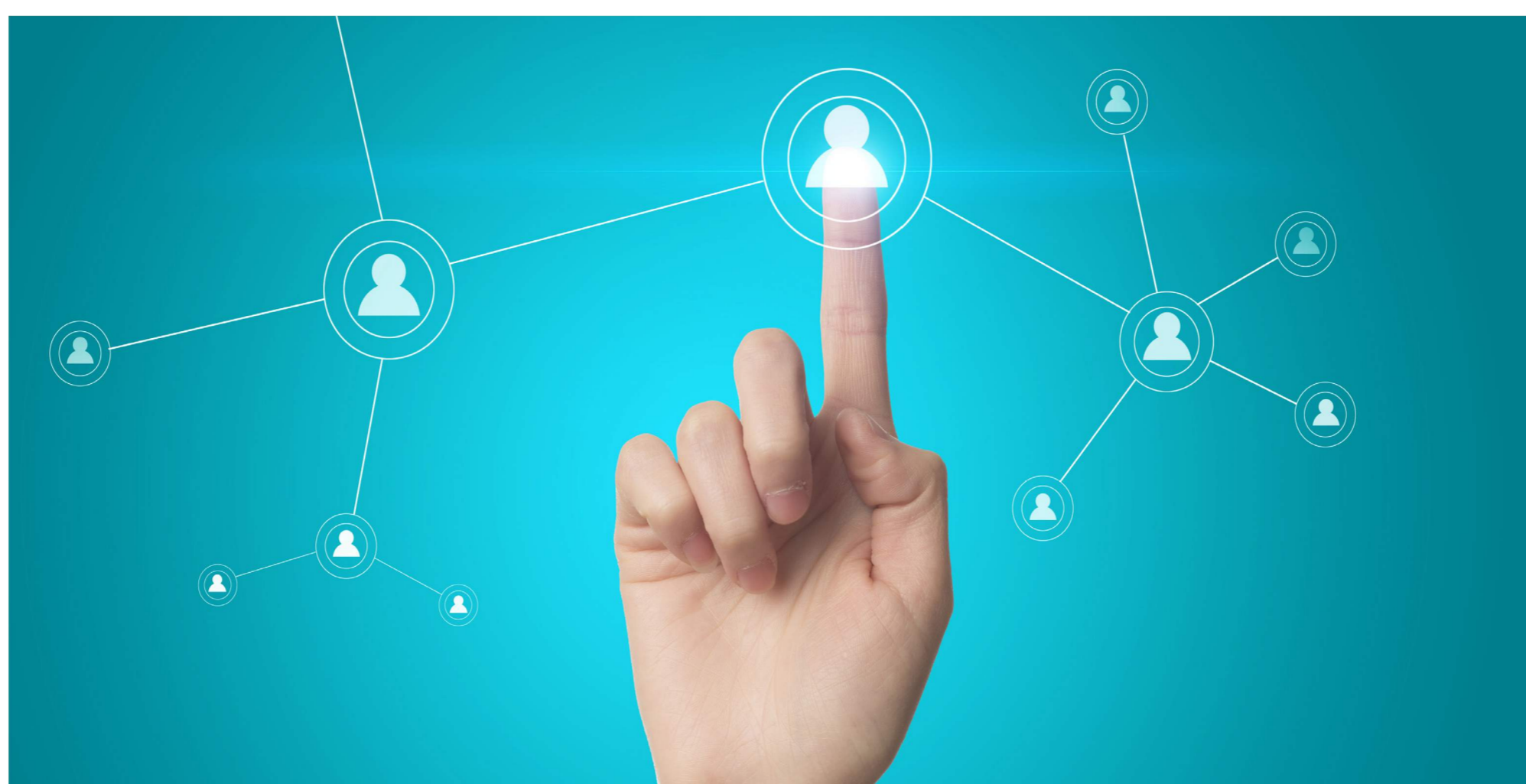
The lower level of satisfaction in specific areas point to priorities for digital delivery models, provided these are well-designed and reflect the needs and preferences of the citizen groups who use them. This is particularly true for services used by the low-educated and the least privileged social strata.

On a positive note, there is a growing willingness from all citizen groups to embrace the new age of digital. Age, education, ethnicity and income might limit this, but they do not prohibit digital adoption.

Our survey found that citizens are ready to familiarise themselves with And adopt digital applications (e.g. mobile apps) for services and for interactions, as long as these new applications are inclusive, sufficiently customised, user-friendly and have a relevancy and a positive impact on their lives.

Therefore, a big window of opportunity exists for policy makers in local councils to embrace digital innovation, with examples set in other European states.

This is not only an opportunity in redefining services for citizens to use directly, but also in the internal methods for their management and oversight. This includes providing performance dashboards, effective service design tools and digital governance methods necessary for councils to be as efficient, effective and citizen-focused as possible.



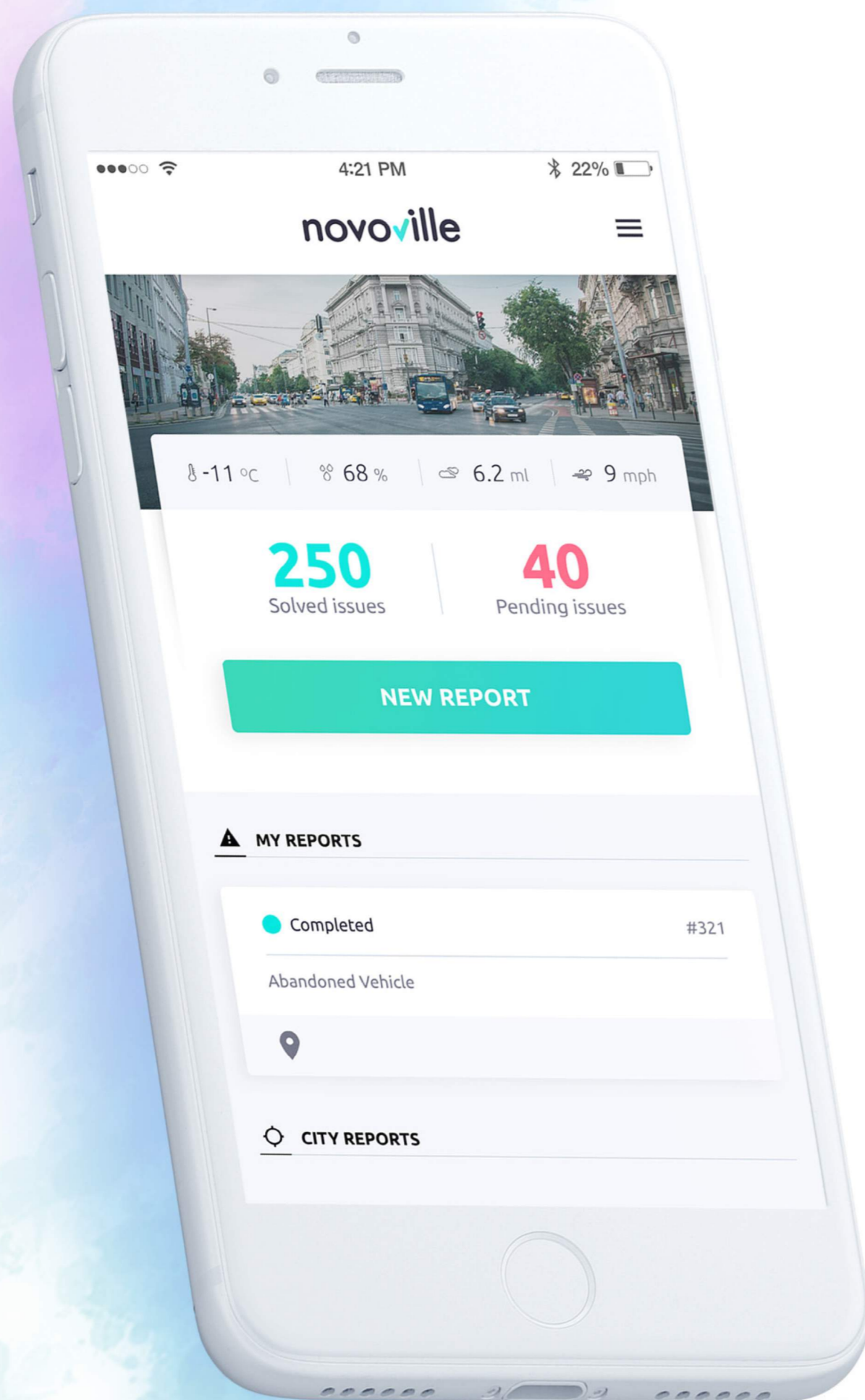
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About Novoville

Novoville was founded in 2016 in response to the growing need for a more participatory, accountable, transparent, efficient and inclusive local governance. Novoville's mission is to transform the public services and improve tomorrow's government policies by putting citizens at the centre of their digital strategies.

Our cloud-based Civic Engagement Platform allows municipalities to reach citizens instantly, manage requests efficiently and get real-time visibility of organisational performance, while diminishing implementation time and infrastructure costs. The user-friendly Novoville app, on the other hand, allows citizens to engage with their local government effectively, submit requests, make payments and voice their opinion with the click of a button.

Over 45 local governments and 150,000 citizens around Europe are already using Novoville to improve the places they live in.



Want to know how Novoville can benefit your Council?

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