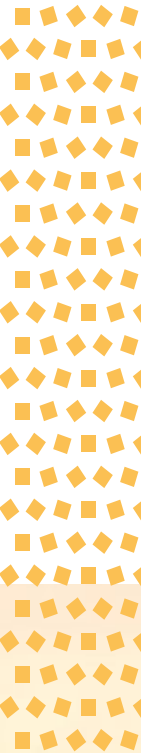# Briefing
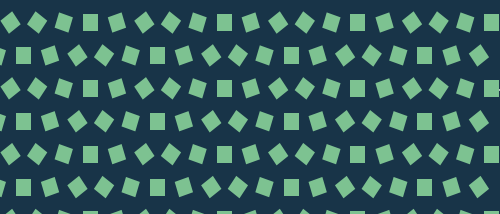
Brexit in the boroughs: putting local authority websites to the test in London

Written in October 2019

Socitm inform

Table of contents

The research underpinning this paper was produced prior to the announcement of the forthcoming general election. At the point of publication, the path to Brexit (if at all) remains unclear. However, that doesn't detract from making preparations, whatever the outcome. This briefing assesses how well London boroughs are providing information on their websites about how organisations and communities can prepare for Brexit, despite the challenges of ongoing uncertainties and delays.

Background

The Government's official position (at the time of writing) is that the UK will be leaving the EU on 31 October, with or without a last-minute deal. All over the country motorway matrix signs are warning freight drivers about changes that may come into place on 1 November.

On 9 October, The Times newspaper reported a surge in applications from EU citizens to settle permanently in the UK. As the Brexit deadline loomed we decided to take a look at how London boroughs have been communicating with citizens and businesses via their websites.

London is home to the highest numbers of EU citizens from other countries, with Brent claiming the most at a figure of 67,000. It is also a major hub for businesses of all sizes.

Methodology

We looked at the main corporate websites of all 32 London boroughs to see what information they were providing for citizens and businesses about the impact of the UK leaving the EU and how well they were promoting it.

We examined the home page and the main Business landing page, conducted a search for 'Brexit' and recorded whether we could find information for citizens of other EU countries and information for business about how to prepare for Brexit.

We also looked to see if the council was publishing information or reports about its own actions to prepare for Brexit.

Summary of findings

> › Fewer than half of sites had anything about Brexit on their home page (44%).

> › Only a quarter mentioned Brexit on their main Business page. Indeed, many sites had quite comprehensive sections on business resilience covering a range of scenarios but not Brexit.

> › All but five sites (84%) did, however, publish somewhere some information for EU citizens of other countries about applying for pre-settled or settled status.

> › Most sites (81%) had advice for businesses on preparing for Brexit somewhere in the site, just not necessarily in the Business section.

> › Under half of London boroughs (40%) gave details about what they were doing to prepare for Brexit.

Detailed findings

Q1

Is Brexit information highlighted on the home page?

Yes: 44%

A number of sites had a bold Brexit graphic but as it was within a carousel of links, whether it would be seen was dependent on luck or how long the user spent browsing the home page. Sometimes we saw a news release or similar about a very specific aspect, but it was not always linked to further information found elsewhere on the website. It was usually a struggle to find information on Brexit if it wasn't featured on the home page, with users needing to navigate through less than intuitive categories such as 'Community ', 'About the council' 'Mayor and council', 'Business' or 'Democracy and voting'.

Q2

Is Brexit information highlighted on the main business page?

Yes: 25%

It was surprising that so few business sections were highlighting Brexit information, particularly as despite the uncertainty over the terms of the UK leaving the EU at this time there was a lot of information coming out of central government and other London and national organisations to help businesses prepare. On the majority of sites we found nothing at all in the Business section and only through search realised there was some dedicated content for businesses as it was only published in the 'Community' or 'Your council' section.

By contrast Lewisham's Business landing page had a very prominent alert banner but the link to advice on GOV.UK was unfortunately broken.

Q3

Can you access information for citizens of other EU countries currently living in the UK?

Yes: 84%

Five of the sites we visited had no mention of Brexit that we could find. Given that Lambeth Council reported amongst its comprehensive Brexit information that all boroughs had received £315,000 in government funding for Brexit preparations, it seems a shocking omission not to be providing basic information and links at least. Those who did cover Brexit were most likely to be at least providing information for EU citizens wishing to stay in the UK.

Many councils used the opportunity to express support and recognition of their contribution to the local area. Some of the strongest support was expressed by Hackney and Hammersmith and Fulham councils promoting a #hackneylovesyou campaign and a unity day respectively. These councils had a strong overt political stance in evidence; the clearest anti-Brexit statement said 'Hammersmith & Fulham Council is opposed to Brexit and will do everything in its power to promote the benefits of the UK remaining in the European Union and to seek a people's vote on any Brexit deal, with an option to remain.'

Several authorities were offering free ID checking services for EU citizens to help them with their applications for pre-settled or settled status. Haringey had delivered a leaflet to 117,000 households explaining how to apply for settled status, Hackney offered free drop-in advice sessions and Richmond had held an information evening. In the light of all this RB Kensington and Chelsea's provision seems insufficient; simply a statement along the lines of the uncertainty making it difficult to advise residents and a link to GOV.UK.

Q4

Can you access information for businesses about how to prepare for Brexit?

Yes: 81%

This was commonly found with other Brexit information and not necessarily signposted from the Business section, as pointed out earlier. In general, this topic was less extensively dealt with than the previous question, although there was sometimes an overwhelming array of links to other sources of information. Typical content included guidance for employers of EU staff, guidance on exporting and importing goods, transport, food businesses and rules and regulations. The main sources signposted were GOV.UK links but also Brexit Business Resource Hub, Chamber of Commerce, Confederation of British Industry, Federation of Small Business, and Institute of Directors and so on. Haringey was the only council we noticed that sought to reassure its suppliers by publishing a statement about the council and its supply chain.

Q5

Did you see any information on how the council is preparing for Brexit (e.g. a preparedness report or no deal risk assessment)

Yes: 40%

There was less information found about specific preparations councils were undertaking but we did come across a few reports analysing risks, issues, impact assessments and plans, and several councils mentioned membership of the London Resilience Forum. Lambeth Council provided the most exhaustive description of its activities and the internal reporting structures that had been put in place.

"*On 19 March 2018, the negotiators of the European Commission and the United Kingdom presented the progress made in the negotiation of a draft agreement on the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union. On 23 March 2018, the European Council (Art. 50) welcomed the agreement reached on parts of the legal text and called for intensified efforts to make progress on the remaining withdrawal issues. The European Council (Art. 50) further stated that nothing was agreed until everything is agreed. This means that a transition period until 31 December 2020 may be agreed, but this is not certain at this stage.*"

European commision. Brexit preparedness notice.

Good practice examples

The City of Westminster and Lewisham

The City of Westminster and Lewisham both had very well laid out pages on Brexit with content that was helpful and easy to read. Westminster's Business page explained how the council has developed its HIRE service to assist businesses in overcoming Brexit related recruitment and retention challenges.

Merton

Merton's 'Brexit help and advice' is the first major link on its home page – one of a very few councils with permanently visible Brexit promotion.

London Borough of Hounslow

Hounslow Council featured a news article about a series of business growth hubs that it encouraged small businesses to visit to receive support regarding import and export arrangements, EU staff and potential changes to contracts and insurance. It also had a helpful onward link to its 'Brexit - Business and Employers' page. It's a shame we saw nothing in the Business section itself though.
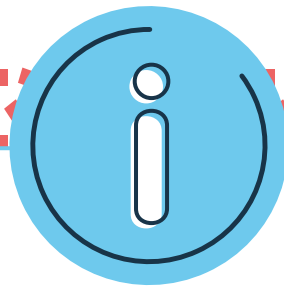
Hounslow's Brexit Guide for residents includes a useful section on how travel and driving will be affected, both travelling abroad, and driving in the UK with an EU or EEA licence.

Camden

EU citizens could watch a video online from Camden Council on how to apply to the Home Office's EU Settlement Scheme, and attend free drop-in advice sessions.

About the authors:

Helen Williams and Lamorna Spry are freelance usability consultants specialising in the public sector. They are both longstanding members of Socitm's Better Connected team, regularly reviewing local authority websites and contributing to the influential annual report and associated publications. They are now engaged in supporting Socitm's service-specific reviews and its Service Design Maturity Assessment (SDMA)

Helen Williams: helen@oliveit.co.uk

Lamorna Spry: lamorna@icloud.com

About Socitm Improve:

Our benchmarking service, designed specifically for the public sector.

Our new Service Design Maturity Assessment (SDMA), free until June 2020, will help you measure your ICT performance and achieve continuous improvement across nine critical dimensions.

Socitm's Improve service: socitm.net/improve

About this briefing

Authors
Helen Williams - Freelance website usability consultant
Lamorna Spry - Freelance website usability consultant

Editor
Marianne Lansley - Communications manager

Designers
Magdalena Werner - Senior creative designer
Benjamin Hughes - Graphic designer

Have your say

We always welcome feedback and discussion on the contents of our publications.

Martin Ferguson
Director of research and policy
martin.ferguson@socitm.net

Nadira Hussain
Director of leadership development and research
nadira.hussain@socitm.net

Get in touch

Website: www.socitm.net
Email: inform@socitm.net
Tel: 01604 709456

Join the conversation... @Socitm | Socitm