

Customer Services Survey – Contact Preferences

Introduction

From October 19th – 31st 2020, members of the community who had volunteered or agreed to participate in surveys and feedback opportunities, were invited to participate in an online survey regarding their preferences when choosing to contact the Customer Service Centre at Basildon Council. Approximately two hundred volunteers were provided the survey and asked if they wished to participate. A link to the survey was also posted every two days via social media (Twitter and Facebook) to reach as wide a section of the community as possible.

The purpose of the survey was to establish how the community engages with Customer Services currently, how they would consider engaging in the future, and what if any preferences or difficulties they ran into when contacting or trying to contact this area. This would help Customer Services better understand and take into account the needs of residents with operational planning for the future, including any technology that may be required to facilitate community engagement.

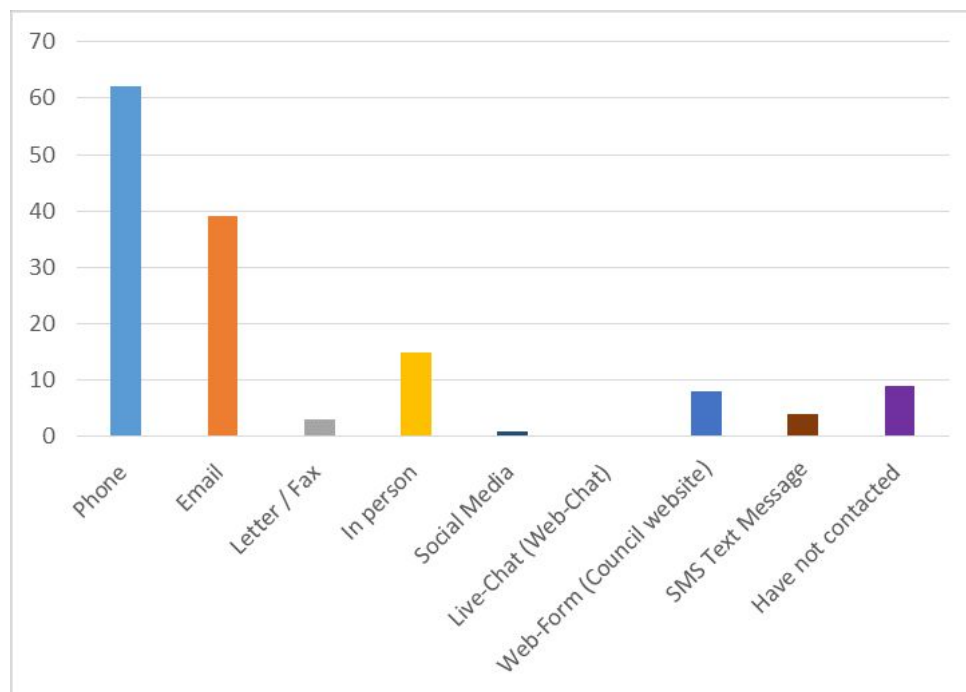
To ensure that we do not discriminate in accordance with the Equality Act 2010, and to capture potential service improvements, a range of questions were asked in respect of contact preferences, and about “protected characteristics” which are aspects of a person’s identity which makes someone who they are. While survey responses were provided anonymously, responses help us to understand if any groups of people in the community feel disadvantaged or discriminated against, do not engage, have particular needs or contact preferences and so on.

The survey questions were based around the following and took on average 3m38 seconds to complete.

- How participants contact Customer Services, e.g. by phone, email, web-form, in person etc.
- What means of contact would they consider using if that service was available, for future queries.
- What would be the main (preferred) method of contact, if it was available
- Sex
- Gender
- Marriage / civil partnership status
- Ethnicity
- Age group
- Sexual orientation
- Religion or beliefs
- Any disabilities (and if / how they present a barrier to being able to contact us)

87 residents took part in this survey. Their responses are included in this report.

If you have ever contacted Customer Services, what medium was used?



The above chart shows the number of respondents indicating their means of contacting Customer Services. Of the responses received, the top three forms of contact were telephone (representing 44% of all contact), email (28%) and in person (11%).

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, face to face (in person) contact is limited but still available if vital.

Email use has increased since March 2020 largely but not solely due to the coronavirus.

Live / Web-chat is not currently in operation though has been available previously hence was included in this question as a potential albeit historic means of contact, though was not used by any of the respondents.

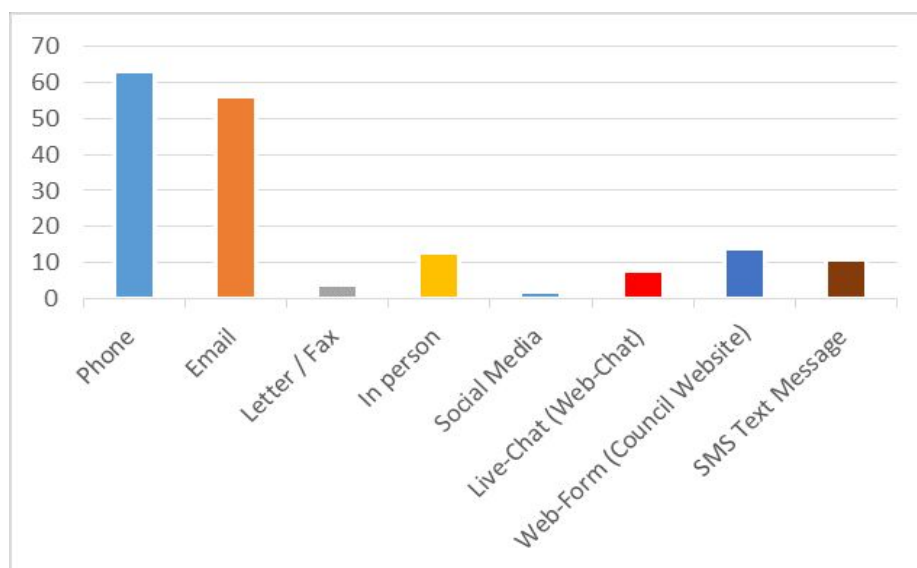
SMS Text Messages (4% of contact) are primarily used as an outbound rather than inbound means of contact by our Recovery team (for reminding residents of an overdue Council Tax balance) and by Revenues, Benefits and Customer Services (in respect of benefit claims) and any use of this as a contact method is likely to have been for the same when residents respond.

Web-forms (6%) are available for submitting information or requesting a service for a wide range of services across the Council and represent one of the most efficient means of contact given that the forms provide a structure for the required information and all relevant details as well as offering automating of some / all of the end to end process.

Both social media and letters / faxes are rarely if ever used for contact (3% combined).

6% of respondents advised they had not contacted Customer Services.

If you had to contact Customer Services in future, what would your preference be?

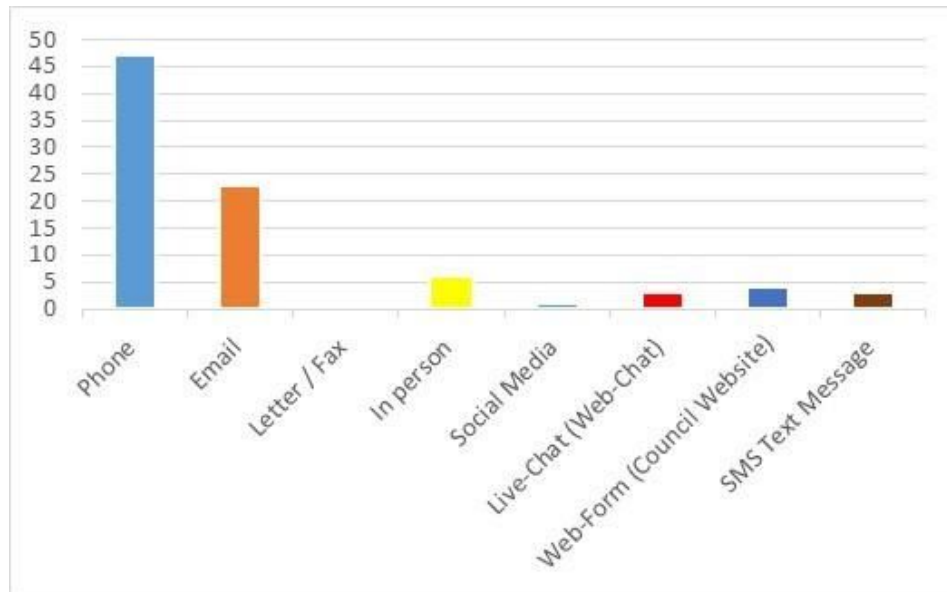


The above chart shows the number of respondents indicating the means of contacting Customer Services they would consider in future. Broadly following the same trends seen in responses to the previous question how residents currently contact Customer services, respondents advised that in future they would consider the following means of contact:

Phone (37%), Email (33%), Web-form (8%), In person (7%), SMS (6%) and live-chat (5%).

Neither Social media nor letters / faxes are regarded as a means of contacting Customer Services with the obvious preference being telephone and email, though slightly more would consider using webforms which increased by 2%. SMS also increased by 2% as a potential means by which residents may consider contacting Customer Services.

If you had to pick one means of contacting Customer Services, what would it be?

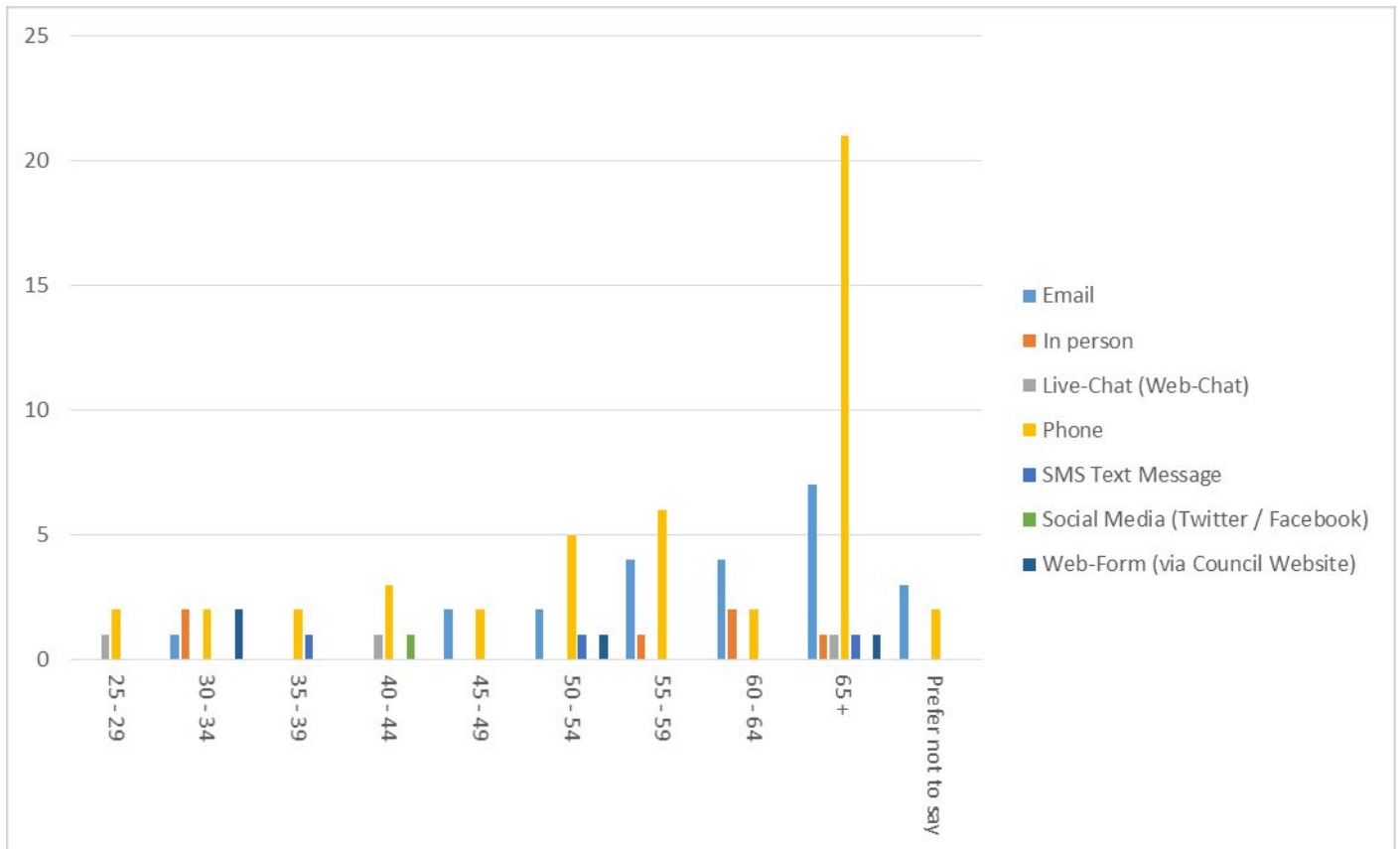


The above chart shows the number of respondents indicating their preferred means of contacting Customer Services in future if they had to pick one method only. By far the most popular means of contacting Customer Services with future enquiries is the telephone at 54% which shows that digital means of contact less preferable based on responses received. Only 26% of respondents regard email as their preferred means of contact in the future, and 7% would prefer to contact Customer Services in person. 5% of respondents advised they would prefer to use web-forms. There was minimal interest in using other forms of contact.

Analysis Using Protected Characteristics

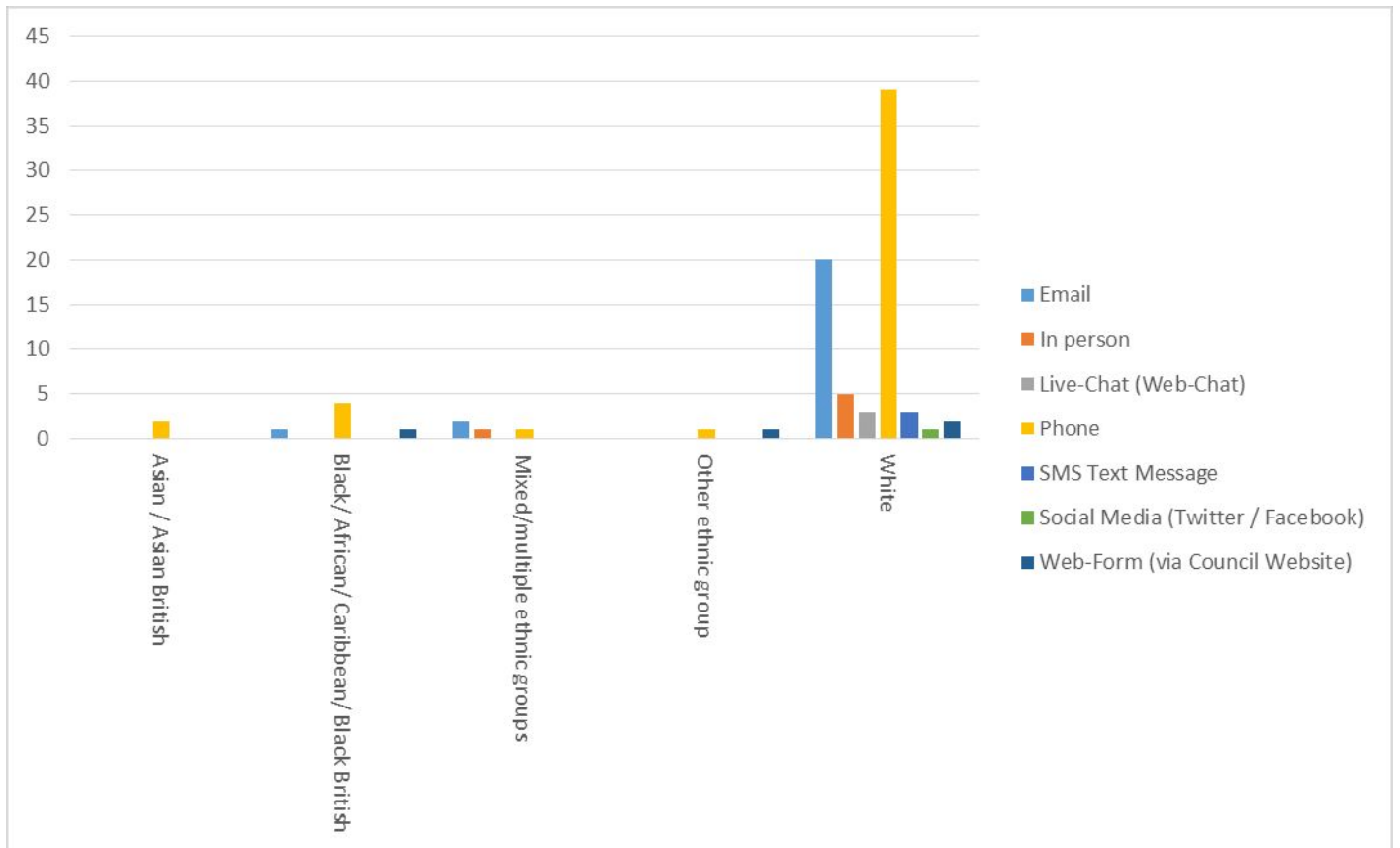
Using protected characteristics data (sex, gender, marriage / civil partnership status, ethnicity, age group, sexual orientation, religion or belief, and any disability), the survey results were analysed for any trends, opportunities and observations to give greater clarity on contact preferences by community groups.

The following graph shows how each age group responded in relation to their preference for contact.

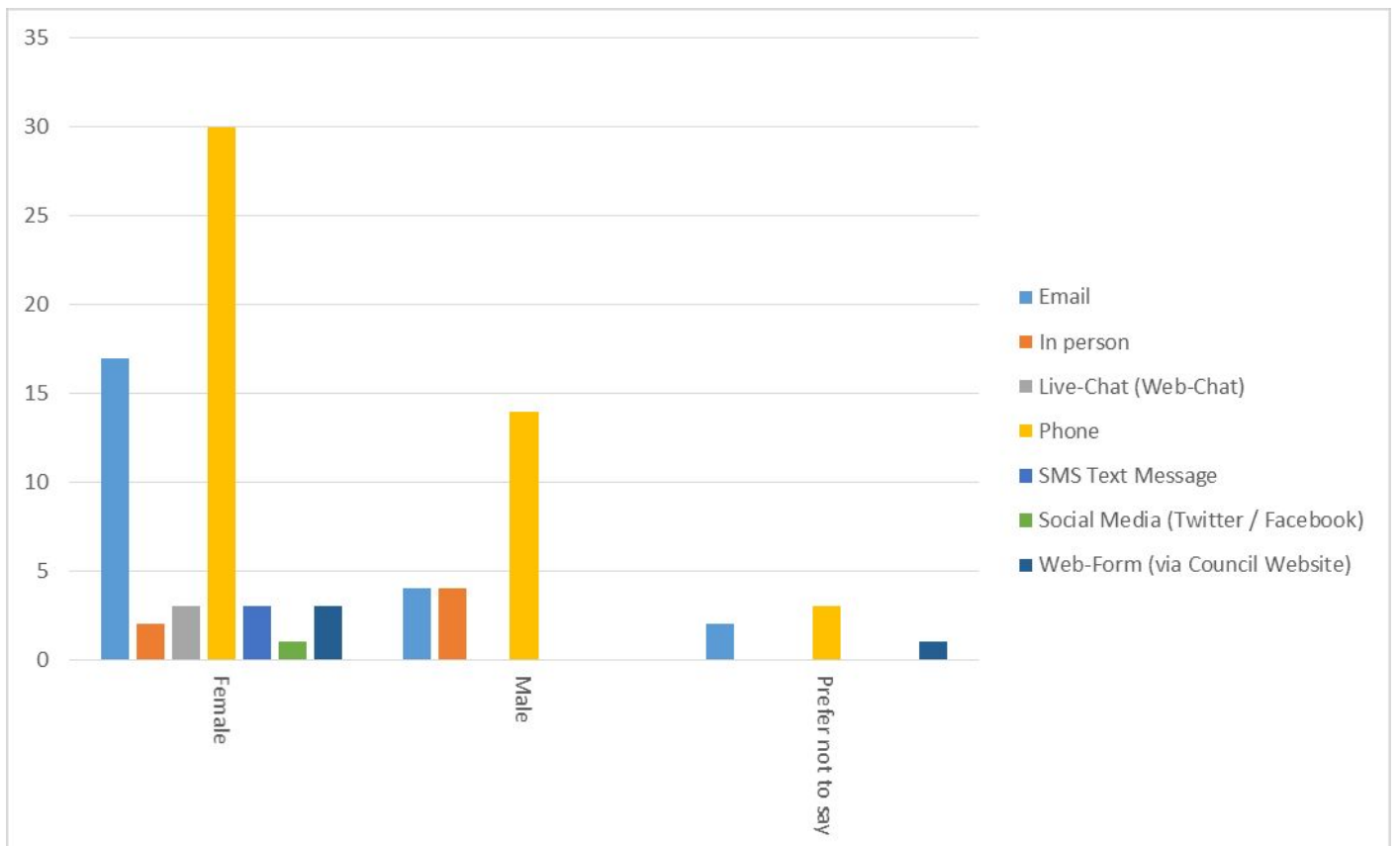


As clearly shown, the 65 and overs age group have a prevalence for the telephone followed by email. The same is true for the 50 – 59 years groups, although respondents between 60-64 bucked this trend, preferring email.

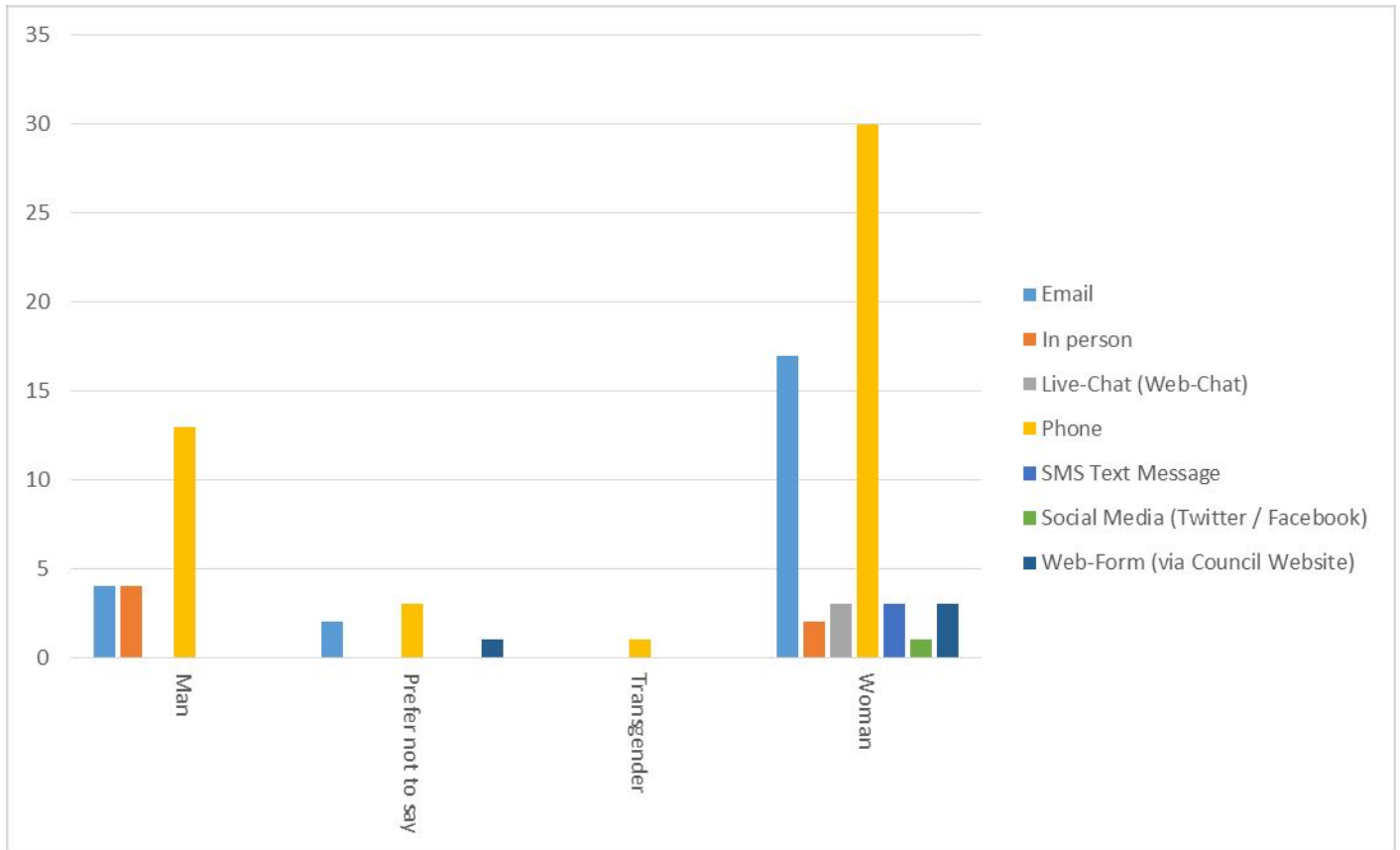
The following is the same graph but this time looking at the ethnicity of the respondents. The majority of participants were white and prefer the telephone followed by email. All ethnic groups showed a preference for the telephone, with the exception of the mixed / multiple group indicating email was preferred.



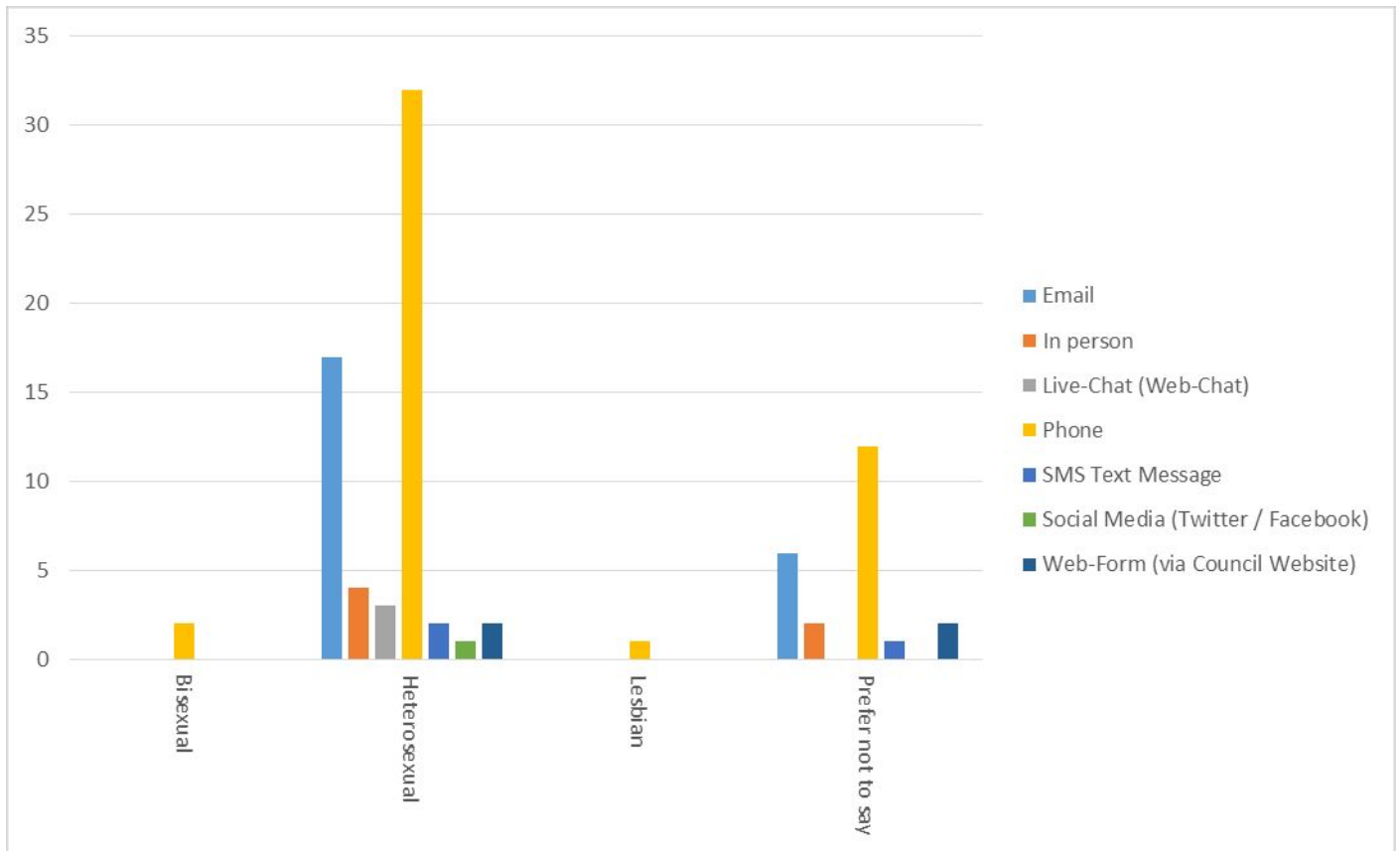
Below shows the sex of the respondents and their contact preferences.



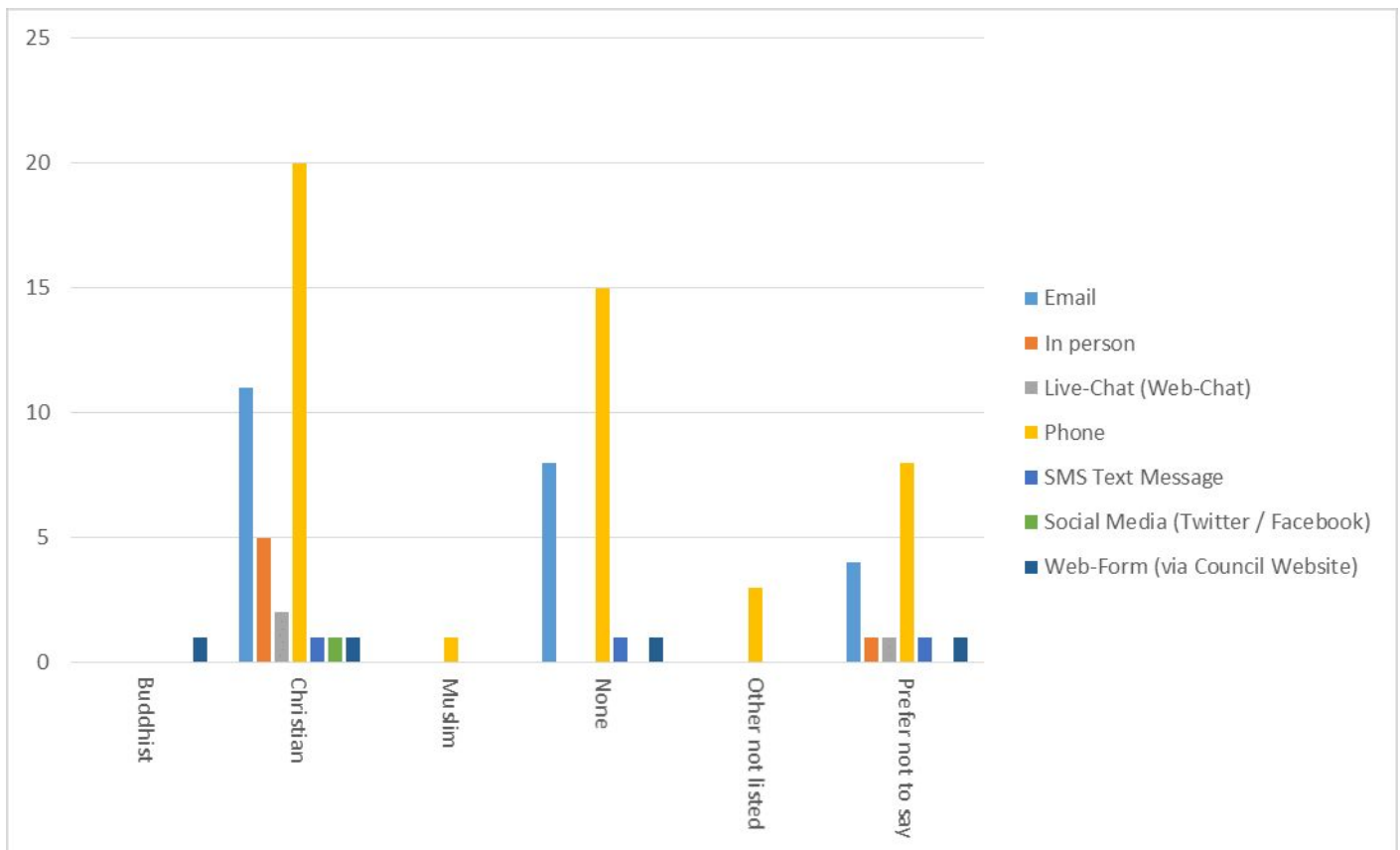
This chart shows contact preferences by gender.



The following shows contact preferences by sexual orientation.



The following shows contact preferences by religion.



Protected Characteristics

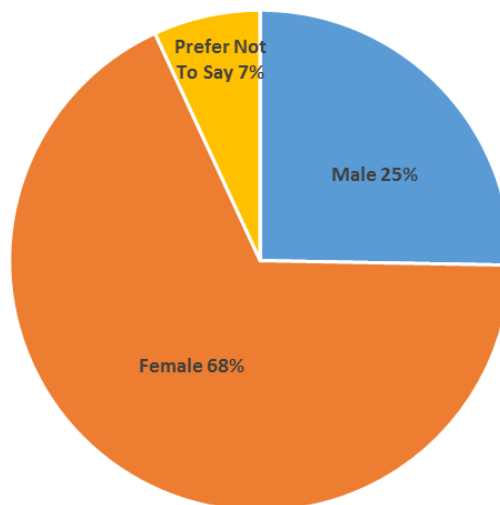
The following questions were asked in the interest of understanding the different community groups which is useful to ensure the provisions of the Equality Act 2010 are followed with respect to equal access to services for all users and social, sexual, religious groups etc.

Sex and Gender

Sex. In addition to Male, Female and Prefer Not To Say choices for this question, Inter-sex and Self-define were also given as options but no respondents indicated either of these choices.

Clearly the majority of service users who took part in this survey identified as female, at 68% as opposed to 25% of male respondents.

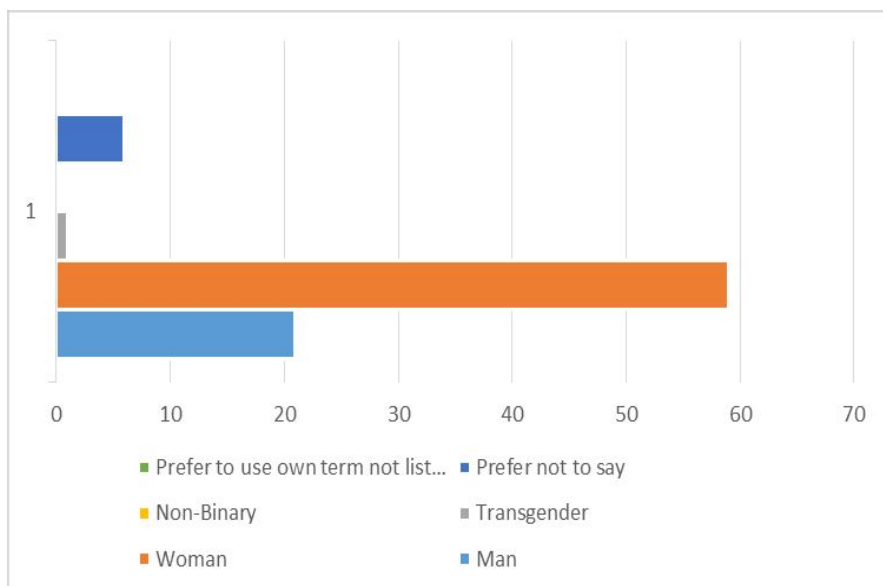
7% preferred not to indicate their sex which evidences some users feel reluctant to share protected characteristics even anonymously.



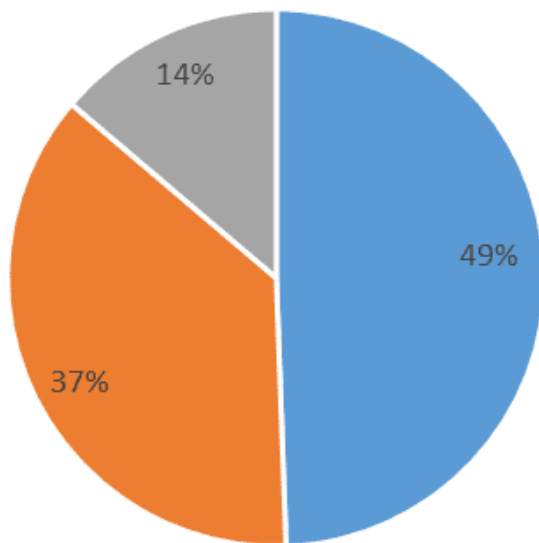
Customer Services want residents from all community groups to feel comfortable, confident and able to engage with this service and with the Council itself if they need help or wish to share information, thus refraining from providing this data could be indicative of a concern or reluctance from some groups to come forward and seek assistance where necessary. It may also be the case residents have no qualms about contacting Customer Services and have other reasons for not sharing such information.

Gender. 68% of respondents identified as a Woman, mirroring the 68% who indicated female as their sex. 24% indicated Man. As before, 7% chose not to say. 1% advised they were transgender.

It is not possible to draw conclusions on why 7% felt unable or unwilling to state gender, but consideration needs to be given to why this may be. All residents regardless of sex or gender must feel confident that how they define themselves is not a barrier to accessing services.



Married / Civil Partnership



■ Yes ■ No ■ Prefer not to say

The chart to the left shows the percentage of respondents indicating their means of contacting Customer Services.

49% of participants were married or in a civil partnership.

37% were unmarried.

14% chose not to provide this information.

As with any question where the data is with-held, it is important to consider why this might be, particularly where the survey was anonymous.

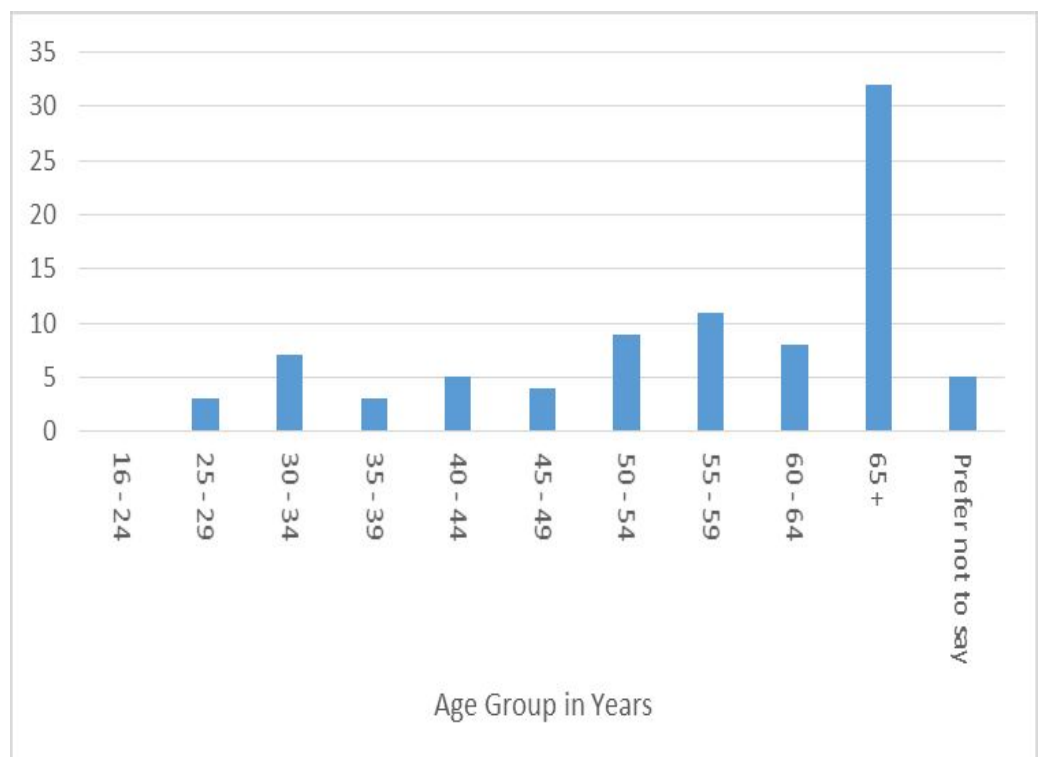
Age Group

This chart shows the number of respondents indicating their age group.

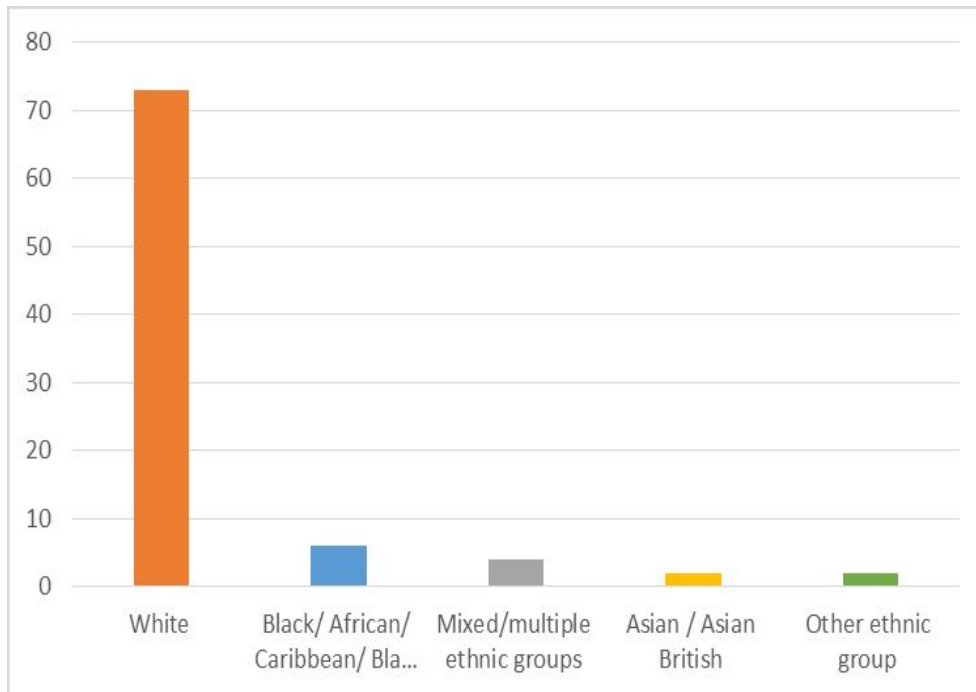
Over a third (37%) were 65 years or older, followed by 13% in the 55-59 year group.

No participants were under the age of 25, unless included within the 6% who abstained.

It can reasonably be concluded there is a lack of engagement in the under 25 age group.



Ethnicity

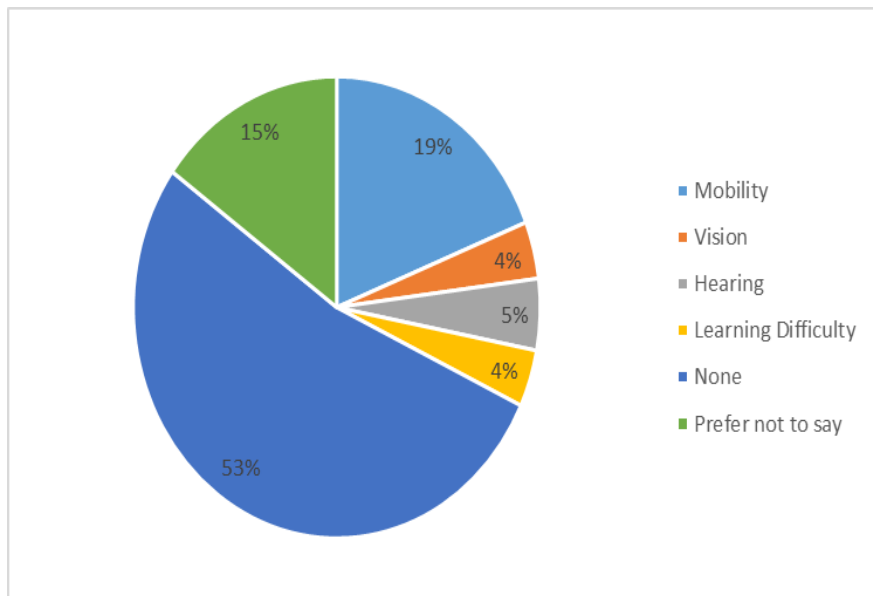


The chart to the left shows the number indicating their ethnic origin, which is not about nationality, birthplace or citizenship rather the group to which people perceive they belong.

84% of respondents advised they were white. The next biggest ethnic group was Black / African / Caribbean / Black British at 7%. Mixed / multiple ethnic groups was 5% Asian / Asian British and other ethnic groups accounted

for 2% each.

Do you consider yourself to have a disability or health condition? If so, does this represent a barrier to communicating with Customer Services?



This chart shows the percentage breakdown of disability / health responses.

Just over half (53%) stated they had no disability. 15% declined to state either way.

32% therefore stated they did have a disability or health condition with mobility being the most common at 19%.

99% of respondents stated they had experienced no barrier in contacting Customer Services.

Of the 1% advising their disability did impact their use of the service, the stated reason for this was that their call was not answered.

Sexual Orientation

This chart shows the number of respondents indicating their sexual orientation.

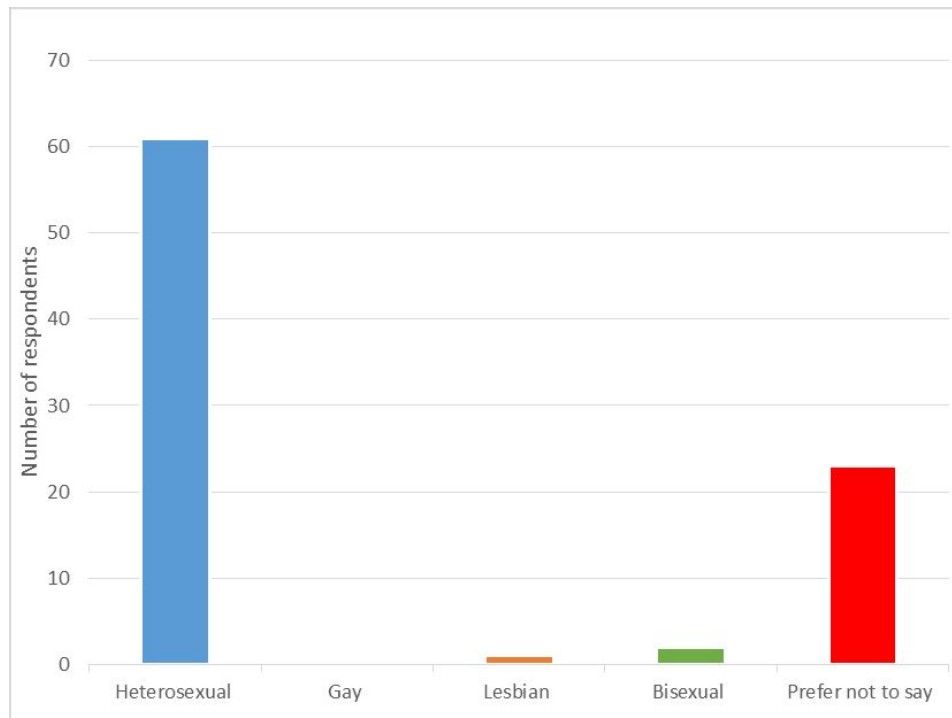
70% advised they were heterosexual.

27% preferred not to state their orientation.

2% stated they were bisexual.

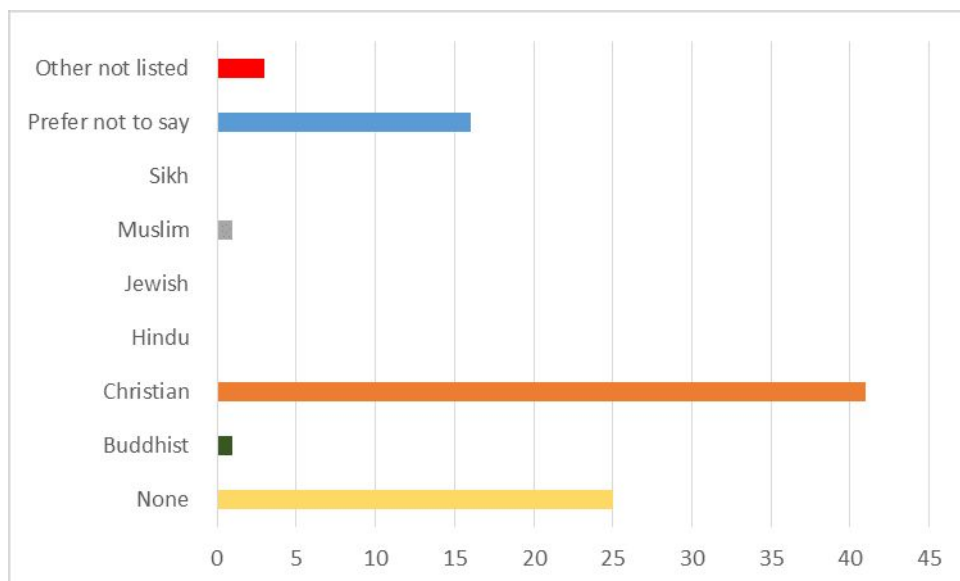
1% stated they were lesbian.

There were no responses that chose gay as their orientation.



There is a relatively high volume of participants who were not comfortable or willing to share this data, and whilst responses alone are not sufficient to draw conclusions on why this might be, the obvious concern would be that some in the community feel their orientation may in some way influence how they are treated or perceived.

What Is Your Religion Or Belief



This chart shows the number of respondents indicating their religion or belief.

47% of respondents cited Christianity as their religion.

29% indicated they had no religion and 18% chose not to state their religion if any.

1% of respondents each stated Buddhist and Muslim, whilst 4% adopted a religion or belief not listed.

Conclusion

The purpose of the survey was to gain an insight into how the Community currently engages with Customer Services, how they would consider engaging in future (what means of contact would they consider using even if they had not considered or used them before, if they were available),

and what their preference (their chosen) means of contact would be if they had to choose one only. This is important information as it allows Customer Services to understand where to prioritise resource or improvements, how service in the future could be shaped to meet the needs and preferences of residents, and using protected characteristics evaluate whether there were any failures in service delivery which limited the ease at which community groups could engage.

Based on the responses received, the two most popular means of contact were telephone and email, with little appetite shown for other forms of contact. The details provided by residents as to why they chose their preferred means of contact typically follow two trends : immediacy of response (telephone) and a digital record of the transaction (email). It is interesting to note that live-chat would fulfil both of these requirements yet was largely ignored by respondents.

The survey results will be shared with Customer Services for discussion with the Council's Digital Board as part of the 2021 work programme looking at the technology requirements for this area over the next year, and with the Inclusion & Diversity Team to ensure awareness of customer contact preferences to help shape service delivery and consider using protected characteristics which community groups need further focus to drive engagement with the Council and ensure relevant services are being accessed. [See IA1](#)

99% of those considering themselves to have a disability found there to be no difficulty or barrier in accessing services but 1% advised that relying on the telephone was problematic as they found it difficult to get through. Due to the Covid pandemic, for business continuity and adherence to social distancing, Customer Services are working remotely and whilst every effort is being made to answer calls as quickly as possible, the technology involved in service delivery limits reporting capability and live demand management of calls. [See IA2](#)

Whilst future planning of Customer Services IT infrastructure will take place in 2021, in the meantime given that Internet access is available to many of the borough's residents, more effort can be made to offer residents digital means of completing transactions to avoid the need for telephone calls if an albeit small proportion of these may be subject to longer call waiting times. As a trial, Customer Services can consider the use and promotion of social media as an access channel both as a means of providing information to residents proactively, but also responding to generic queries wherein account specific information would not need to be provided. [See IA3](#)

Improvement Actions

Action	Details	Owner	Due
IA1	Report to be shared with Customer Services and Inclusion & Diversity	Customer Services	Complete
IA2	Deploy additional laptops within Customer Services to facilitate improvement in reporting and live demand management capability (to help identify long calls waiting and take remedial action)	IT / Customer Services Manager	Dec 2020
IA3	Social media as an access channel to be promoted, with responses to be	Customer Services / Digital	Feb 2021

	provided to residents via this channel within 48hrs	Communications Officer	
--	--	---------------------------	--