

Internet access and use: key statistics

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Summary

This report provides an overview of statistics about internet access and use. Key findings:

- Access to the internet:** Internet access has increased dramatically over the last 15 years. National estimates indicate that the percentage of households with access to the internet has risen from 9 per cent in 1998 up to 83 per cent in 2013.
- Frequent users:** In 2013, 73 per cent of adults in Great Britain accessed the Internet every day, 20 million more than in 2006, when directly comparable records began.
- Accessing the internet ‘on the go’** is becoming increasingly popular. In 2013, 6 in 10 adults had accessed the internet, using a device such as a mobile phone, laptop or tablet. The mobile phone was the most popular device used: more than half of all adults (53 per cent) accessed the web using a mobile.
- Internet activities:** In 2013, 72 per cent of all adults bought goods or services online, up from 53 per cent in 2008. Other popular online activities included: using email (75 per cent), finding information about goods and services (66 per cent); reading online news or magazines (55 per cent) and social networking (53 per cent).
- Reasons why some households have no access to the internet:** Of those households who did not have access to the internet: more than half (59 per cent) said this was because they didn’t need it; one in five (20 per cent) said it was because they lacked computer skills; 13 per cent felt equipment costs were too high; and 12 per cent said access costs were a problem (eg broadband).
- Internet use by area:** Estimates for 2012-13 indicate that around 87 per cent of adults in Tower Hamlets had used the internet, close to the London average (88 per cent), and a bit higher than the national average (85 per cent).
- Internet access:** Estimates from the 2013 Tower Hamlets Annual Residents’ survey suggest that around 88 per cent of adults had access to the internet, while just over one in ten reported no access.
- Age:** Internet access and use is strongly associated with age. Within Tower Hamlets, most (97 per cent) borough residents aged 18-34 had internet access compared with less than half (42 per cent) of those aged 60 and over. London-wide survey data on internet use show similar differentials by age.

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- **Gender:** National figures (for the first quarter of 2014) suggest that, for older residents, there is a gender gap in internet use: 70 per cent of women aged 75 and over had never used the internet compared with 53 per cent for men aged 75 and over. There was no significant difference in internet use between men and women aged under 65.
- **Disability:** Borough residents with a disability or health problem were far less likely to have access to the internet compared with those with no disability/health problem (62 vs. 92 per cent). The prevalence of disability increases with age, so this is consistent with the findings on age.
- **Ethnicity:** Estimates for Tower Hamlets, suggest that Bangladeshi residents were a bit more likely to have access to the internet than White households (92 vs. 85 per cent). However, at the same time, they were less likely than White residents to use online methods to contact the Council. Indeed, London-wide analysis of internet use by ethnicity in 2013, found that Bangladeshi Londoners were the ethnic group with the lowest internet use rate (84 per cent vs. 90 per cent for all Londoners).
- **Housing Tenure:** Borough residents in social housing were less likely to have internet access (80 per cent) compared with private renters (97 per cent) or owner occupiers (89 per cent).
- **Social grade:** Internet access was lowest (77 per cent) for Tower Hamlets households from social class DE (which typically includes low income households) and highest for those in social grades AB and C1 (98 per cent).
- **Qualifications:** Highly qualified Londoners typically have far higher rates of internet use compared with those who have no qualifications (99 vs. 69 per cent). This could, in part, reflect the fact that those with no qualifications are far more likely to be older residents.
- **Contacting the Council online:** While the majority of borough residents still contact the Council by telephone, online methods have become more popular in recent years. Online methods are used most by: younger households, AB/C1 households, White residents, owner occupiers and private renters. In contrast, groups less likely to prefer online methods include: older residents, those in social housing, Bangladeshi residents, and those in social grade DE. Across all groups, interest in using online methods in the future is far higher than current levels of use.
- **Online completion of 2011 Census forms:** Nationally (England and Wales), 16 per cent of Census returns were completed online, however in Tower Hamlets, the rate was 29 per cent - the highest online return rate of all local authorities. The highest rates were mostly in urban areas, where the population usually has a younger age profile. Indeed, almost one half (49 per cent) of the Tower Hamlets population are aged 20-39 – the highest proportion nationally.
- Within Tower Hamlets, the proportion of households that completed their forms online, ranged from 22 per cent in Bow West ward up to 39 per cent in Millwall ward. The completion rates by ward were correlated with age. All wards had online completion rates above the national average.

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Background

This analysis provides an overview of statistics about internet access and use, and is designed to inform the Council's work to promote digital inclusion in the borough. There are a wide range of statistics about internet access, and use, at a national level, but figures are more limited at a local level. For this reason, the analysis draws on national, regional and local data, from the following data sources:

- **Office for National Statistics Internet Access 2013** (Opinions and Lifestyle Survey estimates). This provides national data on trends in internet access and information about how people use the internet (eg frequency of use, online activities and modes of access).
- **Office for National Statistics Internet Access quarterly** (Labour Force Survey estimates). This provides estimates of the proportion of adults who have used the internet at a national, regional and borough level¹. Additionally, the figures allow analysis of internet use across different population groups for London.
- **Tower Hamlets Annual Residents' Survey 2012-13**. The Council's regular residents' survey provides estimates of internet access for key population groups for Tower Hamlets. The survey also identifies which population groups are most and least likely to contact the council using online methods.
- **2011 Census**: The Census provides statistics about the percentage of Census forms that were completed online by area. These figures allow analysis of online response across local authorities and small areas within the borough. These provide an indicator of digital inclusion – by capturing those residents who chose an online method over written completion of the census form.

Digital inclusion and exclusion

While this report focuses on internet access and use, it is recognised that the concept of digital inclusion goes well beyond whether someone simply has access to the internet or not. Indeed, numerous research studies have explored the more nuanced picture of the complex issues surrounding digital exclusion. A recent report by Toynbee Hall² provides a good review of research in this area and considers its relevance to Tower Hamlets. The statistics reviewed here complement the Toynbee research by providing further statistical evidence on the issue. The analysis presented here covers:

- Trends in internet access and use: the national picture;
- Estimates of internet use by region and borough;
- Internet use by different population groups: London estimates;
- Internet access in Tower Hamlets: the local picture;
- Statistics about residents preferences around online contact with the Council;
- Patterns of online Census completion by ward;
- Improving local data on digital inclusion issues.

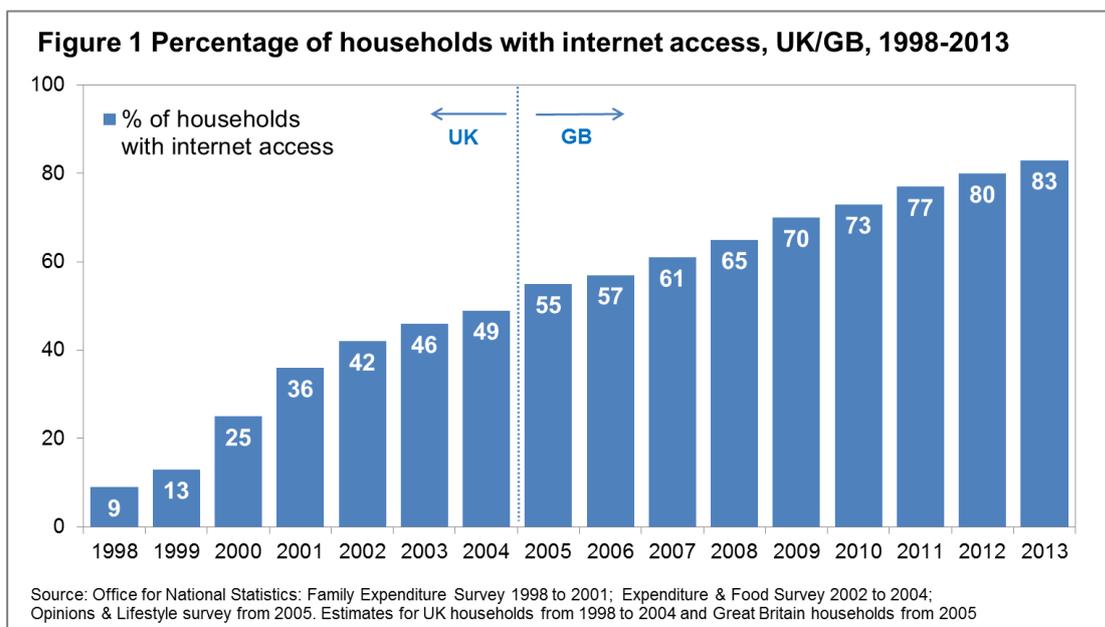
¹ London/borough tables were commissioned from ONS by the GLA (available on GLA datastore).

² Digital Exclusion: Context and scale in Tower Hamlets (James Taylor, Toynbee Hall, Nov 2013).

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Trends in internet access and use: the national picture³

- **Household access:** Internet access has increased dramatically over the last 15 years. The Office for National Statistics (ONS) estimates that, nationally, the percentage of households with access to the internet has increased from 9 per cent in 1998 up to 83 per cent in 2013 (figure 1).

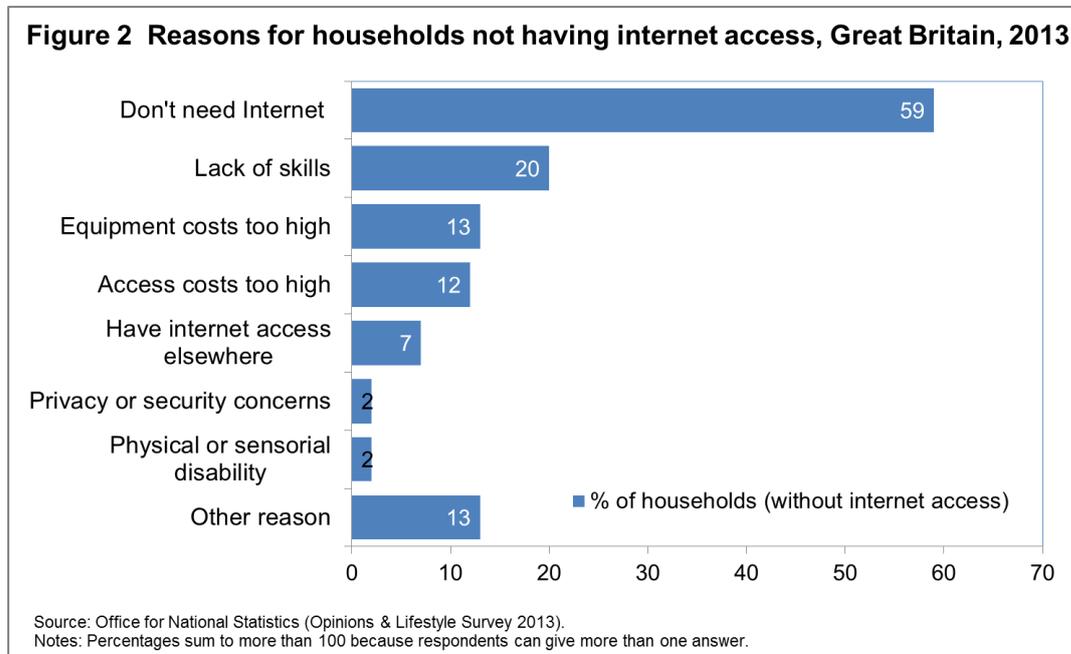


- **Frequent users:** In 2013, almost three quarters (73 per cent) of adults in Great Britain accessed the Internet every day, 20 million more than in 2006, when directly comparable records began.
- **Accessing the internet 'on the go'** is becoming increasingly popular. In 2013, 6 in 10 adults (61 per cent) had accessed the internet, away from home or work, using a device such as a mobile phone, laptop or tablet. The mobile phone was the most popular device used: more than half of all adults (53 per cent) accessed the web using a mobile, up from 24 per cent in 2010.
- **Internet activities:** In 2013, 72 per cent of all adults bought goods or services online, up from 53 per cent in 2008. Other popular internet activities included: using email (75 per cent), finding information about goods and services (66 per cent); reading/downloading online news, newspapers or magazines (55 per cent) and social networking (53 per cent).
- **Connection:** Broadband Internet connections using fibre optic or cable were used by 42 per cent of GB households, up from 30 per cent in 2012.

³ Source: ONS, [Internet Access – Households and Individuals, 2013](#)

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- **Reasons why some households have no access to the internet:** Of those households who did not have access to the internet: more than half (59 per cent) said this was because they didn't need it and one in five (20 per cent) said it was because they lacked computer skills. Cost was an issue for some: 13 per cent felt equipment costs were too high, and 12 per cent said access costs (eg broadband) were too high (figure 2).



Estimates of internet use by region and borough 2012-13⁴

Technical note: ONS publishes quarterly estimates⁵ of internet use, which are based on the Labour Force Survey (and Annual Population Survey). These provide the best estimates of internet use by area, and for different population groups. To obtain more robust estimates of internet use at borough level, estimates have been based on an average of two survey estimates for 2012 Q1 and 2013 Q1.

Over this period (2012-13), the figures indicate that:

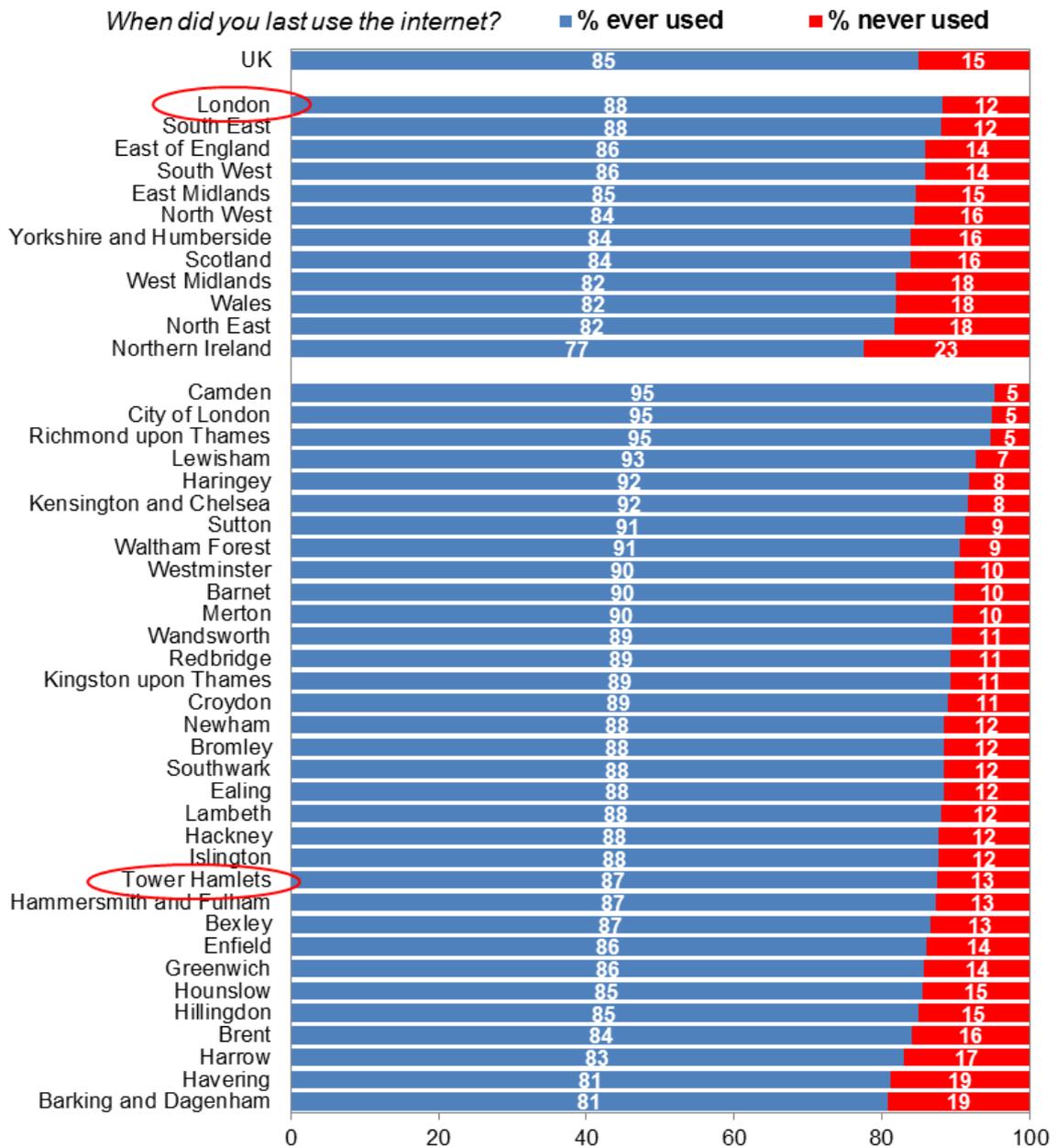
- Nationally (UK), around 85 per cent of adults had used the internet and 15 per cent had never used the internet.
- By region, London and the South East had the highest proportions of users (88 per cent) and Northern Ireland had the lowest (77 per cent).
- The proportion of adults who had used the internet in Tower Hamlets was 87 per cent – close to the London average (88 per cent).
- Across London, the percentage that had used the internet ranged from 95 per cent in Camden, the City and Richmond, down to 81 per cent in the boroughs of Barking & Dagenham and Havering (figure 3).

⁴ London & borough level tables were commissioned from ONS by the GLA and made available on [GLA datastore](#)

⁵ [ONS Internet Access Quarterly Update](#)

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Figure 3 Internet use by region/borough, 2012-13 (two year average)



Source: Office for National Statistics (Annual Population Survey estimates via GLA datastore). To improve the robustness of local estimates, figures presented here are two year averages (average of 2012 & 2013 estimates).

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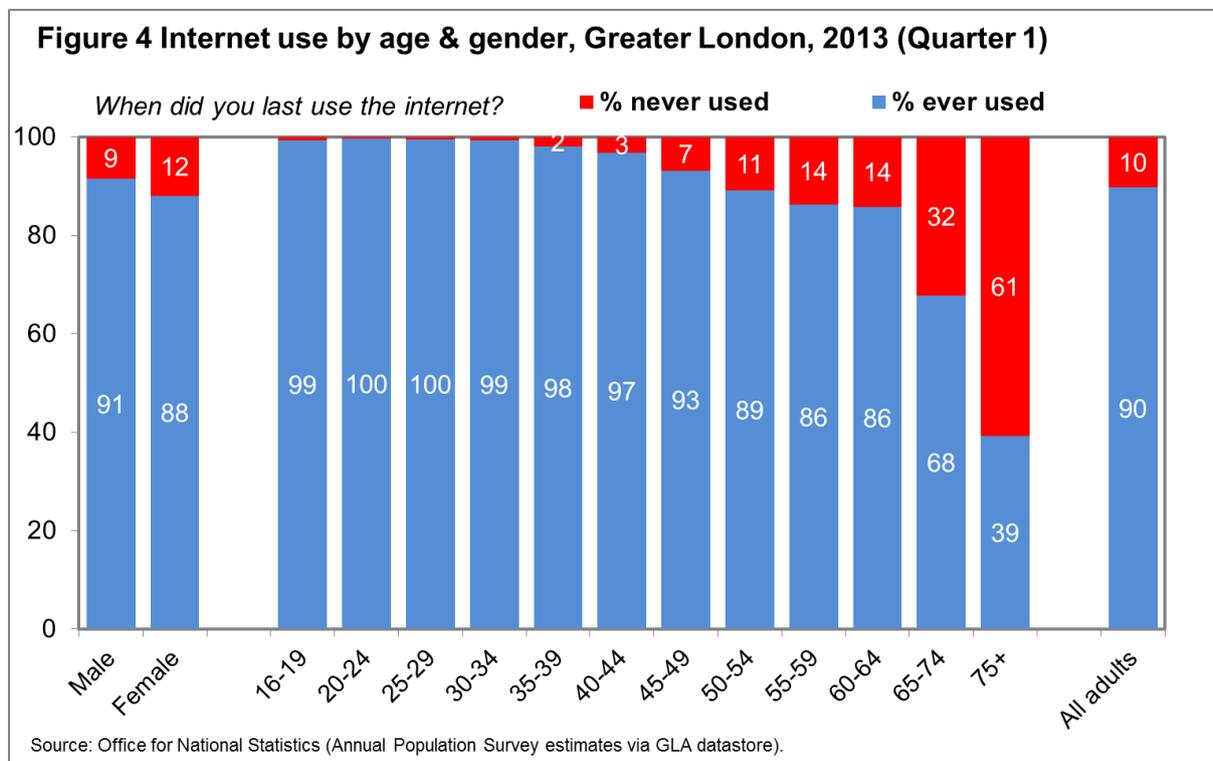
Internet use across different population groups: London estimates

The analysis that follows explores internet use across different population groups in London. Figures relate to the first quarter of 2013. At this time, it was estimated that 90 per cent of Londoners had used the internet ('ever used') and 10 per cent had never used it.

Age

Internet use is strongly associated with age. Internet usage is significantly lower among older people, particularly those aged 75 and over. ONS estimates for 2013 indicate that, almost all (99-100 per cent) Londoners aged 16 to 34 had used the internet, compared with 39 per cent of those aged 75 years and over.

However, internet use is rising fast among older people. Over the last three years, the percentage aged 75 and over who had used the internet rose from 22 per cent in 2011 (first quarter) up to 39 per cent in 2013 (first quarter). Similar trends were evident nationally.



Gender

There is a relatively small gender differential in internet use: 9 per cent of men had never used the internet compared with 12 per cent of women. However, national figures suggest that the gender differential becomes much more pronounced among older people. UK figures⁶ for the first quarter of 2014, suggest that the proportion of those aged 75 and over who had never used the internet was 70 per cent for women compared with 53 per cent for men. However, for those aged under 65 there was no significant difference between men and women in internet use.

⁶ Office for National Statistics, Internet Access Quarterly Update Q1 2014

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Disability

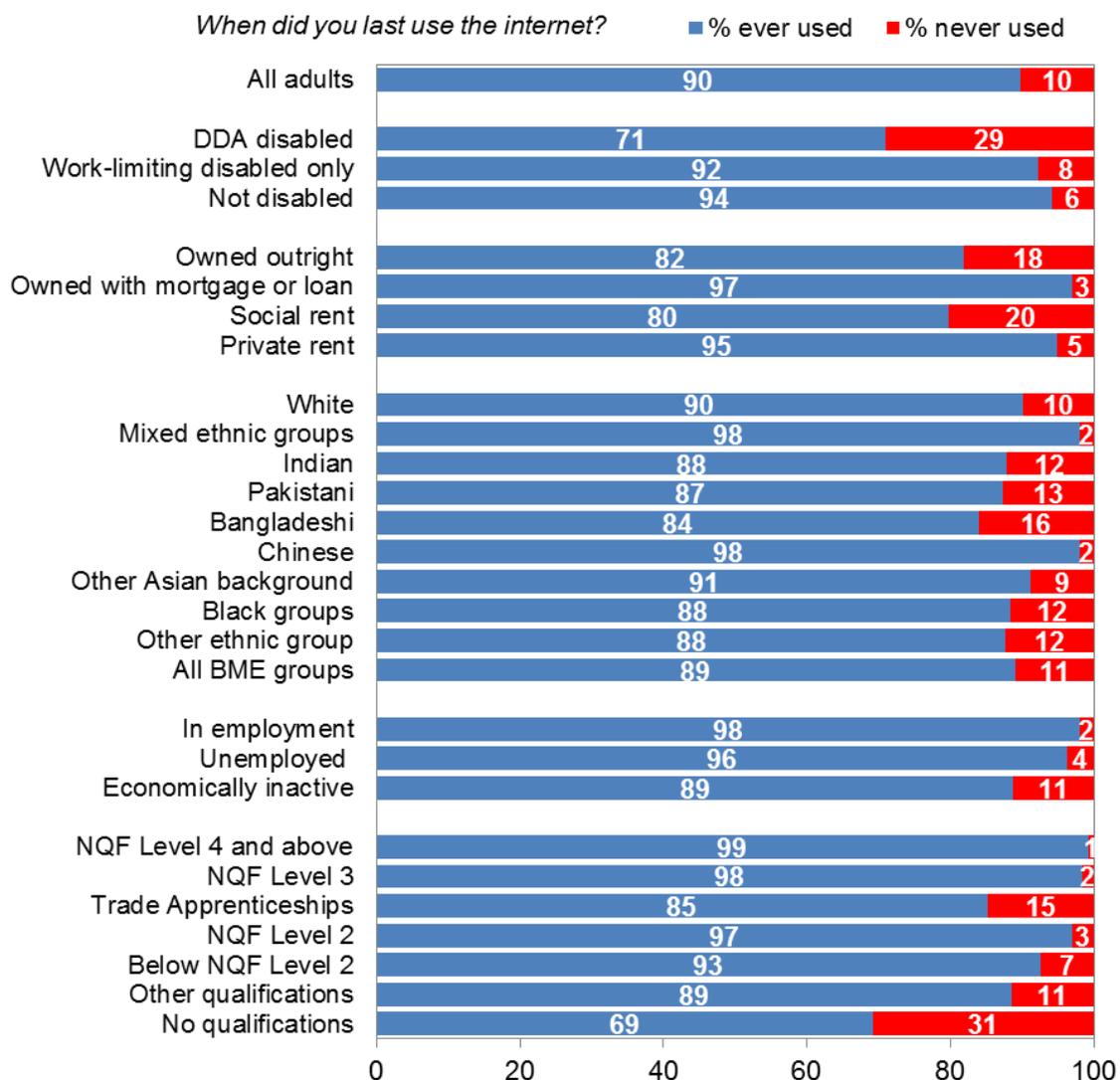
Disabled people have lower levels of internet use compared with non-disabled people. Around 29 per cent of disabled Londoners (DDA disabled) had never used the internet compared with 6 per cent of non-disabled adults. The prevalence of disability increases with age so this is consistent with findings on age.

Ethnicity

There were relatively small differences in internet use across most ethnic groups – with the exception of:

- Chinese, and mixed ethnicity, Londoners - who had relatively high levels of internet use (only 2 per cent of adults in these groups had never used the internet compared to 10 per cent overall);
- Bangladeshi Londoners - who had lower rates of use than average (16 per cent had never used the internet).

Figure 5 Internet use by key characteristics, Greater London, 2013 (Quarter 1)



Source: Office for National Statistics (Annual Population Survey estimates via GLA datastore).

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Economic activity

Internet usage rates are generally higher among those who are economically active. The percentage who had used the internet was 98 per cent for those in work and 96 per cent for those who were unemployed (and actively seeking work). Rates were lower among those who are economically inactive (89 per cent) – which may, in part, reflect the fact this group includes older residents who have retired.

Qualifications

Highly qualified Londoners typically have high rates of internet use: almost all (99 per cent) of those with higher level qualifications⁷ have used the internet. In contrast, those with no qualifications have low rates of use: almost one third (31 per cent) of Londoners with no qualifications had never used the internet. Again, the strong association between age and internet use could explain some of these differentials, as older Londoners are less likely to have qualifications compared with younger Londoners.

Housing tenure

The vast majority of owner occupiers with a mortgage use the internet (97 per cent), while those who own their home outright have lower rates of use (82 per cent) – the latter group are typically older. Usage rates are also relatively low among those in social housing (80 per cent) while those in privately rented housing have high levels of internet use (95 per cent).

Internet access in Tower Hamlets: local estimates

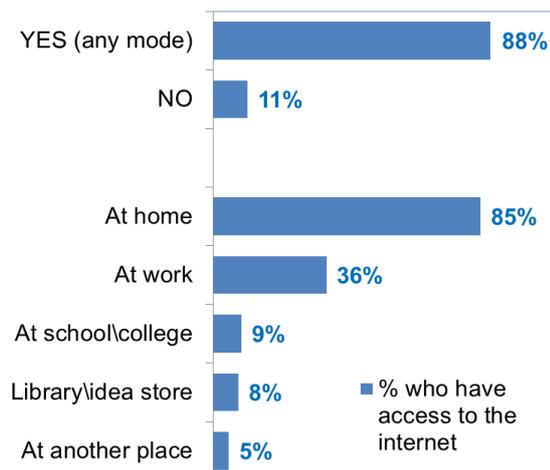
The Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey for 2012-13 provides local data on internet access across different population groups.

The last survey, which took place in March 2013, found that almost nine out of ten residents (88 per cent) said they had access to the internet while just over one in ten reported no access.

Most had access at home (85 per cent) and/or at work (36 per cent). Nine per cent said they accessed the internet at school or college and 8 per cent said they accessed the internet at a Tower Hamlets library or Idea Store.

Figure 6 Internet access in Tower Hamlets March 2013 (survey estimates)

Do you have access to the internet?



Source: TNS-BRMB, Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey 2012-13
Notes: Yes/no totals do not sum exactly to 100 as a small number of respondents said they didn't know.

Figure 7 shows internet access by respondent characteristics for Tower Hamlets.

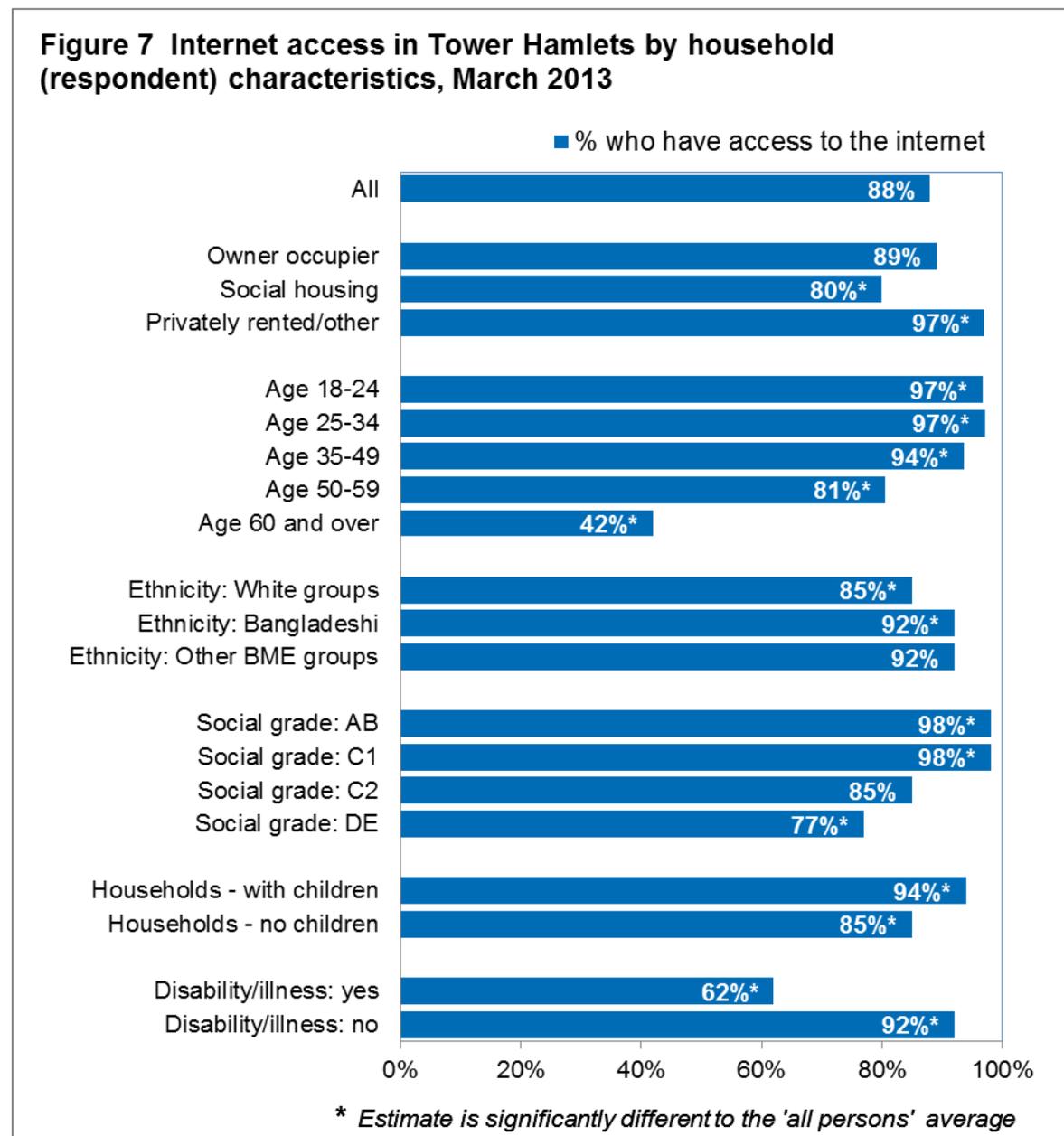
⁷ NQF (Nationals Qualifications Framework) level 4 and above

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While the Tower Hamlets data relates to access as opposed to use, for the most part, the findings are consistent with London-wide differentials. Levels of access are strongly related to age: the vast majority of residents aged 18-34 had internet access compared with less than half (42 per cent) of those aged 60 and over.

Also, those with a disability were far less likely to have access to the internet compared with those with no disability/health problem⁸ (62 vs. 92 per cent).

The tenure profile was also similar to that for London, with those in social rented housing having a lower level of access (80 per cent) compared with other households.



⁸ 'Disability/health problem' refers to respondents who said they had a long term illness, health problem or disability which limits the daily activities or work they can do.

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The Tower Hamlets figures also had information on social grade and internet access. Internet access was lowest (77 per cent) for households from social class DE (which typically includes low income households) and highest for those in social grades AB and C1 (98 per cent).

Ethnic differentials: Tower Hamlets vs. London

The one area where Tower Hamlets seems to differ slightly from London is in terms of ethnic differentials on internet access and use. Estimates for Tower Hamlets suggest that Bangladeshi households had slightly higher levels of internet access than White households (92 vs.85 per cent), whereas in the case of London survey estimates on internet use, the situation was reversed (though in both cases - the size of the differences was fairly modest).

The London measure was about internet use, while the Tower Hamlets survey asked about access, which may explain some of the difference. It is quite possible that there are some residents who have access to the internet within their household, but who may not necessarily use it. Indeed, the survey data presented below, which relates to the proportion of residents who contact the Council online, indicates lower rates of use among Bangladeshi residents compared with White residents.

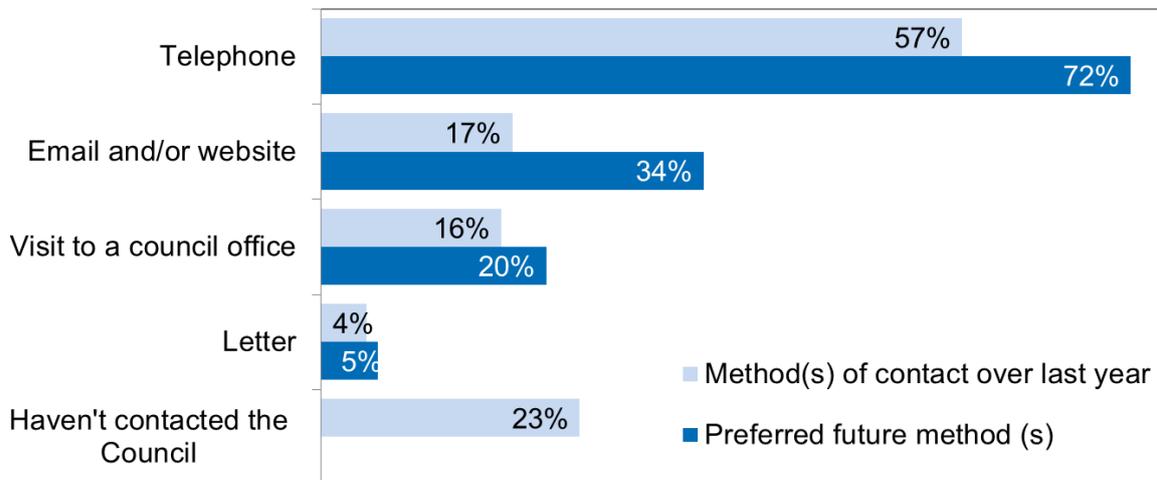
Contacting the Council online: resident preferences

The Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey explores how people contact the Council and what method they would prefer to use in the future. The analysis shows that:

- Online methods of contact have become more popular in recent years, but the majority of residents still use telephone to contact the council.
- However, future interest in online methods is significant – just over one third (34 per cent) of residents say they would like to use online methods in the future ([figure 8](#)).
- There is significant variation in the type of methods favoured by different population groups. Online methods are more popular with: younger households, AB/C1 households; White residents, owner occupiers and private renters ([figure 9](#)).
- In contrast, the groups less likely to prefer online methods of contact included: those in social housing, those aged 60 and over, Bangladeshi residents, and those in social grade DE (typically lower income households). Across all groups, interest in using online methods in the future is far higher than current levels of use.

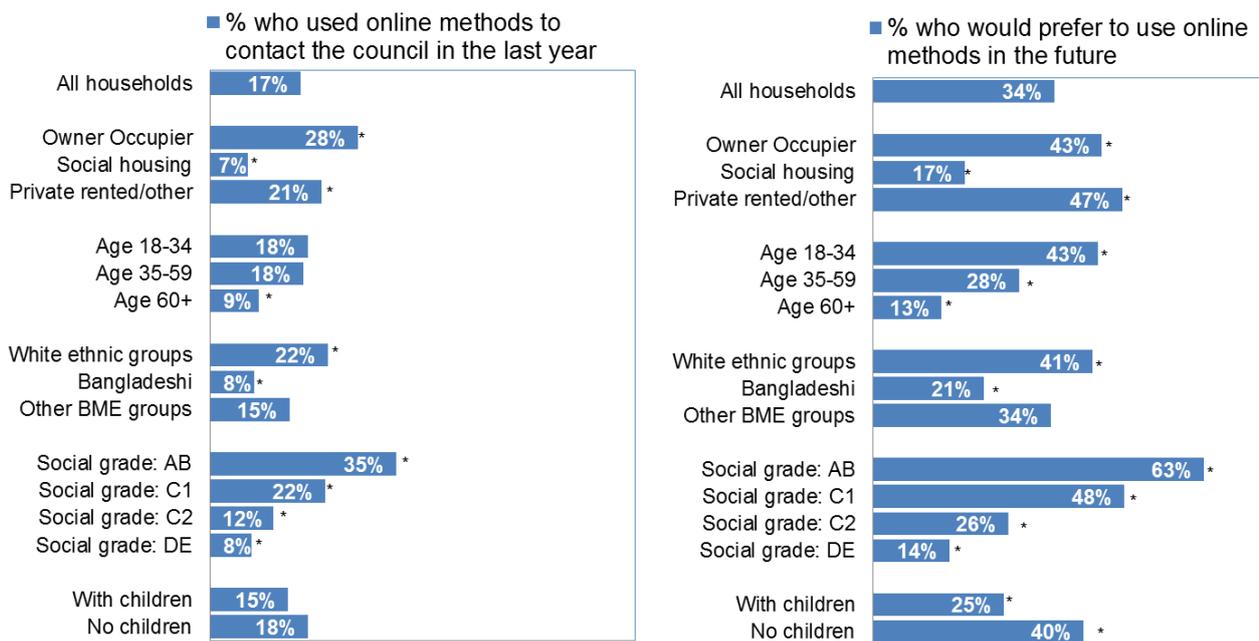
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Figure 8 Current & preferred method(s) of contacting the Council, March 2013



Source: TNS-BRMB, Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey, 2012-13 (% sum to more than 100 as respondents could choose more than one method).

Figure 9 Online methods: use & preference by group, Tower Hamlets, March 2013



Source: TNS-BRMB, Tower Hamlets Annual Residents Survey, 2012-13

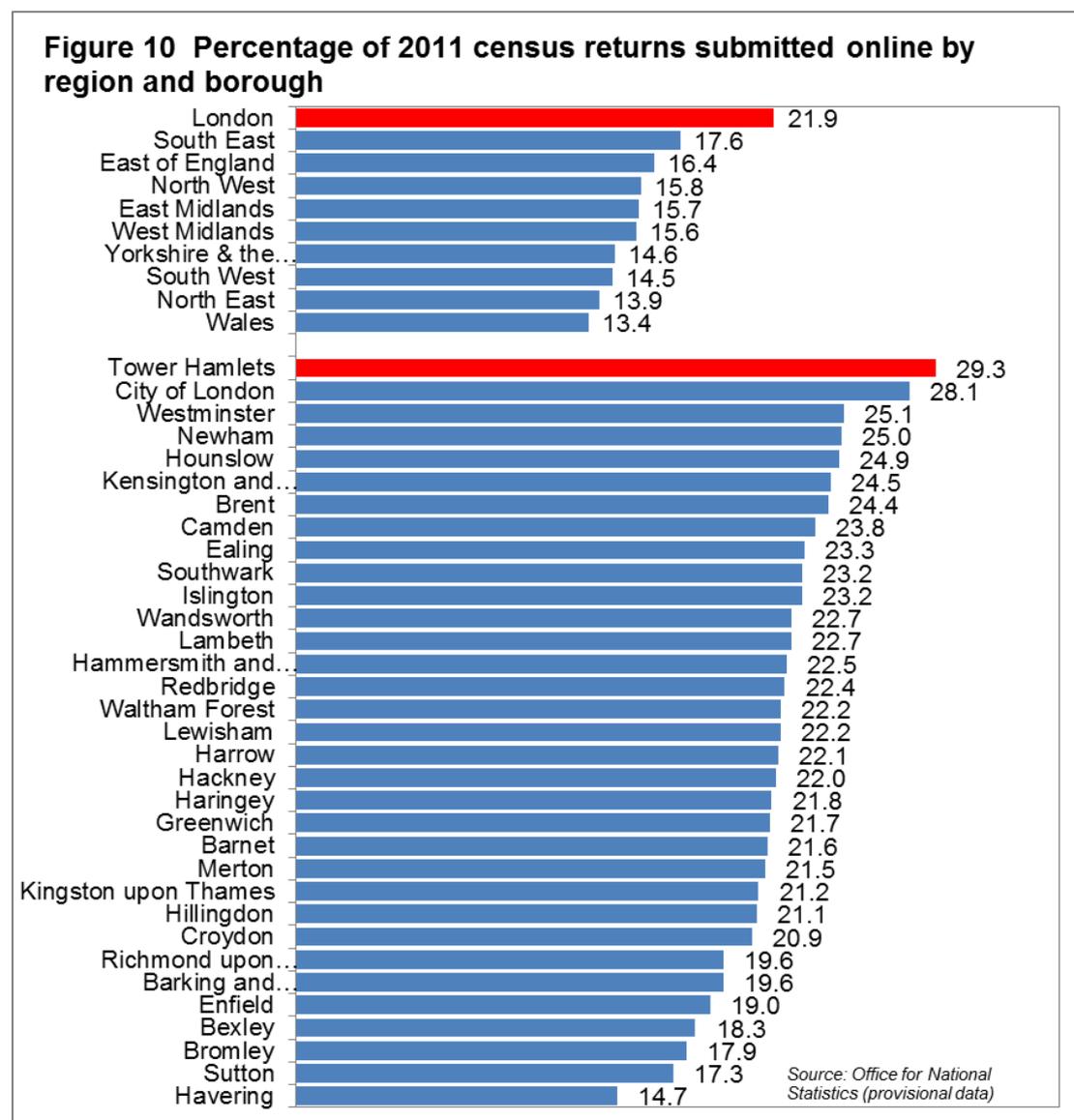
* Estimate is significantly different to the 'all households' average.

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Online completion of 2011 Census forms

The 2011 Census was the first to offer households the opportunity to respond online as opposed to completing the paper form. ONS has provided provisional information⁹ on online completion rates which provide an indicator of digital inclusion, by identifying those households who preferred to respond online. Importantly, the measure allows analysis of online completion rates by geographical area.

Nationally (England and Wales), 16 per cent of Census returns were online, however **in Tower Hamlets, the rate was 29 per cent - the highest online completion rate of all local authorities**. After Tower Hamlets, the highest rates were City of London (28 per cent), Westminster and Newham (both 25 per cent). ONS notes that the highest rates were mostly in Inner London and other urban areas, where broadband is often more available, and where the population usually has a younger age profile.



⁹ ONS, Providing the online Census, February 2012, <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/census/2011/how-our-census-works/how-did-we-do-in-2011-/index.html>

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Indeed, Tower Hamlets has a very young age structure characterised by a high percentage of young adults. In 2012, almost half (49 per cent) of the borough's population was aged 20-39 – the highest proportion of all local authority areas in the UK¹⁰.

Online completion by ward¹¹

Within Tower Hamlets, the proportion of households that completed their forms online ranged from 22 per cent in Bow West up to 39 per cent in Millwall ward (table 1). All wards had online completion rates above the national average.

Wards (ranked highest to lowest)	Percentage of household internet returns (%)	Rank out of 8483 ward in England and Wales (1=highest)
Millwall	39.3	3
Blackwall and Cubitt Town	35.9	7
Whitechapel	32.8	9
St Katharine's and Wapping	31.7	14
Spitalfields and Banglatown	31.0	20
Shadwell	29.5	31
Bethnal Green South	28.9	43
Limehouse	28.2	56
Bromley-by-Bow	27.1	80
Weavers	26.6	103
Mile End East	26.2	124
St Dunstan's and Stepney Green	25.9	134
East India and Lansbury	25.7	146
Mile End and Globe Town	25.0	194
Bow East	24.8	219
Bethnal Green North	23.7	320
Bow West	21.5	665
Tower Hamlets	29.3	
Greater London	21.9	

Source: Office for National Statistics, Providing the online Census, February 2012 (based on provisional results, as at August 2011).

The percentage of internet returns is negatively correlated¹² with the proportion of older people living in each ward. So, wards with higher online completion rates typically have smaller older populations. For example, Millwall has the highest online completion rate (39 per cent) and the lowest proportion of residents aged over 60 (6 per cent).

¹⁰ Office for National Statistics, 2012 mid-year population estimates.

¹¹ Ward data relate to ward boundaries as at the time of the 2011 Census. These are different to the current ward boundaries in Tower Hamlets.

¹² Correlation -0.81 (% of internet returns and % of population aged 60 and over).

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Future data

This report has considered available data on internet access and use. The analysis has had to rely on national and regional data for some of the detail, due to the fact that figures are generally lacking at a local level.

To improve local data on digital inclusion the Council has recently:

- Added new questions on to its **Annual Residents Survey** about how people use the internet. These questions will complement the existing question on internet access by providing more detail on frequency of use, mobile use and internet activities;
- **Commissioned special 2011 Census tables** from ONS (via the Greater London Authority), to further understand the characteristics of households who did and did not respond to the Census online.

These data should be available later in 2014.

Further information

This Briefing was produced by the Council's Corporate Research Unit. Research briefings provide timely and in-depth analysis of data about Tower Hamlets and are designed to improve the use and sharing of data across the Partnership. Contact details for the Corporate Research Unit are:

Shanara Matin	Partnership Information Manager	☎ 020 7364 4548
Juanita Haynes	Senior Research Officer	☎ 020 7364 4238
Laura Widyanto	Research Officer	☎ 020 7364 2239
Benn Huntley	Research Officer	☎ 020 7364 6887
Matthias Schnepfel	Research Officer	☎ 020 7364 1650
Lorna Spence	Research Officer	☎ 020 7364 4014

For queries relating to this report, please contact [Lorna Spence](#).