ICS.AI | Bristol City Council

CUSTOMER CASE STUDY
CITIZEN SERVICES



CUSTOMER STORY | LOCAL GOVERNMENT | BRISTOL

BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL: A PRACTICAL, PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH TO AI IN CITIZEN SERVICES

Today, Bristol's digital assistant "Briz" supports residents by phone and web – answering common enquiries instantly, while complex or urgent cases continue to reach human advisors.

370,000+
Calls answered by Briz

769,000+
Questions asked across phone and web

84,000+
Out-of-hours calls and web conversations

20+
Council service areas supported

Figures cover January 2026 (go-live) to September 2026.

A PRACTICAL, PEOPLE-CENTRED APPROACH TO AI IN CITIZEN SERVICES

Bristol City Council's Citizen Services team – around 120 advisors handling everything from council tax and housing to anti-social behaviour – was under growing pressure from high demand, shrinking teams and rising expectations for 24/7 access.

Rather than viewing AI as a technology experiment, Bristol explored it as part of a broader effort to improve access, enable self-serve demand, and support frontline teams in delivering better outcomes for residents. As Rizwan Tariq, Head of Citizen Services at Bristol City Council, explained "we had to do something different".

Today, Bristol's digital assistant "Briz" supports residents by phone and web – answering common enquiries instantly, while complex or urgent cases continue to reach human advisors.



Watch the webinar to hear Bristol's journey from first trial to launch, early results and lessons learned.

THE CHALLENGE: SUSTAINING SERVICES UNDER PRESSURE

Citizen Services was handling approximately 760,000 calls a year, with average waits of around eight minutes and about 75% of calls answered.

~760,000	~8 min	~75%	~80
Calls a year	Average waits	Of calls answered	Languages spoken



RIZWAN TARIQ

Head of Citizen Services at Bristol City Council

"We were operating under severe cuts... teams were getting smaller... volume was increasing... regardless of what we did, our performance was actually quite low. It was a challenge."

Bristol is also a highly diverse city, with around 80 languages spoken, and runs services many councils don't, such as a Clean Air Zone. Its services aren't static either – new systems, process changes, and seasonal peaks all add complexity.

THE GOAL WAS BROADER THAN SIMPLY REDUCING CALLS:

01 improve access to services,

02 ease pressure on advisors,

03 free them for complex or vulnerable cases,

04 and support Bristol's wider channel shift ambitions.

From the outset, the emphasis was on governance, evidence, a solid business case, and that AI was intended to **support services – not replace them.**

BUILDING CONFIDENCE THROUGH A TRIAL

Bristol's journey began with an AI phone assessment and trial.

Introduced to ICS.AI through Microsoft, and inspired by examples such as Derby City Council, Bristol started with a phone AI trial. It focused on council tax – a high-volume service that almost everyone is familiar with.

RIZWAN SAID:

"What we didn't want to do is commit to something until we knew it worked".

The trial gave decision-makers something tangible: a phone number they could call to ask Bristol-specific questions and hear real answers.

AS PROJECT MANAGER JAMES LINTELL-SMITH EXPLAINED:

"If you can give somebody a phone number where they are going to get Bristol-specific responses that are accurate, it's really, really helpful".

THIS HANDS-ON EXPERIENCE HELPED:

- Validate whether AI could work operationally
- Test Bristol-specific services and terminology
- Build internal confidence
- Support governance discussions
- Strengthen the business case
- Reduce perceived risk

Importantly, it also helped frontline staff engage with the project early. Advisors tested it too, flagging missing intents and common questions that might not have appeared in CRM reporting alone.

THE CONVERSATION INTERNALLY BEGAN TO SHIFT FROM
"Should we do this?"

→

TO
"How would we implement this properly?"



FROM TRIAL TO BRIZ

Bristol's implementation journey was deliberately cautious, collaborative, and governance-led.

While the technology itself could be deployed relatively quickly, Bristol invested significant time in ensuring the right governance, testing, and engagement processes were in place before launch. This included:

- **DPIAs**, information security and equality reviews
- **Testing** with the Disability Commission, housing teams, tenants and residents whose first language isn't English
- **Member briefings**, with councillors testing a pre-live system using real constituent queries
- **Advisors involved early**, with a clear commitment that Briz would not replace them

Testing also covered residents with strong local accents – including the well-known "Bristol L", where "Bristol" can sound like "Bristle" – as well as people with disabilities or speech impediments. "What we didn't want was people being excluded," said Rizwan.

21
JANUARY 2026

Briz launched on 21 January 2026 across phone and web, backed by a comprehensive comms plan. This included how-to videos, web and social content, posters in housing blocks, phone-line messages and advisor email signatures ahead of launch, a press release, newsletters, and assets shared with heads of service and community partners.

THE RESULT, IN RIZWAN'S WORDS:

"A bit of a non-event – which is a good thing."



EARLY IMPACT

Between going live in January 2026 and September 2026, Briz answered more than 370,000 calls and handled over 19,000 web conversations, with residents asking an average of 2 questions per call.



For Rizwan, the bigger story is what this means for his team. Bristol has seen call volumes and average wait times come down and call answer rates improve. Advisor feedback, he says, is that **"it feels calmer, it feels more in control"**.

The council reported a reduction in call volumes, average wait times, improved call answer rates and improved operational resilience during peak periods. One particularly notable example came during Bristol's annual council tax billing run – traditionally one of the busiest periods for the contact centre.

> **RIZWAN REFLECTED:**
>
> *"Usually we know we're going through a billing run. We didn't feel it this time."*

Most importantly, advisors now have more time for the residents who need them.

> **RIZWAN TARIQ, HEAD OF CITIZEN SERVICES AT BRISTOL CITY COUNCIL**
>
> *"I want them focusing on complex stuff... the people that need us to spend time with them, we are spending time with them."*

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

01 **TRIAL BEFORE SCALING**
Hands-on experience built confidence far faster than presentations.

02 **GOVERNANCE TAKES TIME – AND BUILDS TRUST**
Thorough scrutiny and testing gave the organisation confidence to go live.

03 **BRING PEOPLE WITH YOU**
Advisors, members, residents and heads of service all had a chance to test and shape Briz before launch.

04 **PREPARE EARLY**
Implementation prompted reviews of internal processes and website content; starting that work sooner would have helped.

05 **KEEP IMPROVING, TOGETHER**
Go-live was the start, not the end – and ongoing partnership and support were critical.



LOOKING AHEAD

Bristol sees Briz as the start of a longer journey. The team continues to refine Briz as services, policies and processes change, but its success has built confidence to explore future opportunities – at the right time, and with the same governance-led approach.

Bristol's experience shows that AI in local government can move beyond hype to become a practical, people-centred tool – when implemented carefully, collaboratively, and with a clear focus on residents and staff.

WATCH THE WEBINAR

Watch the webinar to hear Bristol's journey from first trial to launch, early results and lessons learned.

PHONE AI TRIAL

Scan to book a meeting with our team.

DOWNLOAD WEBINAR

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CONTACT US

info@ics.ai
+44 1256 403 800
www.ics.ai

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