Prototyping and testing report

Hackney information requests

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Introduction

mySociety has been working with Hackney Council on a discovery project to explore how Hackney could provide new citizen-facing tools for its Freedom of Information (FOI) and Subject Access Request (SAR) services.

More specifically, we are hoping to

- give users a better experience when submitting requests
- open up previous FOI requests for public searching
- try and help council staff by increasing the quality of requests, reducing the number of duplicate FOI requests and reducing the back and forth around SARs
- integrate with a new case management system to enable automatic submission of new requests into the system, and automatic publishing to a disclosure log after a response is sent to a requestor

This document summarises the prototyping work done, the rationale for different design decisions and findings from the usability testing of the prototypes.
Design workshop

We started our design work in a full-day workshop that Mike, Zarino and Mark from mySociety ran with information governance staff from Hackney Council.

We had explored the process of handling an FOI and its attendant problems in a previous workshop and some interviews with FOI champions. The purpose of the design workshop was to take the understanding gained from the previous research and come up with ideas for how to redesign the submission form to help solve or mitigate these problems.

In two groups, we first noted down the kinds of information or functionality that should be presented to users to help them make a request, while trying to solve some of the problems mentioned by Hackney Council staff, and put these bits of information together into a coherent journey. We tackled FOIs first and then SARs second.

The image below shows the process that was mapped out for submitting a SAR.

We used this journey to create sketched mockups of each stage. The image below shows a fragment of the mocked up journey we created in the workshop for SARs.
Initial prototype

Following the creation of rough page mockups in the workshop, we created prototypes to represent our ideas, explore our understanding further and to use in usability testing with users. Usability testing of a prototype would help us check our approach and assumptions without having to think through all of the details that need to be considered for a full implementation.

Principles

There were a couple of underlying principles guiding our design:

- **One thing per page**: GDS’s guidance on how to design forms recommends starting with the assumption of showing one question or concept per page because it reduces distractions, helps lower confidence users, makes designing for mobile easier, and makes it simpler to deal with more complicated logic and conditional flows.

- **People don’t read up-front instructions**: typical FOI and SAR processes tend to start with lots of instructions at the start, defining terms, and asking people to do some research. In reality, people just want to click on the button or link that will get them closer to their goal and don’t read pages of instructions. Instead, we want to put instructions or helpful information at appropriate moments and places in the process where it is most likely to be seen and used.

Overarching design decisions

And a few important design decisions that were relevant to both the FOI and SAR prototypes:

- **HTML prototypes**: we decided to use HTML for the prototypes rather than interactive wireframes. Fully interactive elements made it easier to test out some of the more complicated interactions and the conditional workflow of the SAR process in particular. We used the GDS frontend toolkit to build our prototypes which helped us build something relatively rich in just a few days, and also meant we benefited from GDS’s previous work on design patterns developed for exactly this kind of context.

- **No progress indicator**: again, inspired by GDS, we’re trying this design without a progress indicator, because we’re not sure it’ll help (the length of the SAR process changes mid-flow) and GOV.UK services don’t normally use them.

- **Two separate services**: rather than creating one service for all “information requests” that then clarified with users whether it was an FOI request or a SAR, we decided to create two services with links between at appropriate points. This was for a couple of reasons: firstly because we realised that they work in completely different ways, and secondly
because information requests such as “business-as-usual” requests exist outside of the scope of this system, and we don’t want to accidentally conflate them with FOIs and SARs.

- **Summary pages:** we decided to include a summary page at the end of each FOI request or SAR they make showing all the information they are about to submit to give them a chance to check it for errors and make corrections, another idea that we know GDS has advocated.

## FOI prototype decisions

The FOI prototype had a few specific design decisions related to it:

- **Contextual advice:** we wanted to give users advice about how to write a good FOI request, but as per one of the principals above, we decided to reveal these tips as a user is writing their request.

- **Suggested content:** also related to the same principal above, we wanted to show users content that may answer their question before they submit their request to try and reduce requests for already published information. We added in a “Before you continue” page that is intended to show both previous FOI requests from a disclosure log and links to published information on the website that are judged by the system to potentially answer the user’s request.

## SAR prototype decisions

There were also a few SAR prototype-specific design decisions:

- **Instructions at the start:** given the potential complexity of the process and the requirement to provide proofs of name and address, we added in a box at the start to make this requirement clear before people get part way through.

- **Handling multiple people:** supplying personal details and supporting documentation for the subjects involved in a SAR is probably the most complex part of the process. For this step, we temporarily relax the “one thing per page” rule, so that we can present details of all subjects on a single page. Since the information we’re asking for is the same for each subject, we don’t feel it introduces much extra complexity to the page, and it enables us to consistently present the subjects—numbered and stacked vertically above each other—throughout subsequent steps.

- **Save and continue later:** because this process potentially requires the photographing or scanning of identity documents, and asks a number of different questions, we thought it would be necessary for the form to allow users to save their progress and come back to it at another time, without the need to create an account.
Usability testing findings

Introduction

After the prototype was created, we conducted some usability testing in order to check our approach and test the design decisions we made. Specifically, we were interested in finding out:

- **Usability**: can users successfully use the forms to send a request?
- **Structure**: are they comfortable navigating a multi-stage form with no progress indicator?
- **Follow-up**: are they clear what happens next after they’ve submitted?

FOI-specific questions

- **Reducing duplicates**: how do people react to and interact with the “Before you continue” content?
- **Tips**: do participants notice and use the contextual advice given without being prompted?

SAR-specific questions

- **Information they need to provide**: do they understand what they’ll need to complete the form?
- **Multiple people**: can they navigate entering information for multiple people without getting confused?
- **Providing proof of identity**: do the different options of how to provide identity documents make sense?

User recruitment

We wanted to test the forms with users who had previously submitted a request in order to draw on their experience and help them imagine what it might be like to use it in a realistic situation.

We initially attempted to recruit users through publicity on the London Borough of Hackney website and twitter account, but when this failed to find anyone, we switched to a different approach. We spent a number of hours at the Hackney Service Centre recruiting participants as they entered or left the Service Centre. Using this approach, we recruited seven participants six of whom tried out the SAR form and four of whom tried out the FOI form.

We then further recruited three participants via our own contacts who had themselves submitted FOI requests before and tested both forms with them remotely over Skype.
Testing approach

We tested the FOI and SAR forms by giving each participant a realistic scenario and asking them what they would do in that situation. We asked participants to think aloud (that is, share what they are thinking, doing and why) as they interact with the website, while we watched them use it.

The scenarios we used were:

- **FOI, CEO salary**: we asked participants to imagine they had seen a TV documentary about Council CEO salaries that had prompted them to want to find out how much Hackney’s CEO was paid using the website.
- **FOI, Carillion contracts**: we asked some participants to imagine that having seen in the news that Carillion had gone into administration they wanted to know if Hackney Council had a contract with them, and if so, what the details were.
- **SAR, disability needs assessment**: we asked participants to imagine that they have a disabled child, and that after a home assessment visit last month you want to see a copy of the report and the notes written about them, their child and their home.

Overall findings

There were a number of observations from our testing relating to both prototypes:

- **Easy to use**: people were positive about the two forms tested and thought they were easy to use: “That was fast!” “Very straightforward”.
- **Logical flow**: the absence of a progress bar didn’t cause problems or comment from any of the users tested with and all users moved through both processes easily.
- **Summary pages work**: the majority of people checked their request before sending, and for FOI one person actively went back to edit a spelling mistake in their request text.
- **Need better labels, placeholders and feedback**: a few users made small mistakes such as typing surnames into email inputs or not typing their full name into name inputs. Fields should be labelled “Full name” and “Email address” rather than “Your name” and “Your email address”, use placeholder text to set user expectations about input, and provide more instant feedback if the user’s input is not valid.

FOI findings

There were a few findings specific to the FOI prototype:

- **Preemptive suggestions show promise**: there was uniformly positive feedback on the suggestions of content that might answer their question — “Oh wow this is really useful”; “Ooh links that might answer my question, that’s cool”. Users read the suggestions carefully, and they liked the potential for finding the answer straight away. However, some
of the users who followed the links were overwhelmed by the amount of information on the next page. There is a real risk here that if the underlying information being shown to people is not intelligible enough, then it won’t make a difference.

- **Not reading tips:** we hoped that revealing tips for how to write a good request when the user clicked on the “Your request” text box would make it more likely that users read the tips. However, we found after questioning each user on this point that the majority of the users did not read this content. We are going to move this content directly below the text box instead to see if this makes it more effective.

- **Misplaced SAR link:** two or three users mistakenly clicked on the link to the SAR form on the FOI start form. This link should be moved to a less confusing location, perhaps into the “Other ways to request information” section below.

- **Mistakenly including an email address in a request:** one user included their email address in their request, because they hadn’t yet been asked for it and wanted to make sure they received a reply to a specific email address. This could be mitigated by automatically matching email addresses in a request and warning the user either on the request page or on the “check your request” page.

**SAR findings**

There were several findings specific to the SAR prototype:

- **Initial pages on data subject and proxy are not clear enough:** two users out of nine selected the wrong option on the proxy (“Are you requesting information on behalf of ..?”) page (and most had to work to understand its meaning) and about half of users selected the wrong option on the data subject (“Who is the information about?”) page. We think these pages need to be revised in light of the most common reasons why people submit SARs, which we are currently researching.

- **Adding multiple people worked well:** adding details of multiple people worked well for those who tried it, and the split between providing personal details for all the subjects in one go, followed by their documents on a second page, was clear and easy to complete.

- **Request categories not clear enough:** the request categories on the “What type of information are you requesting?” page were not clear enough. We think they should be further expanded on with concrete examples showing the most commonly requested types of information for each category.

- **Missing the parental responsibility checkbox:** the checkbox used to indicate parental responsibility only appeared for most users after trying to click on “Next”. It should appear as soon as the user has entered a valid date.

- **“What happens next?” worked well:** the instructions section on the confirmation page worked well in telling people what they needed to do next, but was missed by one or two people and could be made more prominent.
● **Proof of address documents for children not appropriate:** some users were put off by seeing a request for proof of address for a child that suggested a utility bill or a council tax bill. These options need to be updated and change to be age-appropriate.

● **Difficulty writing a request description:** some users struggled to compose the written part of their request. This is partly due to the artificial nature of the scenario being tested, but this page could still do with more specific prompts about what information is helpful and perhaps some example requests for common scenarios.

● **Letters of authority and consent:** some users found it confusing seeing mention of letters of authority and consent only at the end of the process. The requirement to provide these documents should be mentioned much earlier in the process. We should also consider whether letters of authority should be collected as part of this process.

● **Not using name inputs correctly:** some users put only their first name into the initial name box which was intended for their full name. This meant that some of them tried to put their surname into the “Other names” box later on.

● **Mistaken use of save and continue:** one user mistakenly clicked on the “Save and continue” button expecting it to take them back to the previous stage in the process. The order of the two buttons at the bottom of SAR form pages could be switched, to prevent people accidentally mistaking “Save and continue” button for a “Back” button.

### Prototype revisions

After reviewing the findings from the usability testing, the prototype has since been revised to address many of these issues, as documented on [this GitHub issue](#).
Further questions to answer

From this research, we have identified some further topics that need exploring in the next part of the project:

- Technical feasibility of showing relevant suggested answers for FOIs: testing the system with real FOI requests and plugged in to real data
- Finalising the list of common SAR scenarios for use in reworking the start of the SAR form
- Testing the SAR process with people who have actually submitted one to see if it matches up to their experience
- Finalising what proof of address documents can be accepted for different ages
- Getting concrete examples of common requests for the SAR categories page
- Getting further explanatory text or examples for the SAR description page