
FixMyBlock

Discovery findings

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Background	2
Project purpose and goals	3
Methodology	4
Participants	5
Discovery findings	6
Data on tower blocks in the UK	6
Tower block safety and the law	9
Legal change on the horizon	10
Law as a last resort	11
Reporting and tracking safety issues	14
Existing support systems	18
User stories	20
Education	20
Reporting and case management	21
Community	22
Next steps	24
Education	24
Reporting and case management	24
Community	25

Background

In late 2018, Tower Blocks UK (a project of Shift Design) and mySociety secured funding from the Legal Education Foundation to investigate ways of involving tower block residents in the management and improvement of their buildings.

Tower blocks are subject to a range of safety and maintenance issues, which, if not identified and dealt with properly and at an early stage, can potentially be life-threatening, as was tragically demonstrated by the Grenfell Tower disaster.

We believe that residents must be at the heart of the system for managing and improving the safety of tower blocks – yet anecdotal evidence suggests they are often unaware of their legal rights, and lack the capacity and resources to exercise these rights and make their voices heard.

Through this discovery process, we wanted to test whether this is the case.

The ultimate aim of the project is to research and develop a pilot service, possibly inspired by FixMyStreet, that demonstrates the potential for tower block residents in a few select pilot areas to have a greater say over the safety and maintenance of their blocks. If judged successful, the service could then be scaled up to cover residents in tower blocks all across the UK.

Project purpose and goals

We began this project with an initial purpose statement:

To design an online service that informs tower block residents of their legal rights around building maintenance and safety, and supports them in reporting issues to the responsible authority.

The main goal of our discovery phase has been to confirm whether such a service would meet the needs of tower block tenants and other key stakeholders, and how the service could technically work.

We therefore set the following as our discovery goals:

1. Research the scale of the problem – How many council-owned tower blocks are there in the UK?
2. Research the legal considerations around tower block safety.
 - What legislation can tower block residents rely on to get problems fixed?
 - What are the shortcomings of the law, and how can they be worked around?
3. Speak to tower block residents about their experiences of reporting and tracking safety issues in the buildings.
 - How do they report issues? Who is involved?
 - What works and what doesn't?
 - How does it make them feel?
4. Where possible, speak to building management staff, housing association staff, and council staff about their role in the process.
 - What works and doesn't work about the current process?
 - What would help them manage their workload?
5. Review existing support systems for residents, including Tower Blocks UK, other resident support groups, and online information sources.
6. Develop a relationship with participants for involvement in prototype testing, later in the project.

Methodology

The purpose of our discovery phase was to understand and map out the user needs associated with tower block housing and issue reporting. We decided to approach this research from three angles:

1. Research data on the scale of tower block housing in the UK. Where are the blocks, and who owns and maintains them?
2. Speak to lawyers, safety experts, and tenant organisers to understand the legal framework through which tenants can enforce their rights. What are the shortcomings of the law, how is it changing post-Lakanal and post-Grenfell? What can tenants and landlords do to ensure the habitability of tower blocks?
3. Speak to tenants, housing providers, and tenant support organisations, to understand how the reporting process currently works, and which user needs are currently unmet.

Our discovery phase involved research methods including:

- Literature review – of existing reports such as the “Closing the Gaps” housing report commissioned by Shelter in 2017, and of legal documents including the Dame Judith Hackitt’s Independent Review of Building Regulations.
- Data research – looking for existing public datasets of tower blocks, and using FOI to open up new ones.
- Online survey – a small-scale survey into problem reporting, publicised via the Tower Blocks UK website and social media channels.
- Workshops – with housing safety experts, and legal advisors.
- Remote and in-person interviews – with tenants, housing professionals, lawyers, and safety specialists, as listed in the next section of this report.

Participants

This discovery project has benefitted from the input of a range of tenants, lawyers, safety specialists, tenant organisers, and housing providers, to whom we're extremely grateful:

- Giles Peaker – Lawyer, involved with the drafting of the Homes Bill 2018.
- Louise Christian – Lawyer, represented families after the Lakanal House disaster.
- Sally Causer – Executive director at the Southwark Law Centre.
- Ed Kirton-Darling – Lecturer in law at Kent Law School, and co-author of the 2017 “Closing the Gaps” report.
- Sophie Earnshaw – Solicitor, Hammersmith & Fulham Law Centre.
- Stuart Hodgkinson – Associate Professor at University of Leeds, and author of “Safe as houses: private greed, political negligence and housing policy after Grenfell”.
- Ronnie King – Former Chief Fire Officer, now Adviser & Hon. Admin. Sec. of the All-Party Parliamentary Fire Safety & Rescue Group.
- Phil Murphy – Former firefighter, Fire Safety Officer, and Building Compliance Manager. Fire safety campaigner.
- Stephen Battersby – Environmental Health & Housing consultant.
- Tony Smith – Housing IT systems consultant.
- Rhiannon Hughes – Southwark Group of Tenants Organisations (SGTO).
- Mark Henry – Edinburgh Tenants Federation.
- Jacob Secker – Broadwater Farm Residents Association.
- Nick Ballard – Co-founder of Acorn, a UK-based community union.
- Georges Clement – Co-founder of JustFix.nyc.
- John Gray – Cabinet member for Housing, London Borough of Newham.
- A representative from a large housing association, who preferred not to be named.

If you are looking to perform your own discovery work in this space, and would like to contact any of these participants, we're happy to make introductions. Get in touch at mysociety.org/contact.

Discovery findings

Our findings can be broken down into four main areas:

1. Data on tower blocks in the UK
2. Tower block safety and the law
3. Reporting and tracking safety issues
4. Existing support systems

Data on tower blocks in the UK

Summary

We investigated the lack of public data on tower blocks in the UK. We used Freedom of Information to request from MHCLG a list of blocks they collated from local authorities in late 2017. Although the list is now two years old, it could form the basis for a “find your block” style feature on an alpha service, which we will consider in the next phase of the project.

We were also able to collate contact details for the repairs, complaints, and environmental health departments of all 198 local authorities on the government’s social housing provider register.

Unofficial estimates place the number of tower blocks in the UK at roughly 4,000. When giving evidence to a [parliamentary committee on fire safety in January 2019](#), Kit Malthouse MP said that, post-Grenfell, MHCLG had worked with landlords to assess “a very large number of buildings over 18 metres [...] something like 6,000 buildings.” His figure probably includes non-residential buildings in addition to residential tower blocks.

Knowing that MHCLG had recently requested, from local authorities, details of every tower block in their area, we [submitted a Freedom of Information request to MHCLG](#), requesting a copy of this data, along with information about who owns and manages these blocks.

While MHCLG considered the request, we investigated other public sources.

A number of partial datasets exist in public reach, but all are too limited or outdated to be used as definitive lists of tower blocks in the UK. The Scottish Centre for Conservation Studies, for example, secured Heritage Lottery Funding to digitise a series of tower block

photographs from the 1980s. [Their online archive](#) includes the names, locations, and sizes of around 4000 blocks across the UK, but it hasn't been updated in a number of years and, in any case, makes no claim to be a definitive list of blocks currently standing in the UK.

We also investigated how much work would be required to associate contact details with the organisations on the [UK Government's list of registered social housing providers](#). There are over 1,600 providers on the list, of which 198 are local authorities. We collected email addresses for the housing repairs, general complaints, and environmental health departments of the 198 local authorities, to enable us to pilot potential alpha solutions in council-owned tower blocks. Collecting contact details for the remaining housing providers on the list would require a significant time commitment – it may be that crowdsourcing is a more effective way to build out the database.

We investigated the possibility of gathering floorplans for tower blocks but couldn't find a suitable source. We'd hoped EPC energy certificates (which are freely accessible online) might contain plans, but they don't.

Near the end of our Discovery project, MHCLG responded to our FOI request with some of the data we'd requested – two lists of tower block addresses, one containing 4,813 *social* residential high rise blocks (18 metres or higher) in England, and the other containing 5,301 *private* residential high rise blocks.

They noted that they are still undertaking “ongoing work to improve the quality of this data, as it is likely that there will be some buildings missing from these lists. As such, these lists should not be regarded as being fully comprehensive” – indeed, we notice that some fairly high-profile blocks, such as the Ledbury Estate mentioned specifically in the 2018 [Hackitt Review](#), appear to be missing.

Our partners at Tower Blocks UK intend to follow up with MHCLG to understand why these blocks might be missing, and also to clarify whether MHCLG holds any similar data for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

MHCLG was unable to give us information about the organisations that own or manage the blocks, since they only hold that information for blocks with ACM cladding, and releasing the data would enable identification of these susceptible blocks, potentially endangering the safety of their residents. It is understandable that MHCLG would therefore not want to publish this data until the ACM cladding has been removed.

Tower block safety and the law

Summary

Legislation protecting the health and safety of tower block tenants is complex, but gradually improving. Cuts to Legal Aid, however, remain a barrier to tenants getting the advice and representation they need.

Tenants often lack clear guidance on their rights and the avenues for resolution that are open to them. Compiling and pursuing a case against the landlord can be a stressful and complex activity, which lawyer-approved checklists, guides, or template letters could help ease. We also heard how sharing knowledge and acting as a group can help tenants force change from even the most resistant housing providers.

Up until recently, tenants facing safety or maintenance issues in their tower blocks were covered by a patchwork of legal provisions, including:

- Landlord and Tenant Act 1985 – Sections 8 and 11 cover duties of landlords towards repairs and fitness for human habitation. However, the sections only apply if tenants are paying less than £52 a year (or £80/year in London) – which is incredibly unlikely in an age when most social tenants are paying rent of at least £52 *a week*, let alone a year.
- Defective Premises Act 1972 – Defines landlords’ and constructors’ liability for construction or maintenance defects, but in reality, is only useful to tenants *after* an incident has taken place.
- Environmental Protection Act 1990 – Section 79 provides some recourse against statutory nuisance, including things like damp or infestations, and Section 82 established that complaints can be taken to magistrates’ courts.
- Housing Act 2004 – Part 1 introduced the Housing Health and Safety Rating System (HHSRS) as a way of assessing risk in properties, but did little to aid enforcement.

The legal professionals and tenant representatives we spoke to were universally of the opinion that the existing legal provisions are complex, and this ultimately leaves tenants in poorer conditions than they should expect. As a [joint report](#) commissioned by Shelter in 2017, from Kent Law School and University of Bristol Law School summarised:

“The law relating to health and safety in people’s homes is piecemeal, out-dated, complex, dependent on tenure, and patchily enforced. It makes obscure distinctions, which have little relationship with everyday experiences of poor conditions.”

Tenant rights activists maintain that the complexity of the existing law favours large housing associations and councils in particular, since they’re able to draw on experienced internal legal departments, while Legal Aid solicitors and Law Centres—the primary means for low income tenants to get legal advice and representation—are becoming increasingly scarce. Meanwhile, there was, and still is, very little in this legislation to prevent defects or disrepair *before* they become a major problem.

It was clear, after Grenfell, that something had to be done to close the loopholes in social housing safety provision. The 2018 [Hackitt Review](#)—while criticised by some as being too lenient on property developers and landlords—did highlight a number of places where legislation and processes were lacking. Notably:

- Lack of clarity over roles and responsibilities when building high risk buildings.
- Lack of effective regulation in the industry.
- The need for a “clear and easy route of redress” for residents raising issues.

The Hackitt review also resulted in a number of working groups, which are currently investigating potential policy changes. Of particular interest to tower block tenants will be Working Group 8, which has been tasked with defining a “Building Safety Manager” or “Building Safety Coordinator” role, to plug the competency and responsibility gap that Hackitt identified. Their final report is due imminently.

Legal change on the horizon

Hackitt working groups aren’t the only legal change in the works.

In December 2018, after more than three years working its way through Parliament, Karen Buck MP’s Homes Bill was passed into law, becoming the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018. The Act amends a number of sections of the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, extending its obligations to cover almost all landlords, and modernising the standard of “fitness for habitation” that tenants should expect.

Effectively, the new Act enables private and social tenants to take legal action on property conditions where previously they couldn’t, and imposes an expectation that landlords should effect repairs in a “reasonable time” dependent on the type of issue at hand.

Residents covered by the new law (all new tenancies starting March 2019 and onwards, and all *existing* tenancies from March 2020 onwards) should finally be able to bring cases

to court that enforce a wide range of Health and Safety standards, as defined in the HHSRS, including previously slippery topics like damp, heat loss, and infestation.

Lawyers we spoke to noted that, since such cases would be brought under civil law, they should require only *civil* burden of proof, meaning that tenants should be able to present a case based on first-hand evidence such as photographs and utility bills, and *not* necessarily require official, and costly inspections. Our interviews revealed that getting Environmental Health inspectors out was all but impossible for both council tenants (where EH officers aren't allowed to enforce action against their employer) and housing association tenants (where housing providers' close relationship with councils means that very few councils are willing to inspect or enforce action against housing association properties). So providing potential courses for enforcement that don't require EH officer inspection is a promising step forward.

Unfortunately, it's very early days for the new law, and even some of the lawyers we talked to for this project didn't know enough about it to comment on how it could be used.

It was a relief to see that, while we were conducting this Discovery phase, MHCLG produced [their own guidance for tenants and landlords](#), on interpreting the rights and responsibilities of the Homes Act. The guidance is presented as clearly as one could expect from a government document, and we are excited to see that it includes a step-by-step guide to using the new law, which could potentially form the basis of a more *contextual* support workflow, as we'll discuss in the **Next steps** section.

We expect tenants' rights groups, such as Shelter and Citizens Advice, will eventually share their own guidance for residents on how to use the law in their favour – for example, through translating complex legal documents such as the Civil Justice Council's [Pre-action Protocol for disrepair cases](#) (once it eventually gets updated to reflect the new Homes Act 2018) into more readable summaries like [this one from Shelter](#).

But in the meantime, even if *new* tenants are given guidance by their landlords at the start of their tenancies, it seems likely that there will be a huge number of sitting tenants, come March 2020, who will be unaware of their rights.

We are also aware that the currently ongoing inquiry into the Grenfell Tower fire is likely to have its own impact on social housing legislation and regulation, but it's currently too soon to tell what those might be.

Law as a last resort

We asked lawyers close to the subject what sort of work could be done to quickly and effectively enable tenants to enforce their rights.

Checklists (such as the fire safety checklist already being produced by project partner Tower Blocks UK) and step-by-step guides came up as possible solutions to quickly building an evidence base for a complaint, without needing formal upfront legal advice.

The lawyers we spoke to were also positive about the potential for pro-forma/template letters to ensure complaints are expressed in legally enforceable terms, and within the required timeframes, without requiring tenants to get individual legal representation. There is, potentially, scope for a technological solution that guides tenants through collecting data about their situation, then fills it into a template letter, and even helps manage response timelines – as we'll cover later, in discussion of JustFix.nyc.

There was an assumption that pre-action letters, warning of future legal action, would prompt landlords into making changes, out of fear of future costs. It would be interesting to see whether further research or alpha testing could demonstrate evidence of this.

The fire safety specialists we spoke to were keen to emphasise the role a local fire department can play in putting pressure on housing providers to fix dangers to fire safety. Under Section 7(2)(d) of the Fire and Rescue Services Act 2004 (often referred to by fire crews as “1-1-Ds” after the section number in the original Fire Services Act 1947), fire and rescue departments have a statutory duty to gather information about risks in their area – including the layout and fire safety measures of tower blocks. This is particularly important in cases like the fire at Lakanal House (2009), where the coroner identified fire crew confusion over the layout of the interlocking maisonette flats, and unrecorded modifications to compartmentation, as key factors in the scale of the disaster.

The fire officers we spoke to were keen to point out that—in addition to a fire crew's scheduled inspections and training exercises—most crews will come and inspect potential fire risks if tenants ask them to. Apparently this is a little-used service, but we were told it can help add weight to complaints, and encourage action from unresponsive landlords.

It also appears that MHCLG are looking at ways to require landlords to make some information (eg fire safety certificates) public, and others (eg water hygiene certificates, asbestos reports) available to residents on request. At least one of the housing associations we came across during this project has already made these documents accessible to tenants via their website.

Building a digital case file of documents and certificates for a tower block—or even an individual tenant timeline of letters, photos, and receipts generated while pursuing a particular issue—is a potential solution that hung in the background of many of our conversations with safety managers and tenant organisers. The act of collecting documents, logging calls, and building a case file can help show landlords that you're serious, and help legal advisers act quickly if the case does eventually end up in court.

Finally, many of the lawyers and tenant organisers we spoke to were keen to express how effective community action can be in pressuring landlords to fix issues. It's much harder for an unscrupulous landlord to fob off an organised group than lone individuals, and engaging with a wider community can help add weight if you end up negotiating with the local authority.

We also heard that acting as a group can reduce the threat of eviction that many tenants fear will result from them raising issues with their landlord or housing provider. Although the government has recently signalled its intention to remove the ability for landlords to issue no-fault "Section 21" evictions to tenants, the law is yet to change in this regard, and even if Section 21 is abolished, tenants facing eviction from unscrupulous landlords will still have to fight their evictions in court, which, as we've heard, can be a prohibitively expensive and disruptive experience. As an alternative, then, we were encouraged to hear from our research participants that there is strength in numbers and, in their view, tower block tenants—with issues that impact the entire building—are in a prime position to benefit from collective action.

It would be particularly interesting to investigate technological solutions to these last two points – tools that could facilitate residents in building a case *together*, to push for action on safety and disrepair issues with a greater voice than if they'd acted alone.

Reporting and tracking safety issues

Summary

Tower block tenants appear to understand how to contact their housing provider to report issues—even with more and more housing providers replacing their front-line officers with online or phone reporting.

But once the complaint is made, it's the resolution process that's stressful and opaque. Complex cases can become increasingly drawn-out, as communication bounces between third parties such as contractors or the local police. Tenants can be left feeling powerless.

Meanwhile, housing management systems are broadly incompatible with each other and with external systems, reducing innovation in service provision. A small number of forward-thinking councils are working on modern solutions to this, including open source services and a common standard for issue reporting.

Reporting of housing issues is often presented as an “us versus them” situation, but that's not always the case. One of the tenant organisers we spoke to noted that very few landlords actually wish ill upon their tenants. More often, problems are caused by impersonal handling processes, or misaligned incentives.

It's important to identify the causes of perceived slowdowns and barriers in the reporting process, so we can single out points in the process that a potential alpha solution could help improve.

Most housing providers manage housing maintenance and tenant complaints through integrated housing management systems. These systems link together aspects of customer relationship management, asset management, tenant billing, and contractor management, and often include online reporting forms or self-service portals through which tenants are encouraged to report their issues. The handful of big names in the industry—such as Capita, Civica, and Northgate—supply software for the majority of local authorities and housing associations.

Compatibility between systems is generally poor, requiring bespoke development to stitch systems together, and ultimately encouraging vendor lock-in. A number of people

we spoke to were of the opinion that this incompatibility resulted in a lack of innovation among software providers, and a decreased focus on real tenant needs.

As a counter to this, potential standards are currently being worked on, such as the [HACT data standard](#), with housing providers such as Lewisham Homes, [Hackney Council](#), and Southwark Council all exploring ways to open up CRM and housing management systems for cost savings, better data portability and better tenant experience. Any work we do next should contribute to, and build on, these standards where possible.

But even with *technological* compatibility, we've been warned that the level of customisation that housing providers are encouraged to make to their instances of each management system will make standardised translation between systems difficult. The software may be the same, but the ways that software is implemented, and the human and organisational processes that the software has to handle, can be vastly different.

In the immediate short-term, feeding tenant reports directly into council systems will be a challenge – especially if we want to offer a service that's completely agnostic as to which housing provider or software system a tower block happens to be managed by. It appears there are two solutions open to anyone wanting to run an alpha for a tenant reporting service:

1. Submit reports by email. This may result in resistance from housing providers who see dealing with these emails as extra work, when they already offer integrated online reporting forms or self-service systems. But at least it's a common standard that can be applied to any housing provider with a published email address.
2. Integrate with a limited number of systems (perhaps even just one) and operate the service only in selected pilot areas/authorities that use those systems. The limited scope will make this technologically simpler, but thought will need to be given to how expectations are managed for tenants from *outside* the pilot area.

Assuming a solution can be found to this dilemma, the actual user journey for reporting an issue is fairly straightforward:

- The tenant has an issue.
 - If they telephone it in, the details will usually go into the housing provider's CRM system first, to log the call, and then a member of the customer support staff will create a "repair request" from that.
 - If the tenant reports online, sometimes the repair request will get created automatically, but often the tenant's free-text report will still have to be manually turned into a repair request by customer support staff. Sometimes customer support will have to call or email the tenant to get more detail about the issue.

- If the tenant uses a full “self-service” system (which often requires them to enter a customer number and password) then, once the system has led them through diagnosing the issue (and has made an automated ruling on whether the issue should be “authorised”), the repair is often sent directly to the contractor for a fix, with the tenant sometimes able to select a specific time and date for the visit.
- The repair request goes through “authorisation” – where a housing officer decides whether the issue should be fixed. There are a number of things that factor into this decision, including the terms of the tenant’s tenancy, and the “scheduler rates” or cost of the time and materials required for the fix.
- If authorised, the request will be “turned into a repair” – and sent to either an external or internal contractor to complete the work.
- When the contractor marks the work as complete in their contractor management system, the the completion filters down the chain, so the repair gets marked as complete in the housing system, and the log entry in the CRM gets updated.
- The better housing providers will offer some form of follow-up a short time after the repair, to check whether the problem has been satisfactorily fixed. But many don’t, and simply rely on tenants re-reporting recurrences of the issue.

Despite most local authorities and housing associations providing reporting forms on their websites, it was notable that all of the tenants we spoke to during our research used more direct methods of contact to make their reports, such as phone or, less commonly, email. Tenants expressed concern over the impersonal nature of contact forms, and the fear that their messages would be more easily ignored than if they actually spoke to a human.

45% of respondents to our online survey said they report issues to their housing provider by phone, and 30% do it in person. Only 20% of respondents said they use their housing provider’s online reporting form.

One tenant organiser noted a longer term shift in the methods of contact available – the general shrinkage of front-line support staff, such as building managers or dedicated housing officers, and the push towards centralised customer service lines and area managers responsible for potentially hundreds of blocks at a time.

Another respondent felt that this lack of local representation from the housing provider only served to exacerbate existing divisions and communication difficulties in the tower block community. Language barriers, for instance, came up a few times as an increasingly unmet problem. We were told how one estate with a strong Turkish/Kurdish community benefited from a translator visiting the housing office once a week. The service was valued so much by non English-speakers (who used the sessions to raise issues, ask for help, and get advice on their legal situation) that it was often oversubscribed. However, visits from

housing officers were one of the first things to go when the local authority's budget was cut, and—our interviewee suggested—the Turkish/Kurdish community at the estate has become more isolated and less empowered as a result.

We heard how tenants can often be confused over who to contact about issues – especially in local authority tower blocks, managed by ALMOs, but with leaseholders and (private rental) AST tenants in some of the flats. The confusion causes delay when dealing with problems, and increases the workload of council support staff who have to spend time handling and redirecting these communications.

When asked how they access information on their housing rights, tenants generally credited word of mouth from other tenants (either in person, or online via Facebook and WhatsApp groups) and online advice sites and forums, as their primary means of finding out what they were entitled to. A small number were able to get legal advice via Law Centres or Citizens Advice bureaus, but with the ongoing cuts to legal aid, access to proper legal advice on housing issues was repeatedly described as out of the reach of all but the most disadvantaged and tenacious tenants.

As expected, we were repeatedly told of the disincentivisation around monitoring and reporting safety and disrepair issues in social housing. The lack of access to legal advice leaves tenants unsure of their rights, and unlikely to challenge decisions made by their housing providers. Tenants spoke of a lack of transparency over how their cases are progressing, and where their issue fits into wider actions across their block. One tenant organiser suggested that, if problem reports were made more public, tenants would be more incentivised to report *their own* issues. Another told us how some tenants can even be scared of talking to each other about issues because, in their words, “bad properties tend to have bad landlords” who will threaten eviction for trouble-makers, in an effort to make problems go away.

This disincentivisation is a real lost opportunity for landlords. One tenant organiser we spoke to pointed out that savvy landlords would make more of the fact that tenants, properly educated and supported, could become their “eyes and ears” in blocks, reducing the need for costly periodic visits from inspectors, and helping to nip problems in the bud as soon as they appear.

Existing support systems

Summary

We investigated how JustFix—a tenant reporting app from New York— helps private and social housing tenants to build and progress their cases against uncooperative landlords.

We also discovered a team looking into the same problems as us, and have begun discussions of how we can collaborate on the remainder of this project, rather than duplicating effort.

When problems appear, many tenants' first point of call is their landlord – whether that's a private landlord, housing association, local authority, or arm's-length management organisation (ALMO) working on behalf of a local authority.

The tenants and support organisations we spoke to confirmed that many of the larger housing associations and local authorities already have either their own reporting forms (built into their websites, or the mobile apps that tenants use to manage their rent payments), or offer some sort of online triage system where residents are encouraged to solve simple problems themselves before being shown contact details for a central repairs/complaints department.

Some councils and housing associations have even built reporting forms into the same mobile apps that tenants can use to make their rent payments, but we weren't able to try any of these during our research.

Residents we interviewed spoke of how the reporting forms are often not the problem – it's the opaqueness of the process *after* that, which makes a bad situation even worse. One resident told us how whole cases have gone “missing” after being reported to their local authority housing department, losing progress and prolonging the time until the underlying issue could be fixed. We also heard how residents often resort to chasing up their issues by phone, because of a perceived lack of communication during the report handling process.

In our online survey, just over 55% of respondents said they "always" or "usually" have to follow up with the housing provider to check on the status of a repair or complain about work not carried out. Another 35% said they “sometimes” had to follow up repairs. The range of contact methods these residents use match the analysis earlier in this document, with residents showing a preference for contact by phone (to a central repairs line, or direct to a housing officer) rather than online contact or feedback forms.

To see an alternative approach to the tenant case management process, we spoke to Georges Clement, one of the founders of [JustFix.nyc](#), a New York based software nonprofit whose [tenant reporting app](#) is helping residents across the city build legal cases for disrepair against both private landlords and social housing providers.

The mobile optimised web app first helps the tenant build a digital dossier about the state of disrepair in their property, and any dealings they've had with the landlord. In the background, the app uses JustFix's [Who Owns What](#) database to find details of the landlord's property holdings, other cases that have been brought against them, and their contact address. The tenant's report is posted to the landlord by recorded mail. JustFix automatically follows up with the tenant by SMS to find out whether they receive a reply and, if the landlord proves uncooperative, to help them through creating a lawsuit, pre-filling all the required legal forms with the information provided during onboarding.

The JustFix app also facilitates communication between residents – if you sign up, and there's another user of the app in your building, it'll let you know, and give you the opportunity to request their contact details. This strongly echoes the advice we received from lawyers and tenant representatives here in the UK, that making connections with the community is vital if you want to make progress in large-scale tower block issues like fire safety failings, damp, or structural issues.

Ultimately, the JustFix app provides a promising model for a service that could potentially be translated into a UK context – helping residents build a case against their housing provider, then sending the notification, and leading into more serious pro-forma/legal template letters, if the situation doesn't improve. However, we're well aware that deploying something similar to cover the entirety of the UK would be a major undertaking.

Our research also revealed another app, taking a slightly different approach to social tenant safety, here in the UK – [Safe as Houses](#). At a very early stage of development, the Safe as Houses app aims to guide tenants through checking the fire safety of their properties, with the goal of both educating them and also building the case for a formal complaint to the landlord. They do this through simple step-by-step images and videos, showing what compliant and non-compliant features look like, and allowing the tenant to highlight the specific items that are of concern. Once combined with photographic evidence, the information is compiled into a report for the tenant to send to their landlord.

Run by an academic/researcher in social housing, a fire safety expert and a campaigning professional, the project shares a number of goals with FixMyBlock, and initial discussions with the Safe as Houses team suggest they'd be happy to work together on a joined-up approach to solving the issues we've identified in this project so far.

User stories

Based on these discovery findings, the following user stories serve to summarise the core needs identified across three broad topic areas:

1. Education
2. Reporting and case management
3. Community

Education

As a tower block resident
I want to know what a safe fire door / dry riser / air vent looks like
So that I know my family is safe

This need lies at the core of the tenant reporting process. Tenants have seen disasters like Grenfell Tower, and are now worried that they too might be at risk. What starts as a damp patch or a draught around a door might have the potential to become something much more threatening. But in many cases, tenants lack the guidance or resources to investigate and understand these problems themselves.

A potential solution to this user need might include plain English non-technical guides on how to inspect structural and fire safety features for compliance with the relevant laws, or case studies of what to look for in your block.

As a tower block resident
I want to know what to do when my housing provider won't fix the problem I'm experiencing
So that I can get the problem fixed some other way

This is the “escalation” need that many tenants face when raising concerns with their landlord, which then appear to stall or are refused outright.

Potential solutions to this need should cover not only the legal pathways for escalation, but also alternative avenues, such as fire service inspections and community action.

As a tower block resident
I want to know what my housing provider's legal responsibilities are, in relation to repairs and building safety
So that I can pressure them to fix the things they're meant to fix

Finally, this is the need that more advanced tenants will encounter – they have a feeling that they're not being treated fairly, and they want clear guidance as to what their rights are, what their housing provider's responsibilities are, and whether there's a discrepancy that they can leverage to get their problems fixed more quickly.

Reporting and case management

As a housing lawyer
I want a clear, organised log of all communication between the tenant and their landlord over a housing disrepair dispute
So that I can quickly get up to speed with the dispute and build an effective legal case

Tenants lucky enough to find legal representation in their complaints then face the difficulty of collecting and communicating the history of the problem, and the steps they've already taken in an attempt at resolution.

An organised "case history" view for a housing complaint is something that housing providers' reporting or self-service systems often don't provide. Yet housing lawyers we spoke to noted that, as well as potentially helping them to pick up a new case, or acting as a store of evidence to draw on, such systems would also help tenants understand *their own* legal position and the reasons why they might or might not have a case against their landlord, which can be useful in emotional, high-stress situations.

As a tower block resident
I want to be prompted with deadlines and next steps during my communication with my landlord over a maintenance/safety issue
So that the problem gets fixed as quickly as possible, and the landlord knows I'm not going to let them ignore my case

This is one of the needs identified and catered for by the JustFix.nyc tenant reporting app. Tenants currently devise their own ways to keep track of their complaints, and for long-running cases, or cases involving multiple parties, this can be a significant burden.

Community

As a tenant organiser
I want to be able to contact tenants with the problem I'm currently investigating (like damp/fire safety/antisocial behaviour)
So that we can work together on developing a solution

Tenant organisers can take many forms. They might be representatives from an official support organisations such as a tenants' federation, or they might just be active members in their local estate.

Potential solutions to this user need might enable tenants to make public calls for assistance with an issue, or to make contact with each other, but should also consider the privacy implications of such communication and the potential for abuse from "ambulance chasers" or unscrupulous landlords looking to identify troublemakers.

As a tower block resident
I want to find other people in my block with the same problem as me
So that I don't have to fight this battle alone

Very similar to the previous user need, but acknowledging the more human side of the story – that sometimes these safety and disrepair cases can have a real physical and emotional toll, and residents acting together as a group can often have a much greater impact than residents acting alone.

As a *tower block landlord*
I want *my tenants to find and report maintenance problems to me*
So that *I don't have to pay inspectors to detect problems that my tenants all already know about*

Further research is required to verify this user need. However, we had indications that community vigilance and reporting could be beneficial to *landlords* as well as tenants.

One interview participant noted: “Social housing providers spend significant sums on hiring people who’ve never been in these buildings before, to come round once every six months, and inspect the door, say, that has already been walked through by residents a hundred times that week [...] there’s definitely a financial gain to be had for landlords in involving tenants in the inspection process.”

Next steps

Based on the user needs identified above, we're planning to prototype and test solutions to the following questions, with representative users.

Education

- What information can we provide to tenants about fire safety and disrepair? We will want to build on materials already available from Tower Blocks UK and other third parties such as Phil Murphy from Manchester Sustainable Communities.
- How can we make this information easy to digest and understand, for tenants with no technical or professional knowledge of fire safety or building maintenance?
- What are the legal pathways for the two or three most common problem categories? (Our research suggests fire safety, damp, and leaks are the source of most activity.) Can we create materials that help people understand and operate the legislation available to them – such as process guides and template letters?
- Will tenants use the lawyer-approved legal pathways and template documents to find solutions they previous wouldn't have tried?
- Are there deadlines and timeframes that tenants would benefit from being reminded about? How should these reminders be delivered?

Reporting and case management

- Will a personal log of communications and documents relating to a maintenance complaint actually be of value to tenants?
- Would such a log be valuable to legal professionals working with tenants?
- How can we make building your own personal log easy and rewarding?
- Are there documents or events that are common to an entire block that could be shared between service users, for the benefit of everyone?
- Can the service report on a tenant's behalf/can they report via the service? Or will housing providers push back against external services mediating communication?

Community

- How can we facilitate interaction between tenants? Which communication methods do tenants prefer – online and offline?
- Will tenants gain value from being connected to other tenants in the same situation as them? How can we measure success in this regard?
- Will tenants be comfortable sharing anonymised details of their problems online?
- Can landlords and housing providers be encouraged to delegate building compliance checks to trusted tenants?