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# FixMyBlock

## Alpha report

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# Executive summary

A collaboration between mySociety and Tower Blocks UK, this Discovery and Alpha project aimed to investigate means for empowering tower block residents to tackle disrepair and safety concerns in their blocks.

Project  
background:  
page 3

mySociety services empower their users in different ways. Some give citizens information and guidance, to enable them to demand better. Others give the citizens the digital tools to take action on their concerns.

One of the overarching goals of this Alpha phase was to test which of these approaches—education vs reporting—or which combination of the two, are most suitable for the given project goals.

We set out a number of hypotheses and points for investigation, roughly grouped into four topics areas: Education, legal pathways, reporting and case management, and community and campaigning.

Topic areas:  
page 4

We then built and tested a series of prototypes with tenants and safety specialists, using a number of research methods, including workshops and one-on-one usability testing, as well as interviews and online feedback surveys.

Research  
methods:  
page 6

Our testing exposed a number of difficulties in providing a reporting or case management tool for tenants – such as the prevalence of other reporting methods (including tenants’ own email accounts), the delayed pay-off around collecting a case log for potential future use, and the challenge of promoting and sustaining an entirely private tool.

More on the  
prototypes:  
pages 11–16

In contrast, the prototype features based around educating and guiding tenants through the reporting process, or suggesting next steps and best practice for them to follow, received a positive reaction.

Detailed  
findings:  
pages 22–28

As a result of this Alpha phase, we go on to recommend the development of an online “Action Guide” for tower block tenants, acting as a hub for legal education, step-by-step safety guides, curated links to official resources, and case studies to demonstrate best practice around common problems.

Action Guide  
project plan:  
page 29

# 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 suggested they are often unaware of their legal rights, and lack the capacity and resources to exercise these rights and make their voices heard.

Earlier in 2019, we completed a Discovery phase, looking into how residents report and track safety issues in their buildings, as well as how legal pathways and housing provider case management processes affect their outcomes. You can read the Discovery Findings report for this first phase of the project here:

[research.mysociety.org/publications/fixmyblock-issue-reporting-tower-blocks-discovery](https://research.mysociety.org/publications/fixmyblock-issue-reporting-tower-blocks-discovery)

The ultimate goal of the FixMyBlock project is to research, develop, and pilot a service that demonstrates the potential for tower block residents to be more informed and equipped to take action on 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.

# Alpha phase approach

Our ultimate aim for this Alpha phase was to build and test prototypes, incorporating residents' and specialists' feedback, to identify an effective service offering that would address the overall project goals. This final prototype would then act as a blueprint for our development work in the next phase of the project, building and launching a beta service for tower block tenants in one or more pilot areas.

To achieve this broad aim, we identified a number of short term goals, based on our Discovery findings, and selected a range of research methods to employ, alongside the prototypes, to help quickly home in on a service that addresses real world user needs.

You can read about these goals, research methods, and the ways we used them below.

## Goals for the alpha phase

At the end of our Discovery phase we set goals for building and testing prototypes that would help tower block tenants identify, report and resolve disrepair and safety issues.

Based on our Discovery interviews and research, these fell into five broad categories: education, legal pathways, reporting and case management, community, and data.

### **Education:**

- Investigate what materials / information would help tenants understand more about the issues they're facing.
- Investigate what information tenants are already given by their housing providers.
- Test a service that helps empower residents into demanding better, from a position of knowledge.

### **Legal pathways:**

- Outline the legal pathways for two or three of the most common complaint categories.
- Test whether a service could usefully guide tenants through these legal pathways, without the need for external legal advice.
- Investigate how tenants currently use the law when reporting issues and complaining to housing providers.
- Test whether there are prompts or reminders that could be automated, to help tenants manage their cases.

**Reporting and case management:**

- Investigate how tenants currently manage their disrepair cases – do they keep notes, copies of letters, etc? What works about this, and what doesn't?
- Test whether a service could help tenants gather information, in a way that would be useful to the tenants and also to legal professionals who might later get involved in the case.
- Investigate whether there are documents that are common to an entire block, that could be shared between service users, and what the practicalities are of sharing this potentially sensitive information.

**Community and campaigning:**

- Investigate how tenants currently organise around issues, or communicate about issues between themselves.
- Test whether tenants might value a service that helps them share their stories, or contact other tenants in a similar situation, for increased support on sticky issues.

**Tower block data:**

- Investigate the practicality of collecting or crowdsourcing an open dataset of UK tower blocks and their responsible parties, to encourage further development of digital services for tower block tenants.

# Methods for conducting the alpha

We used the following methods during this phase of the project:

## Interviews and conversations

- Spoke to safety experts to understand the benefits and challenges of upskilling tenants with knowledge about safety risks, and sharing building documents.
- Spoke to tower block campaigners about the sensitivities of publishing or curating datasets about tower blocks.

## Workshops

- Put together two stages of prototypes, which were tested at tenant meetings, to prompt discussion and reveal real user needs around our education, case management, and community themes.
- Workshop methods included “I like, I wish, What if” design thinking, a “Spectrum Lines” activity for exploring attitudes to a series of questions, and one-on-one conversations and paper prototyping. Descriptions of these two activities are included in the Appendix (page 35).

## Usability testing

- One-on-one usability testing with representative social housing tenants in Southwark—thanks to the kind cooperation of Southwark Group of Tenants Organisation (SGTO)—to better understand the mindset of social housing tenants and identify the barriers that might affect uptake of a tenant-focussed service.
- Remote testing of second iteration prototypes, via online form.

## Research

- Research into the completeness of existing datasets, and the viability of crowdsourcing more data on non-council blocks and landlords.
- Legal advice from the team at Kent Law School, on legal pathways for tenants to escalate and resolve issue complaints.
- Research into factors that could influence a successful beta, launch and rollout of the new service, including learnings from past mySociety projects, and the goals / success metrics we could use to measure impact.

## Alpha timeline

<b>June</b>	<p>Deeper investigation into the availability of data on tower blocks and management companies, and discussions with campaigners over the practicalities of collecting/publishing such data.</p> <p>Contacting tenant representatives, to arrange prototype testing workshops.</p> <p>FixMyBlock project page goes live on Tower Blocks UK website.</p> <p>Presentation at Tower Blocks UK fire safety checklist launch event, with the aim of attracting council / housing association participants for prototyping.</p> <p>Discussing legal pathways and template letters with legal advisors.</p>
<b>July</b>	<p>Design and development of initial prototypes.</p> <p>Prototypes sent to council / housing association contacts for feedback.</p> <p>Workshop with tenants and representatives from across London – in partnership with London Tenants Federation, Phil Murphy and Stuart Hodgkinson.</p> <p>Workshop and one-on-one user testing with tenants and representatives from Southwark – in partnership with SGTO.</p> <p>Second iteration of prototypes, based on workshop findings.</p>
<b>August</b>	<p>Conclusion of legal pathways investigation.</p> <p>Research on marketing, rollout, and success metrics for next phase.</p> <p>Remote user testing of second version prototypes.</p>
<b>September</b>	<p>Project write-up, including recommendations for next phase.</p>



# Legal advice

## Summary

In attempting to define the legal pathways a tenant might take to resolve a common disrepair issue like damp or a leak, we found little that lent itself to automation. Even automating the first step of a legal action—the pre-action protocol letter—runs the danger of beginning a legal case the tenant won’t be able to see through.

Instead, we investigated the possibility of “letters of complaint”, and the potential value of a less interactive service which simply collated advice and guidance from multiple sources.

Initial feedback from lawyers and legal specialists during our Discovery phase had suggested that it might be possible to automatically guide tower block tenants through the process of making and escalating disrepair complaints, potentially generating template letters based on input from a web form.

In the Alpha phase we wanted to test this further, by asking a legal professional to map out the reporting process for a handful of the most common disrepair complaints, and to note the information that an automated service would be required to collect if a template letter or useful “next steps” guidance were to be generated.

We also wanted to check that we were not duplicating effort that had already been undertaken by other organisations. Earlier in the Alpha phase, we’d found the [GOV.UK guidance on tenant rights and responsibilities under the new Homes \(Fitness for Human Habitation\) Act](#), and [Shelter England’s advice on reporting disrepair to social housing providers](#). We wanted a legal opinion on whether these guides represented an exhaustive list of the avenues available to tenants, or whether there were *other* complementary routes through which tenants could raise and resolve disrepair complaints.

For this investigation, we called upon Ed Kirton-Darling and Helen Carr from the University of Kent Law School, who had previously collaborated with FixMyBlock project partner Tower Blocks UK on their Fire Safety Checklist.

## Automated legal guidance

Taking a hypothetical tower block resident with a leak or damp problem, Helen and Ed were able to identify at least 13 potential legal options available to the tenant – from a civil claim that a term of the tenancy agreement had been breached; to a civil claim that

the Landlord and Tenant Act, Defective Premises Act, or Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act had been breached; to a private criminal prosecution under the Environmental Protection Act; or a claim under the NHBC Buildmark Scheme.

Additionally, a number of factors might influence the tenant's choice of legal pathway, such as the nature of their tenancy (tenant, leaseholder, shared owner, etc); the terms of their tenancy agreement; the leaseholder and freeholder of the tower block (private company, housing association, local authority, etc); and their personal (emotional, and financial) capacity to enter into a potentially protracted legal case.

Given the number of potential routes to resolution, and the nuance of the factors that would influence the tenant's opportunities, it was difficult to see how an automated system could help here, compared to personalised advice from a legal professional.

## **Pre-action protocols vs letters of complaint**

We investigated whether, rather than building a system that attempted to guide tenants along the whole process, we could instead build something that just *started* them on the process, with an automatically generated “pre-action protocol” letter. In our Discovery phase, and the first two Alpha workshops, we'd heard that pre-action protocols could be a powerful tool in quickly alerting housing providers to serious disrepair issues.

Ed and Helen noted that, while this approach was possible, they had serious reservations that the letters—far from opening a shortcut to resolution— could end up wasting a tenant's time, or frustrating future legal representation.

The system, for instance, might miss out on collecting information that a lawyer would pick up: for example, a set of circumstances that justify inspection from an environmental health officer. Expert evidence might even reveal that a problem (for example, damp) is being caused by a design flaw in the building, necessitating a different legal route to resolution – while the automated letter, lacking this evidence, would waste the tenant's time pursuing a disrepair claim.

More worryingly, pre-action protocol letters effectively begin legal proceedings, meaning an automated system that creates these letters might “start the clock ticking” too early, before a tenant even has even had any legal advice. In some cases, the legal action could effectively time out while the tenant has no legal representation, making it much harder to pick up the case later.

It's for these reasons that we instead focussed on the less legally sensitive ‘letter of complaint’ – effectively the tenant's formal notification to the landlord that a problem is being experienced and needs fixing.

Assuming the system could identify the nature of the user's tenancy (something tenants often aren't even sure of *themselves*), we were confident that it could present a clear, actionable report, especially with useful photographic evidence and/or logs of the problem's development over time, which could then be sent directly to the housing provider. If the housing provider failed to take effective action on the problem, the letter could be taken to a lawyer, Citizens Advice, or an Environmental Health department, to help them quickly build a case for a more involved legal complaint.

## Extra guidance

We were interested to get a legal opinion on the extent of the [GOV.UK](#) and [Shelter England](#) guides, as noted above. Do they represent an exhaustive list of the avenues available to tenants, or are there other complementary routes through which tenants could raise and resolve disrepair complaints?

It was encouraging to see that, in the time we've been working on this project, both websites had been updated to include guidance on the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act. In fact, the quality of the guides was considered generally excellent. Ed and Helen noted that we could potentially add some extra guidance around more advanced steps (eg: disrepair claims, and environmental health prosecution), or link out to other resources like the [Justice Department's template letters](#) – but these feel like quite advanced steps for a lone tenant to take without legal expertise or support.

It was clear, however, that there is a range of information available which hasn't previously been drawn together for easy access by tenants. Information is siloed, and progress often seems to rely on tenants having either professional legal advice, a deep familiarity with the subject matter, or guidance from another tenant who's been through the process before.

# Prototypes

Here is a summary of the prototypes we considered and tested during this phase, with an explanation of the hypotheses they each tested, and the potential risks that we identified would need to be mitigated for a successful launch of the finished services.

## “FixMyStreet-style” map of reports

This service was suggested during the Discovery phase, and again during early Alpha discussions.

It was considered by our designers in this phase as more of a thought experiment – how could reporting of issues with a public or semi-public map display, just like FixMyStreet, work for tower block safety and maintenance problems?

There is a clear incentive for TRAs, campaigners, and support organisations to use the *outputs* of the service, to see patterns in what’s been reported in different blocks. And tenants *might* use it to report problems, even though it offers very little additional value over just sending an email yourself.

But the key feature of FixMyStreet—that it works out the right authority to receive your report, based on the report location—doesn’t usefully apply to tower blocks. Every tenant we spoke to knew who their landlord was, so an automatic lookup wouldn’t save them any time. We also identified a number of other risks, which led us to discount this idea before the prototyping stage:

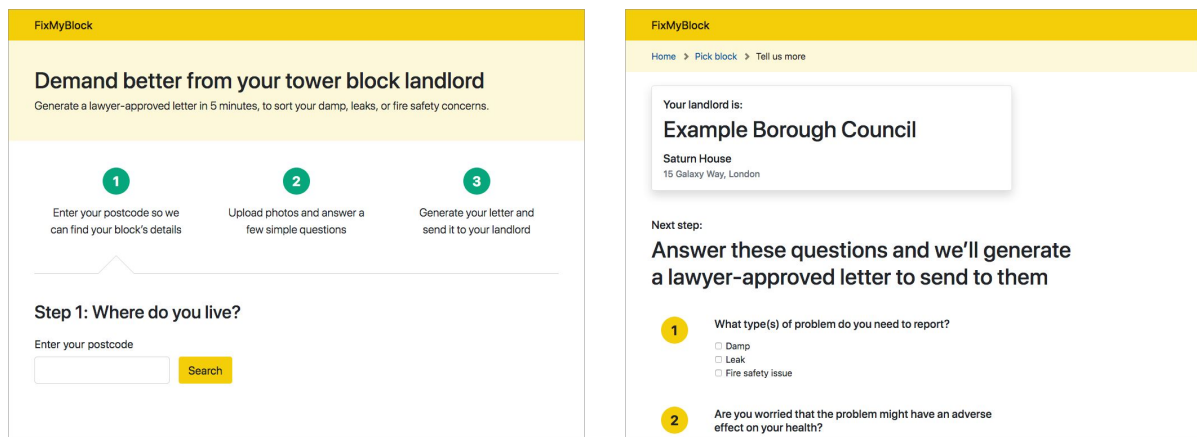
### Risks:

- Service doesn’t take off because there’s no incentive for tenants to add data about their complaints.
- Service becomes a “graveyard” of abandoned problems, because there’s no incentive for tenants to update the site after their complaint has been addressed.
- Difficult to verify reported problems are actually true.
- By highlighting only things that have gone wrong, the service is seen by housing providers as an unfair “shaming” of them just doing their job.
- Potential for complaints from *leaseholders* in blocks that the service damages their property value, by presenting a picture of poor safety and neglect.
- Accidental personal data breaches seem even more likely than on FixMyStreet, given the personal nature of many disrepair complaints. Yet, if we try to avoid these (say, by hiding photos and free text report descriptions and relying on pre-defined categories or aggregate summaries) the value of the service is reduced.

- The number of issues reported in a block does not correlate with the safety or quality of a block – by presenting only reports, you imply some blocks are better or worse than others, when the reality is that some blocks just happen to have more service users living there.

## Letter builder (v1)

Our Discovery phase had found that tenants often lack clear guidance on their rights and the avenues for resolution that are open to them, and identified lawyer-approved template letters as one potential solution. We decided to test out this approach with our first prototype, which helps tenants build a letter of complaint – the formal notification of a safety concern or a disrepair issue, sent to the landlord.



Try the prototype here: <https://fixmyblock.mysociety.org/letter-builder>

The prototype allows tenants to search for their block by postcode, select their block to prefill their landlord's contact details (or enter new block and landlord details), answer a handful of questions (including photo uploads), preview their letter, and decide how to send it.

The wording of the letter of complaint was based on a template already available on the Shelter England website. Users are offered the option of emailing the letter via the system, or printing and sending it in the post. If they choose to email, they're offered the option to receive a reminder email in a month's time, to check up on how the complaint went.

### This prototype tested:

- The concept of crowdsourcing – whether users would fill in their landlord's details if their block wasn't already in the system.
- The value of automatically building a letter for the tenant, rather than making them download and fill in a template.

- How tenants would prefer to communicate with their housing provider.
- Whether tenants would value automatic reminders, and how soon they'd expect to be reminded to follow up their letter.

### Risks:

- The service doesn't present enough value to tenants, over writing their own letter/email, or using housing providers' online forms.
- Tenants are put off by having to find and enter their landlord's details if they're not already in the system.
- The service has no public outputs, making it harder to promote.
- There's a risk that building on an existing template letter might negatively impact TBUK's relationship with Shelter. We should contact them before proceeding to assess and mitigate the risk.

## Case logger (v1)

Our Discovery phase had found that tenants can be left feeling powerless when disrepair or fire safety complaints become increasingly drawn-out, as communication bounces between third parties such as contractors or the local police. We'd also heard from lawyers and other specialists, such as the team behind JustFix.nyc, about how gathering a log of communications during a complaint can make future legal action significantly easier.

We decided to test the incentives around this case logging behaviour in our second prototype, shown to tenants alongside the Letter Builder, in our first set of workshops.

The image displays two screenshots of the FixMyBlock case logger interface. The left screenshot shows 'Step 1: Create your case file' with a three-step process: 1. Tell us what's gone wrong, 2. Give us your email address, 3. Receive reminders. It includes input fields for name, date, and location, and a 'Create case file' button. The right screenshot shows 'Your case file' for Joe Bloggs, listing a complaint about damp on 2019-10-01 and a reminder to the landlord, followed by 'Next steps...' including 'Know your rights', 'Gather evidence', and 'Complain'.

Try the prototype here: <https://fixmyblock.mysociety.org/case-logger>

Tenants are able to create a new case file immediately from the homepage (entering their name, email address, and details of an event including date, description, and photos). An

account is created if they don't already have one, and they're shown the new entry on their case file, along with three next steps ("Know your rights", "Gather evidence", and "Complain").

**This prototype tested:**

- Which details tenants would be happy to record.
- Whether tenants would feel comfortable adding photos.
- The value of reminders, again – set at 30 days after the event.
- More generally, whether case logging in itself was seen as a worthwhile activity, despite being a short term investment for a longer term pay-off.
- The value of the generated data to tenant campaigners and support organisations.

**Risks:**

- The service doesn't present enough value to tenants, over just using their email inbox to track their complaints.
- As with the letter builder, this is an entirely private tool, meaning we'd need to market it more heavily to raise awareness.

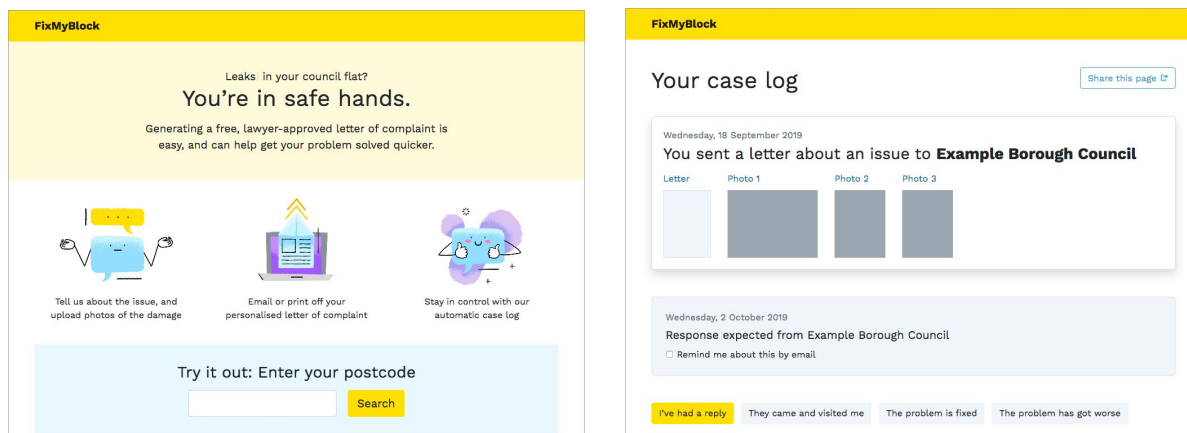
## **Combined letter builder and case logger (v2)**

This iteration combined the two earlier prototypes into a single journey – your letter becomes the first item in your case log.

It increased the amount of explanation provided during the letter-building wizard, showing the beneficial features of the letter and the reasons why it contains what it does, below the preview of the completed letter. In this way it educates the user while they use the tool, upskilling them for raising issues in the future.

And it also included the ability to add a second item to the case log, for example when the landlord replies – with the recommended next steps changing as a result.

This prototype introduced the concept of the "block champion", based on comments we'd received in the first round of workshops, about how every block tends to have one or two tenants who are either in an organiser position (such as sitting on the TRA board) or who are known informally as the person with the contacts and the experience for getting things fixed. We were keen to investigate whether these tenants could help "champion" the service to regular tenants, in exchange for a chance to monitor patterns of reporting in their block.



Try the prototype here: <https://fixmyblock.mysociety.org/prototype-v2>

### This prototype tested:

- A shorter reminder period – 14 days.
- More context-sensitive next steps – eg “*Wait for a reply*” before the landlord replies, but “*Complain*” if landlord reply is unsatisfactory.
- The level of data tenants would expect to share with different audiences.
- Peer-to-peer communication, through both the “*Another person in your block has reported a similar issue: share contact details?*” timeline event, and the “*Get help and advice from someone who’s been through this before*” next step. Would tenants respond to prompts like this?
- The content that “Block champions” (campaigners and active tenants) would expect to see on their dashboard.

### Risks:

- As before, there is still a danger that the service doesn’t present enough value to tenants over just using their regular email to contact landlords, and using their inbox to track the history of complaints.
- The service is still primarily a one-off, private tool, so might require significant marketing and promotion to attract new users.

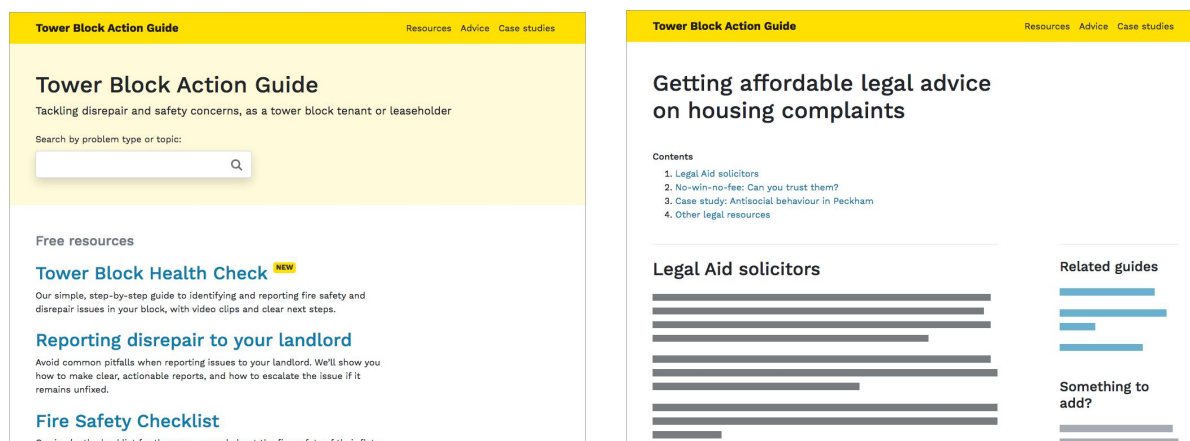
## Tower block action guide

This prototype was introduced very late in the Alpha phase, based on the challenges faced by the other reporting-focussed prototypes.

It presents mostly static informational content, which links out to existing guidance and tools elsewhere on the web – including Tower Blocks UK’s fire safety checklist.



It also attempts to address the issues surfaced in our Discovery phase around the poor discoverability of trustworthy, evidence-based advice on what to do about disrepair and fire concerns.



Try this prototype here: <https://fixmyblock.mysociety.org/prototype-v3/>

### This prototype tested:

- The value of linking out to existing resources, rather than building and maintaining its own duplicate content – the value is in the curation of the resources.
- The potential for including interactive step-by-step guides—like a simplified version of the Tower Blocks UK fire safety checklist—which could help gather anonymous data about which problems tenants are facing, and where.
- The possibility of crowdsourcing new content, by asking visitors to submit their own success stories / case studies.

### Risks:

- Danger that it becomes an unfocussed “grab bag” of advice, reducing its utility. It will require good curation and ongoing editorial input as links move or break.
- Danger that it is less discoverable than the Gs pages it links to. Will require persistent marketing, perhaps including “timely” content like blog posts (case studies?).
- With the right optimisation, the service could do well in attracting visitors via search engines. But it’ll still need active promotion to ensure links from online and offline media.

# Research into growth and sustainability

## Summary

We looked at past mySociety projects for examples of how to grow and manage a successful resident-focussed service.

We noted how past “write to your representative”-style tools have effectively challenged and *changed* legislation, especially when deployed as part of a wider campaign.

And we also noted how the lack of visibility in a purely private WriteToThem-style letter building tool will require more marketing effort and could ultimately have issues over sustainability.

In this phase, we also built a growth model to help identify the outreach goals we’d need to hit for a successful pilot and launch of a service either built on reporting/tracking issues, or sharing best practice and guidance on getting things fixed.

Alongside our legal research and prototyping, we asked Alex from mySociety’s Research team to look into the hallmarks of a successful citizen-facing mySociety service, to see whether there are core concepts that could help shape our decision on which prototype to take forward in the pilot phase.

## Who will use this service?

The English Housing Survey figures suggest that [around 197,000](#) households are renting a tower block flat from a local authority or housing association in England. For a moment ignoring the number of tower blocks in Scotland, we can say there are roughly 200,000 households who might be users of the service.

It’s worth highlighting that this is a small proportion of the four million homes rented from councils or housing associations – so while the product is currently focussed on tower blocks it might actually have a far wider potential use.

[Shelter research](#) suggests that 56% of social renters experienced a problem in the last three years and that one in 10 of them (5.6%) had to report an issue more than 10 times before it was resolved.

This suggests a higher potential for repeat users than other mySociety services – this is a group of people in an environment where they experience more problems than the average person reporting on FixMyStreet, and are also likely to be the only one to notice and report the individual problems, and so can’t “free ride” on other people’s reports.

It’s also worth considering that tenants who face problems most frequently may have the least responsive landlords. This may pose a challenge for a transactional letter-writing service, where tenants might be discouraged from using the service again, after their first or second “letters” get no response.

Where possible, this would lead us to encourage a focus on informing tenants about their next steps for resolution, or guiding tenants through alternate paths, rather than treating the letter-writing or evidence-gathering as the entirety of the service.

## **Correspondence tools as part of a wider campaign**

mySociety has experience building tools that help citizens write to their representatives and local decision-makers. The most popular, WriteToThem, delivers around 200,000 emails to MPs, local councillors, MEPs, and national assembly members, each year.

The WriteToThem model has also been replicated in other countries, via our reusable “WriteInPublic” plugin. In South Africa, for example, we worked with Parliamentary Monitoring Group South Africa (PMG) to add a “Write to a Parliamentary Committee” feature to their site, People’s Assembly, as part of a wider campaign encouraging scrutiny on the bills being formed and discussed by the committees.

One campaign—around proposed party funding legislation—gathered over 1700 responses, many of which were from people who would never formally comment on a bill. PMG distributed its users’ responses to the committee members, who found them incredibly useful during their discussions, and used the messages as a reference point to gauge public opinion especially where discussions were deadlocked over contentious issues. The feedback gathered by this letter writing campaign directly shaped the final form of the bill, and helped ensure that important citizen-empowering features, such as enforced disclosure of party funding sources, were included in the law.

In this way, the People’s Assembly WriteInPublic service shows how an effectively private letter-writing tool can still have an impact on outcomes for residents, when used carefully as part of a wider campaign. This is important when we come to consider the alternative, exemplified by sites like FixMyStreet and WhatDoTheyKnow, where network effects (described in the next section) do the heavy lifting of publicising the service and demonstrating impact.

## Discoverability and reach

An important consideration in the growth or failure of many online services is the idea of network effects, whereby the value of the service to new users increases relative to the number of existing users. This might be because the existing users are valuable in themselves (like on a discussion forum, or a social network) or they might be generating content that shows up in search engines and attracts new users.

mySociety's most successful services often have a weak form of network effects. Each FixMyStreet report or WhatDoTheyKnow request makes evidence available, shows a past success, or provides an example of how to use the site for your own aims. This is distinct from word-of-mouth; users don't need to actively do anything. The most effective marketing happens as a side effect of the normal working of the service.

This is not to say that the service should be designed specifically to create a network effect where one doesn't usefully exist – but we should be aware that a tool without any network effects at all will be harder to pilot (as users won't magically “recruit” each other just through using the service) and to run as a fully launched service (as you'll need to rely on marketing and coverage in other websites and media to build a profile and attract new users every year).

For an entirely private reporting / case management tool, this will be a problem. An informational service may fare better – it will launch with suitable content to attract users, and that content may be updated over time, to stay relevant, but the content won't grow automatically with use.

## Modelling usage

Finally, like most of mySociety's services, FixMyBlock is a need-driven service. Just as a FixMyStreet user might have a pothole to report, or a WhatDoTheyKnow user might have a question they want to ask a government department, FixMyBlock users will be facing a safety or disrepair issue, and will want fast action.

This presents a challenge: most people only use the service once – meaning that new users do not stack with existing users to grow the service. The implications of a high proportion of non-recurring users is that new users need to be constantly won. Depending on the method of marketing and growth, this might be prohibitively expensive.

This alone isn't necessarily a problem. As mentioned, both FixMyStreet and WhatDoTheyKnow have faced the challenge of single-use users by making sure that the content created from those interactions goes on to benefit future users.

WriteToThem, on the other hand, lacks the public visibility and network effects of its sibling services, and faces much higher user churn as a result. The service is still successful, and regularly delivers around 200,000 messages a year, but to do this, it requires significant marketing through Google Adwords.

TheyWorkForYou, acting as more of a repository of useful information, avoids the user churn by hosting valuable content that can't be found elsewhere.

The shape that FixMyBlock takes—either a reporting / case-logging tool, or a content-based informational hub—will affect the repeatability of its value to users.

## FixMyBlock as a reporting service

Our research team prepared [a growth model](#) for the service represented in our v2 prototypes (combined letter builder and case logger) running from 2020–2025, using the following assumptions:

- 50% of tower block tenants experience a problem in a year.
- Minimal viral growth – we'll assume each successful resolution leads to 1.1 future users, which is a realistic figure for “word of mouth” recommendation.
- 1% of tower block households (2000) find it organically/are marketed to per year.

It quickly becomes apparent that—with viral effects and marketing both limited—the growth of the service is heavily dependent on the “success rate” of the tenant's complaints. Varying the success rate from 2 in 4 complaints to 3 in 4, would result in around 19,000–47,000 problems solved by the end of the period.

The problem is, a letter-writing service will have very little influence over the success rate of the complaints it handles. Tailored advice, improving the quality of the complaints, might increase the chance for a successful resolution, but the growth in this part of the model will be necessarily limited by the responsiveness of the landlord, and the practicality of fixing the underlying safety or disrepair issue.

Reaching a larger percentage of the market would require:

- 1. Reaching many more than 1% of tower block tenants a year (for context, 1% is equivalent to all people with problems in 100 ‘average’ high rise buildings)**
  - Reaching more people is both simple, in that it just involves more resources, but also difficult, in that those resources are limited. (For comparison, WriteToThem reached 0.4% of the adult population in 2018, including returning users).

## **2. Improving the success rate**

- As mentioned above, scope for improvement might be limited here, but the guidance and support offered by the tool might improve success rates.

## **3. Increasing referral rates**

- High referral rates could be leveraged within the tool design, for example through encouragements to share the service with friends and neighbours over social media.

When it comes to piloting, launching, and monitoring the service in the next phase, if we're not confident in attaining at least two of the three requirements above, it may be that setting the number of users as a goal isn't the most helpful, and we should instead focus on more qualitative measures of impact.

## **FixMyBlock as an informational service**

If we instead consider FixMyBlock as a less transactional service—as demonstrated in the “Action Guide” prototype—it will have a slightly different model of success.

Step-by-step guides are still likely to only be filled in by tenants experiencing the selected issues. So, when it comes to marketing and monitoring the site, treating each of these guides as its own miniature service, and following a growth model similar to the ones above, would be a good start at measuring the performance of each individual guide.

Success rates become less important, since the site doesn't rely so directly on successful transactions. However, recommendations and referral rates will still be an important factor in the growth and sustainability of the service. Network effects will again be minimal, so any features that can encourage happy users to share and recommend the service will be vital for spreading the service among the potential user base.

One advantage of this model is that the informational content on the service can be accessed without having to actively use the tool, so we'd encourage the development and monitoring of links with third parties—tenant groups, support organisations, legal advice centres—who could recommend the service as a first port of call for tenants facing issues, fostering a steady incoming stream of new users.

We'll go on to recommend a series of measurements for the action guide service in the **Summary & next steps** section of this document.

# Alpha findings

Using our prototypes, workshops, and research activities, we could begin answering the goals defined at the beginning of the Alpha phase.

## Education

### Summary

Tenants feel they're often not given enough information about the safety or state of their flats, and have to take on an unofficial expert role. Information is available online, but is spread out and often hard to find.

Case studies would help tenants share knowledge on best practice, while more targeted/curated guidance on how to diagnose and effectively report issues could improve working relationships with housing providers.

### What materials are tenants given by their housing providers?

- There was unanimous disagreement with the phrase “My housing provider gives me useful information on how to understand (or even self-fix) issues like leaks, damp, or over/under-heating” at SGTO meeting.
- Housing stock is all different – even the housing provider staff are sometimes surprised when they visit the property and find the building isn't as they expected – so how can tenants be “informed” about their building if the landlord doesn't have up-to-date records?
- Housing providers seem to be moving towards building information/advice into their reporting websites and apps (as a form of triage, to reduce reports about things that are simple fixes or aren't the provider's responsibility) but feedback we got was that tenants generally avoid the housing provider's website and apps because they “just don't work”.
- It is very easy to slip into an adversarial relationship with the housing provider – tenants are treated as customers rather than partners, but this doesn't translate to good customer experience, because of a lack of funding and a housing stock that only requires more and more maintenance. Tenants get to the position that they're not interested in housing providers' words, only their *actions* – they want someone

to come out and see the problem with their own eyes, not to be fobbed off with generic responses and information guides.

### **What materials would help tenants understand more?**

- Some tenants already research how to self-fix problems (eg: on YouTube) – either because they’re scared / tired of reporting them to the housing provider, or when the housing provider has been out but not managed to fix them.
- It is unrealistic for us to build a “homeowners’ handbook”-type service that tells people how to identify and repair all manner of disrepair issues — and in any case, that information is already out there.
- Examples of how *other blocks* diagnosed, reported, and got fixes for issues might be helpful. As much about how to play the *process* of reporting, as it is about how to properly identify and report the issue.

### **Feedback on prototype – letter builder (v1).**

- Tenants liked that the letter came across as professional.
- They liked the simplicity of filling out the form, indicating that it was much simpler than the forms they’re used to using on council websites.
- A number of tenants wondered whether the form could be filled out on somebody else’s behalf – eg a neighbour, or a family member.

## **Legal pathways**

### **Summary**

Where tenants are provided with information about their housing rights, it is rarely designed for easy consumption. Many will take it upon themselves to do further research, and will use the names or wording of laws to add weight to correspondence.

When we prototyped a service that built a letter of complaint for them, we found they were more interested in the content of the letter, than they were in the automatic service.

We investigated whether a reminder service could be built, to help tenants keep on top of ongoing cases, but this felt like a feature of a wider product rather than a tool in its own right.



### **Can pathways for the most common complaints be mapped out?**

- Our legal advisors were sceptical about this. In their opinion, the right legal path to take will depend on a number of factors, such as the extent of the problem, any historical fixes, the tenant's personal situation, and their capacity to pursue a potentially protracted legal case.
- Tenants might face multiple potential avenues at the same time – eg: do you take a civil claim for disrepair, or a complaint to the council over the HHSRS? A legal professional would weigh up the options, with input from the tenant, to decide which one to pursue.
- The new Fitness for Human Habitation law doesn't *really* make this any simpler – it just adds another potential avenue. And it's so new, so untested, that lawyers haven't worked out the wrinkles in it yet – it's hard to map out the best way to use a law until you've got case law to refer back to, to understand how judges tend to *interpret* the law.
- Even if you ignore most of the "pathway", and just focus on automating the creation of a pre-action protocol letter, there's a danger that:
  - You might not collect all the info that a lawyer would have collected.
  - You might not tailor the letter to the specific case like a lawyer would.
  - You might lack expert evidence that a lawyer would have brought in (eg: expert evidence that actually the problem is caused by a design flaw, not disrepair, and so can't be brought as a disrepair claim)
  - You "start the clock ticking" in a legal sense, even though the tenant doesn't *actually* have any proper legal advice yet.

### **How do tenants currently use the law when reporting issues and complaining to housing providers?**

- Some tenants like to include legal terms in their complaints, even if they don't fully understand what they mean, because they think it helps scare the housing provider into action – *"When I email the council, I copy in [a legal firm] and quote the Housing Act, and it makes the council sit up and listen."*
- Referring cases to the Ombudsman is slow and often doesn't help – they can only rule on whether a housing provider handled a complaint incorrectly (which housing providers are very smart about *not* doing) and have limited powers to actually get the tenant's problem fixed.
- A couple of tenants with years of experience navigating the social housing system were of the opinion that you simply can't get anywhere without a lawyer.
- One tenant said they'd try politicians first, before lawyers: *"I would go to my local councillor first, instead. Including them in an email, or even just saying their name does work."*

## Feedback on prototype – letter builder (v1) and case logger (v1).

- It became clear that we need to help define / explain legal terms in letters, rather than people sending letters they don't understand. This is something we addressed in the v2 prototype.
- A number of tenants liked the idea of the automatic reminders – but didn't agree on the right delay. 30 days seemed too long, but it was unclear what a more useful time would be. It seems likely the delay depends on the severity of the problem being reported. Nonetheless, we reduced the reminder delay in the v2 prototype.

## Reporting and case management

### Summary

Tenants manage their fire safety complaints and disrepair cases in an ad-hoc manner, often using a mixture of communication channels. When we tested a service that helped tenants document what had been sent and received in these communications, however, the incentives to keep the log up to date were unclear.

Contextual guidance on next steps to take when previous actions have stalled proved very popular in our testing, and helped tenants feel more in control of the reporting process.

## Are there documents that are common to a whole block, which could be collected and shared? And what would the privacy implications be?

- Yes, there are documents common to whole blocks – for example, Fire Risk Assessments (FRAs).
- Landlords will generally store these documents in their own private Digital Systems of Record (DSORs).
- Most responsible landlords make the documents—especially fire risk assessments—available to tenants if requested. But they are never shared publicly.
- Like all risk assessments, these fire safety documents depict worst case scenarios, and the current '*by request*' distribution method is in place at least partly to prevent alarm. A few of the tenants and tenant organisers we spoke to raised concern over the documents being made public, and then being misunderstood.
- Earlier this year, Hackitt Working Group 8 submitted its recommendations to government that:

- Each high rise building should have a designated “Building Safety Co-ordinator” (BSC) to act as a single named person responsible for the day-to-day management and safety of the building;
- Block information and documents should be stored in a “safety case”, managed by the BSC.
- These safety cases, and all fire and emergency files for at-risk blocks, could be stored in a national government database.

### **How do tenants currently manage their disrepair cases?**

- Tenants value the paper-trail that email provides, but they’ll often turn to phoning up their housing provider when it comes to chasing up on an outstanding issue.
- Tenants are busy, and often don’t think of a disrepair “case” as a thing to be managed – it’s just another complication in their life, and they’ll manage it in whatever ad-hoc way they can.

### **Feedback on prototype – case logger (v1).**

- There is value in showing tenants tried-and-tested “next steps” throughout the reporting process. Tenants can feel alone and overwhelmed, especially when the housing provider refuses to act in the first instance, or leaves them in what feels like a never-ending holding pattern.
- But even with the next steps, there wasn’t a strong enough incentive to use the tool, versus just reporting by email or phone and getting advice from other sources.

## **Community and campaigning**

### **Summary**

Tenants communicate about issues and offer support both offline (in person meetings / informal chats in the hallways) and online (usually in Facebook or Messenger groups). Twitter is used by some tenants as a way to pressure housing providers into action.

Tenant activists and campaigners would appreciate better visibility on problem areas/estates, and bottlenecks in housing provider fixes, but gathering this data automatically is a hard problem to solve.

## How do tenants organise themselves around, and communicate about, issues?

- Tenants talk to each other about issues much more than we expected, either in person or on social media (mostly Facebook) – *“People in Peckham are friendly, we communicate with each other about these sorts of issues.”*
- Some blocks have TRAs that try to coordinate and campaign around issues.
- Sometimes there will be active or experienced tenants who will be asked for advice, or who will take on a sort of unofficial “organiser” role for the block, just because they want to help people in a similar position to them.
- Organisers would love more data about what tenants are complaining about, where the bottlenecks are, which complaints have stalled – so they can feed into campaigns, or highlight serious problems in housing provision.
- Collaboration has its uses, but not for every situation – *“We want collective action to stop something big like a demolition – but don’t need collective action to get a leaky stopcock fixed!”*

## Feedback on prototype – case-logger (v1) and combined letter builder and case logger (v2).

- Some tech-savvy tenants use social media (mostly Twitter) to shame housing providers into acting on issues.
- *“I could do this myself”* – some tenants were happy just using their email inbox as a log of communication.
- Tenant organisers liked the idea that the service might help collect data about safety concerns or disrepair in a block or across a whole area – but were worried that it might not be used by enough tenants to make the data representative.

## Tower block data

### Summary

After facing difficulties in finding data on tower blocks in our Discovery phase, we wanted to spend a little time investigating whether collecting or crowdsourcing such a dataset would help other organisations develop tenant-focussed tools in future.

Our impression is that tenants are unlikely to contribute directly to a collaborative dataset like we’ve seen with political data recently (for example, on Wikidata), but it’s possible that a dataset like this could be built up as a byproduct of a sufficiently popular

tenant-facing service. There would be challenges in verifying the data submitted by tenants, but this could potentially be mitigated through verification by a network of “trusted” tenants or support organisations around the country.

**Practicality of crowdsourcing an open dataset of tower blocks and their responsible parties.**

- Data on the names, locations, heights, and ownerships of tower blocks is out there, but it’s private, patchy, and has mixed provenance.
- There’s no good source for non-council landlord contact details.
- If data is crowdsourced, we’ll need to think carefully about reliability and accuracy.
- There’s a chance this problem might be solved in the next few years by the central government database of Building Safety Co-ordinators and Safety Cases being recommended by Hackitt Working Group 8.
- In the meantime, we’re not sure if there is anything we could pull together here that could be of use to future reusers looking for a reliable dataset.
- On a smaller scale, there’s still potential that a tool could launch with, for example, addresses and contact details for council-owned blocks, and then use crowdsourcing to slowly gather similar details for non-council blocks.

# Summary & next steps

## Summary

Our testing revealed there are a number of small usability wins that could be gained through a self-serve reporting tool, but ultimately we aren't convinced that any of them represent a significant incentive to use a custom-built tool, versus tenants' own existing tools and behaviours.

Once we moved away from the reporting angle, and back towards supporting tenants in making informed decisions about their issues, the idea of a central “hub” for well written summary content, links to authoritative guidance, interactive self-tests, and case studies for success stories, made more sense as a resource that would achieve the project goals.

This project started with a question – how could a future Grenfell incident be avoided with the use of an issue reporting service like FixMyStreet?

Following a Discovery phase that gathered information from tenants, landlords, safety specialists, and legal experts, we established a set of goals for the Alpha phase, that roughly fell into three main angles:

- **Education** – providing information to tenants about their housing rights and avenues to resolution, as well as giving them a better understanding of how to spot and diagnose fire safety and disrepair concerns in their buildings.
- **Reporting** – helping tenants report their concerns to the relevant authority, and helping them track and manage the report, to increase the chances of it being fixed in a timely manner.
- **Campaigning** – using data and experiences provided by the community, to give campaigners the evidence they need to demand better from housing providers.

There are obviously overlaps between the three approaches. Our Discovery research showed how better education about rights leads to more reporting, and probably also more campaigning. Meanwhile we spoke to tenant activists whose campaigns would benefit from the data collected by a reporting tool, and would also, themselves, feed into awareness-raising and education around safety issues — and so on.

Therefore the aim of the prototypes was to identify which of these angles—and which specific features within them—would combine to make for the most impactful, sustainable service to address the project goals.

Our first set of prototypes focussed heavily on the reporting angle, with education and campaigning included as, effectively, byproducts. Here's a reminder of what we tried, and the key learnings we found:

- **Letter builder (v1)** – The service aimed to construct a Letter of Complaint, for the tenant to email or post to their landlord. (We had initially intended to generate a Pre-Action Protocol, but our legal research suggested this might run the risk of “starting the clock” on a legal action too early. Letters of Complaint were chosen as a suitable point *before* legal action has begun.) While feedback for the content of the letter was good, tenants wanted to know more about the legal background and the *reasons* for the questions. Some were also unconvinced that it offered additional value over sending and emailing their own letter.
- **Case logger (v1)** – The service aimed to document the entire history of a tenant's housing complaint, to make future escalation easier, while also potentially generating anonymous summary statistics for tenant organisers. Tenants valued the contextual “next steps”, but weren't convinced that they'd maintain the log *in addition* to communicating with the landlord in a separate channel.
- **Combined letter builder and case logger (v2)** – This iteration used the output of the letter writing journey as the first “entry” in the tenant's case log (to incentivise keeping the rest of the log up to date), and showed more detail about the reasoning behind what was in the letter, and what was suggested as next steps. Testing feedback, however, still indicated that the letter builder was not incentive enough, even with added benefits like automatic reminders.

Nearing the end of the Alpha phase, it was clear that reporting alone wasn't a strong enough proposition. The aspects of the prototypes which had the most positive reception—such as the content of the letter of complaint, and the contextual “next steps”—were mostly unrelated to reporting.

Because of this, by the end of our prototyping, we settled on a service with a focus on the legal education angle (rather than reporting), and with a secondary goal of encouraging and supporting campaigning activities.

## Next steps

It's this third prototype—the “Action Guide”—that we recommend is taken forward for development, testing, and launch.

Here's a list of the key features the service should have, why they're important, and how their impact could be measured:

### Content driven by user needs

The content on the site should be clear, precise, and succinct. It might include:

- Guidance on how to use current legislation to your advantage
- Information about fire safety features you should check are in place
- Advice on how to escalate issues when your first attempt is unsuccessful
- Guidance on where to find affordable legal advice

We'll want to use careful content design to ensure the information is easy to navigate and understand, without being overwhelming. Where possible the content should summarise, and link out to other sources to provide extra depth. Attention will also need to be paid to how the content can remain navigable even on small screened devices.

The content shouldn't replicate existing resources like GOV.UK or Citizens Advice, but instead highlight the most useful key learnings, and link back to the source for more detailed reading if desired.

**Why this is important:** The service gains its value from bringing together and summarising more complex content from authoritative, trustworthy sources. Tenants need clear, easy to follow advice that's been written with their needs in mind, and this service has an opportunity to bring together a number of perspectives and viewpoints that the individual official sources cannot.

**How this could be measured:** Analytics tracking for time on page and bounce rate, and “Did this help you?” yes/no buttons for immediate feedback.

### Interactive step-by-step guides

With actionable next steps. We recommend starting with a set of two or three guides, one being based on Tower Blocks UK's existing Fire Safety Checklist.



**Why this is important:** By identifying a few core user journeys or user needs (eg: “checking my building’s fire safety features” or “what to do if my landlord doesn’t respond”) we can help tenants navigate a potentially complex decision tree, and present them with clear reports or next steps, to encourage further action.

**How this could be measured:** We’d recommend setting a goal for the number of step-by-step guides completed by visitors per month – for example, 2,000 completions would represent a completion from one in every 100 tower block households in the UK.

## Evidence of success

Case studies would be an excellent way to bring the content to life with real tenant experiences.

They would also allow the inclusion of more faces and organisations on the site, reinforcing the idea of this being a hub for the entire sector. There’s potential here for collaborations with other tenant groups, to co-author and cross-promote case study posts.

**Why this is important:** Where the official resources we link to might need to maintain their impartiality, this service would benefit from a more relatable, human stance. Tenants often have to find creative ways to bypass landlord inertia or lack of documentation – case studies are an opportunity to share some of those unexpected solutions.

**How this could be measured:** We’d recommend setting a goal for the number of new case studies per month, and a schedule to write them by. Progress can then be measured against the plan. Pageview and social sharing analytics can help identify the most popular topics for future case studies.

## Gathering data for the bigger picture

The site is also a way for Tower Blocks UK to gather anonymous information to assist their and their partners’ campaigning efforts. This could be managed through a “send us your answers” checkbox on the step-by-step guides, for example, or as a stand-alone “we want your input” form.

As mentioned earlier, in our analysis of writing to committees on People's Assembly, the site could also function as part of a wider information gathering campaign – having the dual benefit of both encouraging feedback on a particular topic, and promoting the existence of the site to a wider network of tenants.

**Why this is important:** Data on real life cases will help tenant support organisations focus their campaigning activities. Data could potentially also feed into government consultations on fire safety and housing rights. Offering the tool as a service for third parties to use, to help answer their own important questions, would also help build the network of supporters for the service, and the potential audience for the advice and step-by-step guides.

**How this could be measured:** Setting a target for how many responses should be received for a specific campaign (the number is likely to depend on the topic and intended audience for the campaign). Monitoring the proportion of step-by-step guide users who opt to submit their information (our experience from mySociety research surveys suggests a rate of one in 10 would be good). Another good outcome would be the ability to report that a campaign helped contribute to new legislation or a specific decision from a local authority – something we'll need to encourage tenants and/or third parties to tell us about.

In addition, concrete plans will need to be made on how to maintain the content on the site, and how to grow its audience and impact. We have some recommendations:

## Maintaining the site

Guides, informational content, and case studies should be updated over time. This unquestionably requires a plan be put in place to ensure the content is refreshed on a schedule.

Tower Blocks UK should be in an ideal position to update the content, in reaction to feedback from service users, their own work in the sector, and patterns they see emerging in the data collected from visitors.

We'll need to ensure that the site is physically easy for non-technical editors to manage and update, while still maintaining uniform styling and appearance across all pages.

## **Growing usage of the site**

Users of the site won't generate their own content, so the chance of viral growth is fairly low. Instead, the service will need to be proactively promoted to tenants, until its reputation can carry it forward. Marketing through search engine optimisation, and search/social media advertising should help here, as would developing relationships with tenant support organisations such as TRAs, Tenants Federations, law centres—and even national bodies like Shelter or Citizens Advice—as a route to encouraging them to share and recommend the service to their users. We should investigate Google's Charitable Adwords scheme here, as a potential route to reduced cost search advertising.

Where possible, including campaign tags in the URLs third parties use to link to the service would help identify the most active sources of incoming visitors.

As a minimum, we should be tracking the most popular content, and using that as direction for future updates.

# Appendix: User research methods

## Spectrum Lines

This user research activity is well suited to workshop settings, where you need to quickly gauge the spread of opinion on a number of topics, amongst a group of people.

Define a set of questions which will elicit responses on a scale, or statements with which respondents can agree/disagree on a scale. For example: “There is good, affordable guidance out there on how to use the law to your advantage as a resident.”

Draw a line, a few metres long, on the floor—or use an imaginary “line” between two objects, such as chairs or walls—and define one end as “strongly agree” and the other as “strongly disagree.” Then read each statement out loud, and ask the participants to position themselves along the line, in accordance with the agreement/disagreement.

Make a note of the general distribution of people along the line, and if there’s disagreement, probe further with one or two informal follow-up questions, to better understand the reasons for the participants’ choices.

Allocate about 3–4 minutes per question.

## I like / I wish / What if...

This user research activity is well suited to gathering constructive feedback on visual or physical prototypes, from small groups of participants.

Prepare a three column grid (using paper, a whiteboard, or sticky notes on a wall) for each group, with the column titles “I like”, “I wish”, and “What if...”.

Explain to the participants that the first column is for things they like about the prototypes, the second is for things they feel could be improved, and the final column is for more radical ideas about missing features or completely new takes on the problem.

Allow each group to try out the prototype, then facilitate them in filling in the columns. Encourage constructive language with terms like “Yes, and...?” and “What if...?”.

We’d recommend allocating at least 30 minutes for this activity – 15 minutes for trying out the prototypes, and 15 minutes for feedback.