

Can we fix it?

*Why you should use the **FixMyStreet Platform** to empower citizens and open up local government*

Version 1.1

By mySociety

What is the FixMyStreet Platform?

The FixMyStreet Platform is a free, open source software platform designed to power websites that make it easy for people to report problems in their local area.

In Britain we use the FixMyStreet Platform to power the FixMyStreet.com website, which has now sent over 200,000 reports to over 400 local governments. We want other people to be able to run such sites, easily.

What is this guide for?

We have written this guide to help explain **why** you might want to run a website using the FixMyStreet platform, and roughly **how** you would go about it.

Who is this document for?

You do not need to be a computer expert to read this document! We have written this guide for anyone who works or volunteers in the transparency, accountability and local community sectors in any country in the world.

More specifically, this document has been written for people who are excited by the idea of using the internet to encourage civic participation and transparency at the local level.

Who wrote it?

This guide was written by mySociety, the open source not-for-profit which built the FixMyStreet Platform.

Why did mySociety write this guide?

We wrote it because we believe the FixMyStreet Platform offers real value to people trying to make their local areas better. We want more people to take advantage of this software for their own needs, and to make the Platform better for other users in other countries.

The FixMyStreet Platform is free, and we are not trying to sell anyone anything.

Where can I find out more?

The FixMyStreet Platform homepage is code.FixMyStreet.com, and you can email us at team@fixmystreet.com

Acknowledgements

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Thanks to

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Key Terms

mySociety - the UK not-for-profit that maintains the FixMyStreet Platform

FixMyStreet.com - A website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform

The FixMyStreet Platform - The name of the software that makes FixMyStreet.com run, which is being continuously improved to make it easier to install around the world.

Part 1: Why we built The FixMyStreet Platform

About mySociety

mySociety is a British NGO that was set up by a group of politically knowledgeable computer experts. mySociety's mission is to help people become more powerful in the civic and democratic parts of their lives, through digital means.

Since 2004 we have launched various websites that made it easy to do tasks such as identifying which politician(s) represent you, writing to them about your concerns, and making requests under freedom of information laws.

In 2007 we launched FixMyStreet.com, which makes reporting street problems to the local government (e.g. broken street lights) really easy.

What is FixMyStreet.com?

FixMyStreet.com is an award winning, highly popular website that makes it easy to report street problems anywhere in Great Britain.

As well as making it easy to report problems, it makes public copies of the problems for other users to see, get alerts about, or comment on.

FixMyStreet.com is available as a desktop and mobile website, and mobile apps on various platforms.

Today, covering over 400 local authorities, FixMyStreet.com has sent over 200,000 reports. Those reports were the work of over 87,000 different people, 52% of whom had never before reported an issue to their local authority. It is this large group of 'first timers' who are mySociety's core focus.

What change was mySociety trying to create by building FixMyStreet.com?

All NGOs are in the business of creating change. To that end they often set themselves goals. When we started building FixMyStreet.com, our main goal was to make people more powerful.

However, this wasn't the only goal. In total, we had three:

- The first goal was to make it much easier to report problems to local governments in Britain, by removing the need to know who to write to. The kinds of problems it was targeted at are problems in public places - for example a blinking streetlamp, a worn-out stretch of road, a vandalised park bench or a misleading road sign.
- The second goal was to make these reports public, and (so far as possible) to make information on how they were being responded to by local governments public too. We wanted to do this to encourage better performance at fixing this kind of problem, as well as to give local

governments a chance to explain why some things were not going to get fixed.

- The third goal – they key goal for mySociety as an NGO – was about educating normal people into the idea that they can ask the local government to do things, and that often the government will do what they ask. As an democracy NGO, we believe there is great value in more citizens understanding that they have some ability to control what governments do, and that they are not just helpless people with no power.

We wanted to introduce people to the idea that reporting problems or things that could be improved in their local area was a legitimate – and positive – activity. We hoped that someone who had never engaged with government before might report a pothole through FixMyStreet.com, see how easy it was, and think to themselves, “If I can report potholes, maybe I can also speak up about the fact that my child’s teacher at school doesn’t appear to be doing their job properly”.

In short, we built FixMyStreet.com to **empower people** and build their capacity as citizens.

However, you do not have to have the exact same goals as us to find the FixMyStreet Platform helpful.

Your focus might be a bit different: it might be all about transparency and accountability. By making the problems people care about in a local area visible on the web, the FixMyStreet Platform promotes transparency, and helps hold local governments to account.

You might want to build your own version of FixMyStreet because you are a public servant who wants to make sure that their government is working properly. The FixMyStreet Platform can help reveal whether or not money that is being spent on street issues is being well spent, badly spent, and where it's being spent. It can show, ultimately, how efficient local government services are. The information FixMyStreet reveals is just as useful for elected representatives, like town mayors and local councillors, as it is for citizens.

Why mySociety built the FixMyStreet Platform

When we originally built FixMyStreet.com, we didn't make the software so it would be very easy to re-use in other countries. We didn't have much time or money, so it sat there free and open, but not easy to use.

In the last year, following a collaboration to launch FixMyStreet in Norway, we decided that it would be a really good thing if other people could launch their own websites like FixMyStreet.com without having to re-write all the computer code that we had already developed.

So we took the software code that powers FixMyStreet.com, and started to change and improve it so that it would be easy for other people to use in different countries, with different local government structures and different languages. We were helped by the Norwegian Unix Users Group who improved the code whilst installing it in that country.

The computer code that powers FixMyStreet.com is what we now call the FixMyStreet Platform.

It is a free, open source software package designed to make it as easy as possible for you to set up problem-reporting sites which work in ways similar to FixMyStreet.com.

Part 2: What is it like to use a website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform?

An example user journey for someone making a report using a website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform

It all starts with someone deciding that they need to report a problem or issue in their local area. Let's call this someone "Alice". One way or another, Alice finds her way to the website homepage, and this is what she sees:

Figure 1: The homepage of a website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform

Report a problem Your reports All reports Local alerts Help mysociety DONATE OUR SITES

FixMyStreet Hi Tom Steinberg SIGN OUT

Report, view, or discuss local problems
(like graffiti, fly tipping, broken paving slabs, or street lighting)

Enter a nearby GB postcode, or street name and area:

GO

... or locate me automatically

How to report a problem

- 1 Enter a nearby GB postcode, or street name and area
- 2 Locate the problem on a map of the area
- 3 Enter details of the problem
- 4 We send it to the council on your behalf

1,599 reports in past week

2,569 fixed in past month

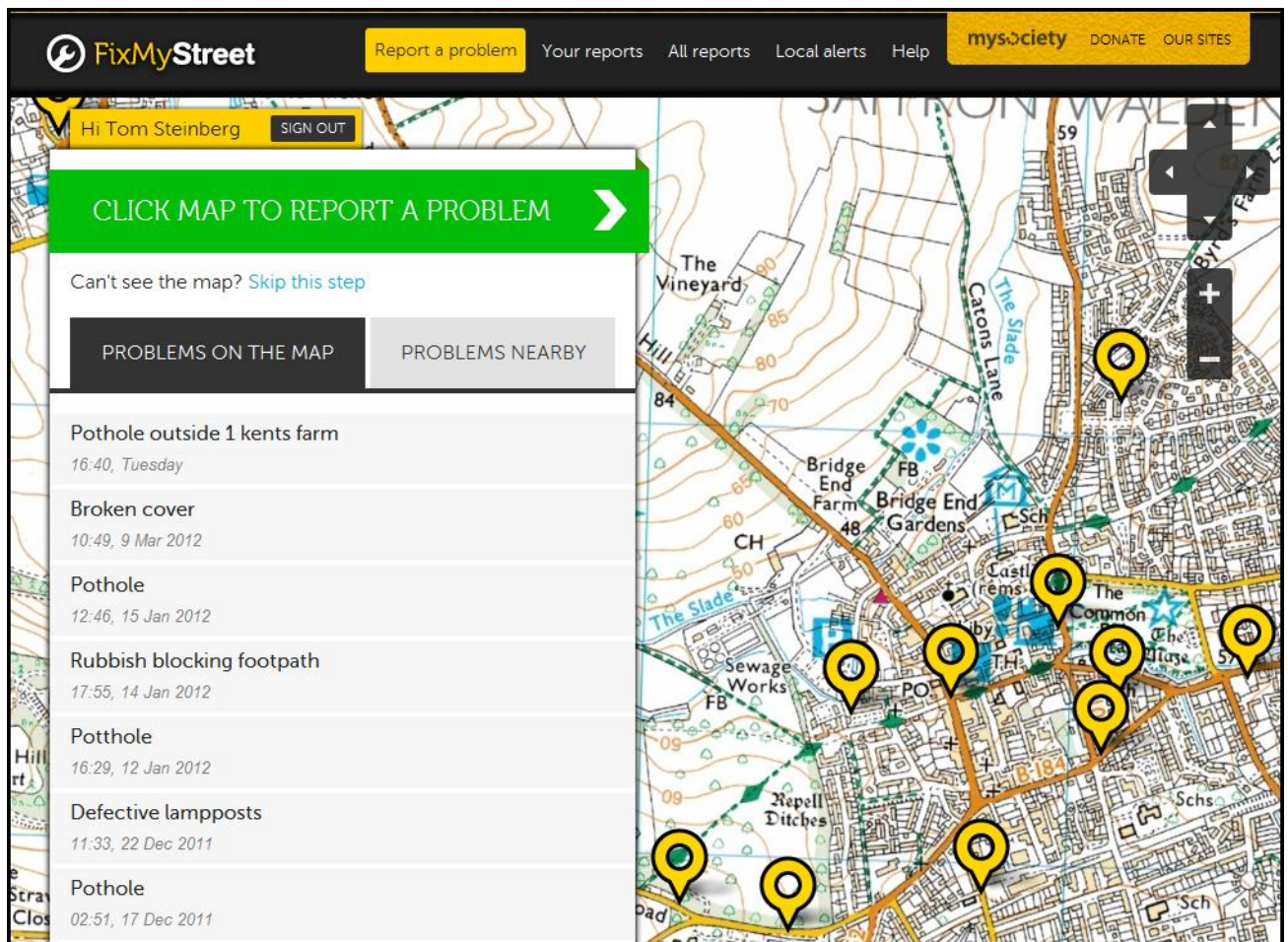
188,557 updates on reports

Recently reported problems

- Flytipping of bedside table
19:21 today
- Communal Bins and Recycling AGAIN
19:07 today
- Flytipping of mattress
19:06 today
- Road Signs vandalised
18:14 today
- Pot hole big
17:19 today

On this page: Alice enters the name of the town where she lives, "Saffron Walden", in the search box in the centre of the page, and the site returns a list of reports made about Saffron Walden, together with a map.

Figure 2: A website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform, showing the results page for a search for “Saffron Walden”



On this page: Alice wants to report some sacks of rubbish that have been dumped on the common. She checks down the list of reports, to see if someone has already reported the problem. When she is happy that nobody has reported the problem yet, she enlarges the map slightly, then clicks on the area of the common where the rubbish has been abandoned. The site returns this page:

Figure 3: A website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform showing the problem reporting page

Reporting a problem

All the information you provide here will be sent to Uttlesford District Council or Essex County Council. The subject and details of the problem will be public, plus your name if you give us permission.

Subject

Details

Category:

Photo

No file chosen

Your email

Now to submit your report...

You have located the problem at the point marked with a green pin on the map. If this is not the correct location, simply click on the map again.

The council won't be able to help unless you leave as much detail as you can. Please describe the exact location of the problem (e.g. on a wall), what it is, how long it has been there, a description (and a photo of the problem if you have one), etc.

Please note:

We will only use your personal information in accordance with our [privacy policy](#).

Please be polite, concise and to the point.

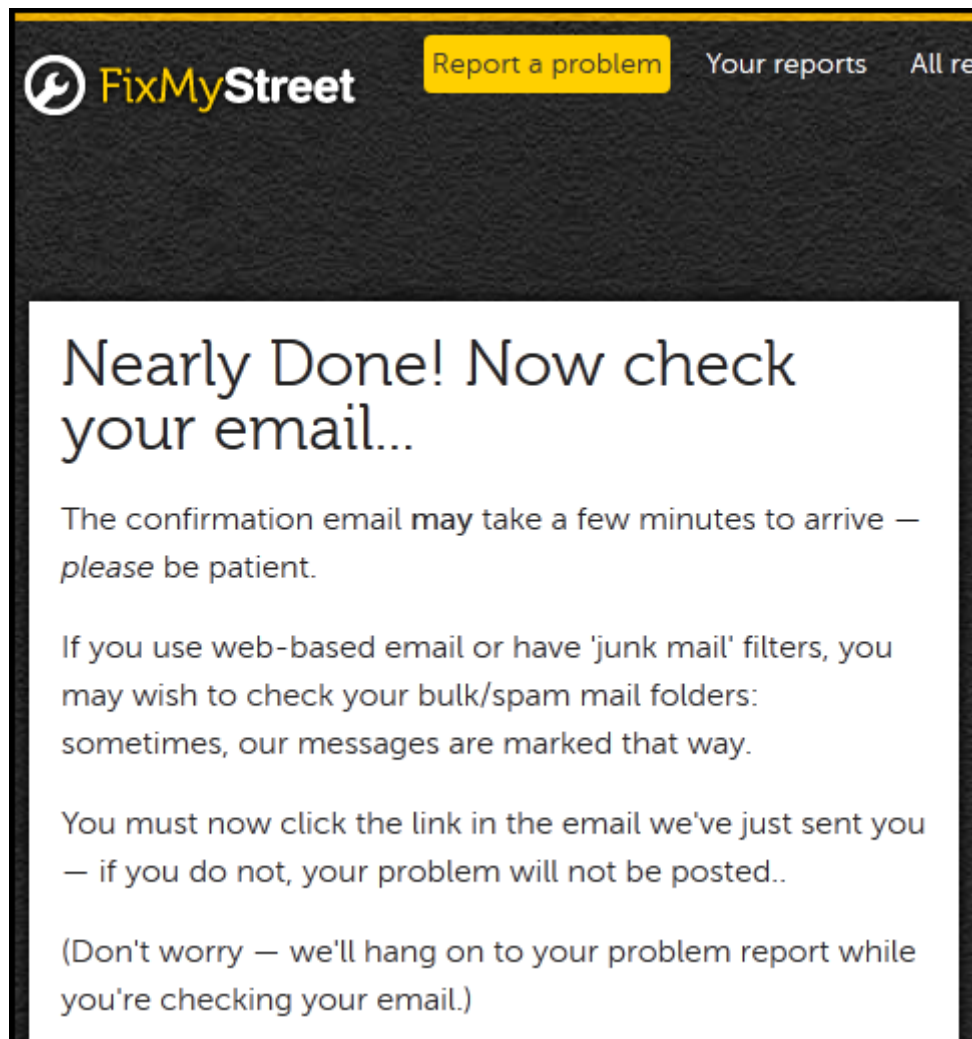
Please do not be abusive — abusing your council devalues the service for all users.

Writing your message entirely in block capitals makes it hard to read, as does a lack of punctuation.

Remember that FixMyStreet is primarily for reporting physical problems that can be fixed. If your problem is not appropriate for submission via this site remember that you can contact your council directly using their own website.

On this page: Alice fills in the details of her report, choosing a category (in this case “fly-tipping”), and providing her email address. She has the option to upload a photograph of the problem, and to specify a password so that she can create a user account that will allow her to report problems more quickly in the future, but she chooses neither of these options. She clicks on the submit button, and the following screen is displayed:

Figure 4: A website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform, asking the user to check their email in order to complete the reporting process



On this page: Alice checks her email, clicks the link, and the report is both sent to the local council, and posted on FixMyStreet for other users to see.

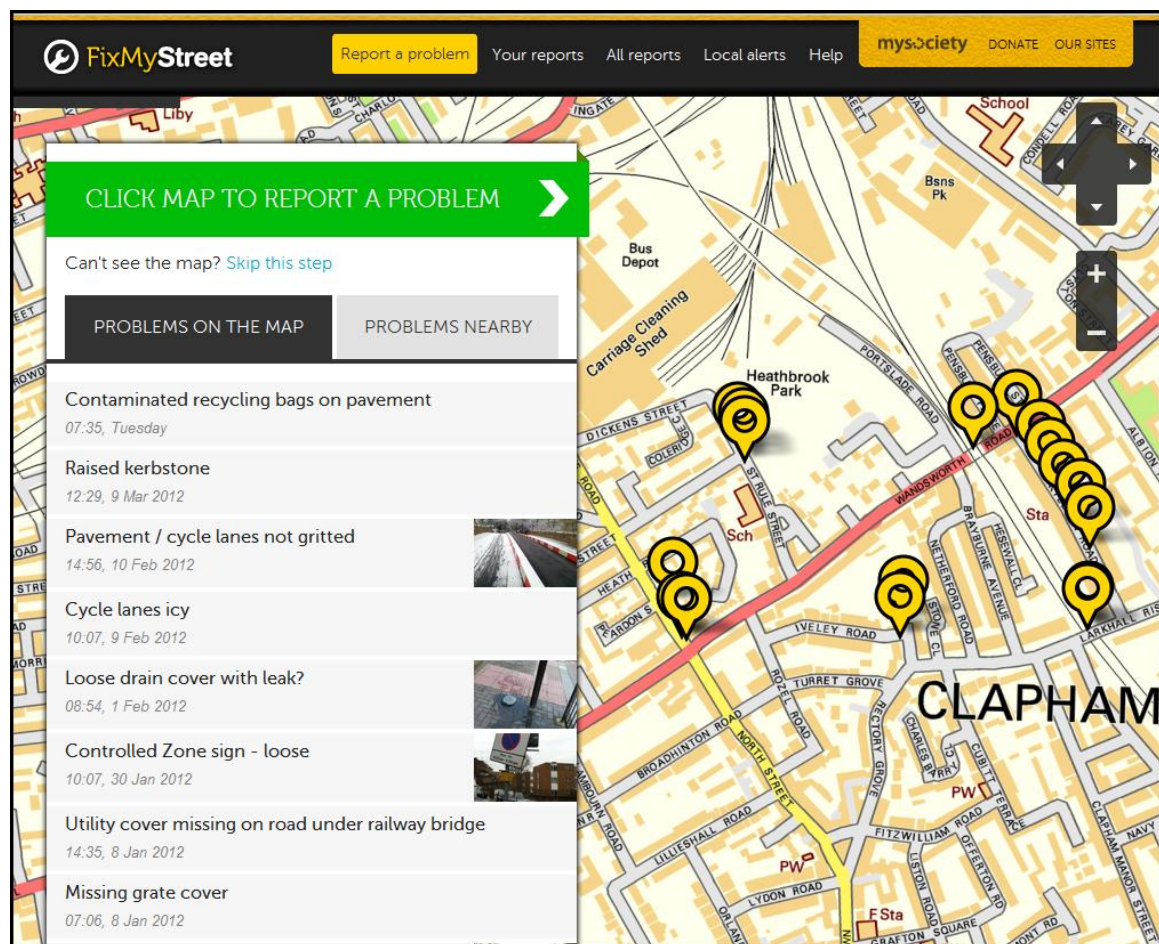
The user journey of someone using the site to discover problems that have been reported in their local area

Many people visit FixMyStreet not to report problems, but to see reports made by other people.

For example, a local politician might like to inspect the problems that have been reported in the area he represents, to see if there are any interesting patterns. Let's call this local politician "Bob".

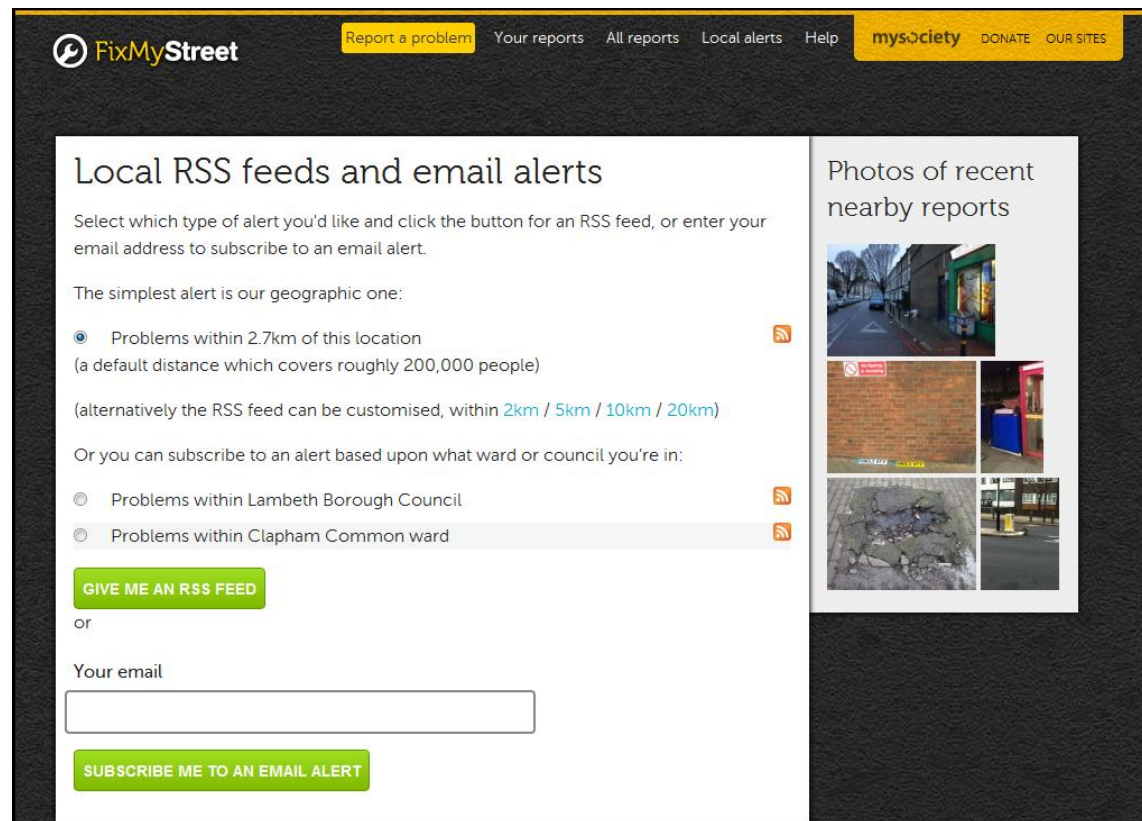
Bob goes to the website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform, and puts in the name of the local area which he represents, in this case "Clapham". He is presented with the following screen:

Figure 5: A website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform, showing a search return for "Clapham"



On this page: Bob looks at the list of reports, and sees that there seems to be a pattern of reports down one street. By clicking on the pins he discovers a particular problem in that area. However, these are historical problems, and Bob wants to know about new developments. To track these, he clicks 'Local Alerts':

Figure 6: A website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform, inviting the user to subscribe to alerts about problems reported in their local area



On this page: Here Bob is given various different options for subscribing to local alerts. Since Bob is the councillor for Clapham Common Ward, he chooses to be informed of all problems reported within the boundary of this area. In this case he opts to be subscribed to an email alert, by entering his email address in the box.

Bob is then sent an email that asks him to confirm that he wishes to receive email alerts. He clicks on the link and is taken to a webpage that tells him he has successfully confirmed his alert. Now Bob just waits, and every time there is a new problem within the area he represents, an email is sent directly to him.

Part 3: Seven Reasons why you should consider using the FixMyStreet Platform, instead of building a similar site from scratch

The main reason you should use the FixMyStreet Platform is because, fundamentally, the website you'll get at the end will almost certainly be much better quality than if you don't.

Why does that matter? It matters because bad quality websites like this don't get used: users dislike them and they fade away to nothing. And that means that the time and effort you put in will be wasted for no good reason.

This is not just marketing talk - we have seen people build bad copies of FixMyStreet in many countries, and they almost always fail. **This makes us sad and we want to see more people succeed.**

If you do use the FixMyStreet Platform as the basis for your own site you have a greatly improved chance of launching a service which will work, and which people will want to use.

Saving Money

It is much less expensive to modify the FixMyStreet Platform to do what you want than it is to write such a site from scratch. We estimate that replicating all the current functionality in the FixMyStreet Platform would cost around \$100,000US. By using the free FixMyStreet Platform code you can get your site running for a fraction of this cost.

Saving Time

A basic version of the FixMyStreet Platform can be installed in just a couple of days, and a good one, including a translation into your local language, can be done in a few weeks.

Rewriting a website like this from scratch will take you many months, and introduces the risk that the site may fail before it is launched.

Help & Community

mySociety is here to help you make use of the FixMyStreet Platform, and our community is growing all the time. We are continually working to make the FixMyStreet platform easier to use, better documented and more fully featured. As our software improves, your site using our software improves too.

The people who are developing, documenting and supporting the FixMyStreet Platform include people who were involved in building the initial website at FixMyStreet.com, as well as people who are in exactly the same position you'll be in - having installed the FixMyStreet Platform themselves and now running new problem-reporting websites. It is a friendly, knowledgeable group and new members are warmly welcomed.

FixMyStreet Actually Sends Problems To Governments

The most common mistake we see when people try and make websites like FixMyStreet.com without using the FixMyStreet Platform, is that they assume they don't need to email the problems people report directly to the authorities who can fix them. They assume that putting the reports on the web is enough for them to get fixed. We have two things to say about this:

- 1. Putting the problems on the web is not enough.**
- 2. It's not enough to just put the problems on the web.**

This is worth saying twice, not just because it is a common mistake, but because it is a common mistake that completely undermines one of the core goals of websites built to report local problems to local authorities. If you don't email a problem a user has reported directly to the authority that can fix it, it is virtually certain that the problem will not get fixed. And when the problem does not get fixed, the user will be disheartened and disempowered. And it will be your fault.

If you are intending to build a website that asks people to report things purely for your own analysis, and you have no interest in sending problems to anyone in government, you should almost certainly use **Ushahidi**. **Ushahidi** is designed for this purpose, **is really polished** and **is really easy to install**. Check it out at Ushahidi.com

Increased Reliability

You should use the FixMyStreet Platform because it is proven to work. Using the FixMyStreet Platform dramatically increases the chance of a successful launch.

The FixMyStreet Platform can cope with large volumes of users and reports. FixMyStreet.com has processed over 200,000 reports and is working well. We have put a lot of time and effort into fixing bugs so that you don't have to.

Many Languages

You can run the FixMyStreet Platform in your language very simply. We have already implemented a technology that means translating the wording on the site is as easy as typing translated sentences into a web browser.

Other People are Using the FixMyStreet Platform Too

Whilst FixMyStreet.com has been around since 2007, the easy-to-use FixMyStreet Platform is much newer. As a consequence there are not many instances running yet, however there are already:

- FixMyStreet.com – Covering Great Britain
- FiksGataMi.no - Covering Norway
- Soon – an SMS-based site based on the FixMyStreet platform being rolled out in the Philippines

- Soon – FixMyStreet for Ireland

We hope we will add your site to this list soon!

The alternative – doing it all yourself

If, for whatever reason, you decide not to power your new problem-reporting website using the FixMyStreet Platform you will need to make sure you have access to and skills over a variety of different components. At the very least you are likely to need to develop your own:

- mapping solution, helping users find just the right spot where they want to report a problem;
- email publishing solution, pushing emails received from local authorities onto the public site;
- alerting infrastructure, for email and RSS;
- administration interface;
- administrative boundary-handling software.

Part 4: How the FixMyStreet Platform can be customised to work in very diverse countries

Inevitably, governments in some countries and regions are not all equally good (or bad) at handling problem reports.

Even if your local government doesn't often fix problems, or doesn't regularly fix problems, or **never ever fixes problems**, a website built on the FixMyStreet Platform can **still be useful**:

- to make it obvious where government is failing; or
- as a social tool to try and help gather local people around problems so they can fix them themselves.

The willingness of governments to fix problems is not the only difference between countries - there are many and they are very significant:

- governments can have no administrative boundaries system, making it hard to tell where a problem is being reported
- governments can have strange or complicated responsibilities where unusual people are responsible for unusual things in unusual ways
- governments might require problems to be reported on paper or face to face, and not via email
- people in your country might not have regular access to the web

We are building and improving the FixMyStreet Platform so that it can handle as many of these situations as possible, but we will only truly succeed at this if we work with people in very diverse environments.

We believe that the core FixMyStreet Platform can handle any different kinds of boundary systems, or government systems where some or all types of problems are handled by one authority across an entire country. We know that it can be adapted for governments that require reports to be submitted on paper, it we know that it can be adapted to be entirely driven by SMS (text messages).

In short, the FixMyStreet Platform can help in incredibly diverse countries, languages, cultures and situations. But we need your help to tune the system to adapt to your needs. Modifications to the FixMyStreet Platform can be made by anyone with the right skills, not just mySociety.

At mySociety we are very keen to see all the features above added to the FixMyStreet Platform, and as well as being willing to put in our own time and money to do this, we would love for some of them to be added by people or organisations outside of mySociety. If you can think of a feature that the FixMyStreet Platform doesn't have, please come and talk to us about what it would take to get it added.

In summary: it will almost always be easier to adapt the FixMyStreet Platform to your local environment than to write a new site from scratch.

Part 5: What you will need to launch and maintain a website based on the FixMyStreet Platform

mySociety is doing everything we can to reduce the amount of time, money and skill you will need to run a site like FixMyStreet.com.

However, despite our best efforts, there are some problems that just can't be solved through clever computer programs. FixMyStreet.com is a democratic and political tool, and like most impactful projects it requires time, energy and sometimes money to make it thrive. This chapter is a summary of what you will need and why.

You will need a good understanding of what the FixMyStreet Platform is and isn't

Websites powered by the FixMyStreet Platform are a genuinely new kind of service. They aren't the exact equivalent of a book or a newspaper or a campaign put onto the internet. They are something powerful, but different, from equivalent civic engagement projects in the offline world.

As a consequence of these differences, it is very important for you to have a deep understanding of how or why websites built on the FixMyStreet Platform are different from more familiar things, like newspapers or campaigns. If you lack this understanding, it becomes quite likely that you will not be able to make a success of your new site.

Joining our mailing list at code.fixmystreet.com is a good way of meeting people who you can talk to about what FixMyStreet is and isn't.

You will need a project manager

Whilst initial installation of the FixMyStreet Platform can be quite quick, there is a lot to do to make your site as successful as FixMyStreet.com. And the tasks that need doing are quite diverse.

To ensure that all these tasks get done there needs to be one person who "owns" the entire process of making the site a success, and who is good at gathering together diverse resources like money, computer programmers, media contacts and so on. **If you're reading this guide, there's a high chance this person is you.**

You will need a computer programmer

Even if you wisely opt to install the FixMyStreet Platform and use it to run your website, you'll probably want to customise the way it looks, and you'll almost certainly need to change some details that relate to the way responsibilities for

different problems are divided up among your country's local authorities and government agencies.

You must at the very least have access to a technically-adept person or people in order to get your site up and running, and to keep it going on a from-time-to-time basis. Ideally you would employ someone full time as long as you intend to run the project.

You will need a computer to run it on (server)

You'll also need an internet connected computer (a server) on which to install and host the FixMyStreet Platform code. In the short-to-medium term, until your site gets big enough, mySociety can provide hosting for free.

You will need volunteers, or funding for a dedicated support team

Once the website has been built and launched, you'll need to offer some degree of support, in order to answer people's questions about how the site works and remove abuse when it happens. The more popular your service becomes the more intensive this workload becomes. FixMyStreet.com suffers remarkably low levels of abuse – in part because of some subtle but effective technical decisions we have made, for example in limiting users' ability to search across whole countries or types of reports. But abuse can and does happen, and you will need people helping you watch out for it and respond to it.

mySociety has an active volunteer community of several very dedicated individuals. Imitators in other countries will either need to nurture such a community, or be willing to pay for dedicated staff employed on an ongoing basis.

You will need access to the internet

If you do not have easy access to the internet, or if your key volunteers or staff do not have it, it will be difficult to make a success of the site.

Your intended users will also need high levels of desktop or mobile phone internet access in order to make the website a success. If citizens in your country do not have high levels of access to the internet, you should consider adapting the FixMyStreet Platform to be powered by SMS, as mySociety is doing in the Philippines.

You will need publicity

If people don't know about your service, they won't come to it.

You will need a plan for telling people about the site, and getting them to have a go.

What forms of publicity are likely to work in your context is not something mySociety can help you with – you will need local knowledge and skills in publicity and marketing.

You will need to look after the site on an ongoing basis

A website like FixMyStreet.com requires regular attention to ensure that it thrives and survives.

Too many organisations make the fatal mistake of believing that a website like FixMyStreet.com can be launched like a pamphlet – a press release, a lot of noise, and then move onto the next thing.

Running a website powered by the FixMyStreet Platform is more like setting up a whole new organisation – one that delivers services day in, day out, 365 days a year.

In order for your website to be a success, you need to think about questions like “Who will be running it in five years’ time?” and “Will anyone be able to fix it next year if there is a problem?”

Part 6: Interested? We're here to help

If you are even slightly interested in the FixMyStreet Platform, or if you have any questions about it, we're here to help you.

The FixMyStreet Platform has a small, friendly community, and we are keen to talk to new people who are interested in the project.

If you have any immediate questions, please ask us by mailing hello@mysociety.org or tweet us at @fixmystreet

If you want to read more about the project, visit <http://code.fixmystreet.com> . On that webpage you can also join a mailing list where you can talk with other people who are interested in running FixMyStreet in their countries.

Appendix: FixMyStreet Platform Features List

FixMyStreet Platform Features List:

- FixMyStreet is Open311 compatible, and can send problems to governments via email or via Open311 messages.
- The user types in the name of a place (an address, postcode, or just the name of a town) into a search box, and the website shows them the place on a map.
- The user can look at the area and view reports left by other people.
- The user can leave comments and updates on other people's reports if they also care about the problem, know something more about it, or if something about the problem has changed.
- The user can subscribe to receive email or RSS updates on other people's reports, to find out if something happens about it.
- If the user has her own report to make, she can stick a pin on the map, and start typing. Once completed, the report is automatically emailed to the authority whose job it is to deal with the issue being reported, without the user needing to know who this is.
- The user can also upload photographs to support the report she is making.
- The user can access the website and make a report using her mobile phone, meaning if she spots a problem while she's out and about, she can report it there and then.
- Just as with other people's reports, the user can subscribe to receive email or RSS updates, to find out if something happens about the report she has made.
- If she wishes, the user can ask that her name not appear on the public record of the report.
- Users can opt to receive email or RSS updates every time someone submits a report within a given local authority area, postcode, or within a given radius of a point they specify on the map.
- People can use the site to make reports on an ad-hoc basis, or they can choose to create a user account, helping them view and manage the reports they're interested in.
- At the backend of the website (the bit that you control) you can adjust the categories of reports users can make for individual authorities, depending on how that authority handles different types of issues.

You can also produce graphs and reports showing the rate of reports, where they are, how many are yet to elicit a response from the appropriate authority and how many are reported as fixed.