

The London Borough of Barnet and FixMyStreet for Councils



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Creating community

The London Borough of Barnet replaced online street issue reporting forms with FixMyStreet software on [their website](#) in January 2010. Our experience with Barnet and several other

*councils has led to creation of [FixMyStreet for Councils](#), a tailored service designed for local authority websites. We interviewed **Chris Palmer**, the council's Assistant Director of Communications, who is responsible for online engagement, about Barnet's experiences with FixMyStreet, and how it fits with the council's web strategy.*

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Barnet is a forward-looking council when it comes to using the web to engage people and help them interact with the council. What have been your key goals in this area?

Our general aim is to get the council out of people's way, to give people direct access to services. We don't want residents to feel like they have to go through a complex council process in order to get anything done – so removing process from the equation as much as removing council from the equation is our goal with online.

One of our challenges, as with many other councils, is that technology moves so quickly. Nowadays people expect great, highly-usable web tools as they get this in other sectors – so we need to look at how we continually refresh that relationship with our residents.

What were you looking to achieve with FixMyStreet – and have you been successful?

Rather than putting you through a “customer service process”, FixMyStreet gives you a clear idea of what’s happening, allows you to contact your council from standing in the middle of the street with your phone, and gets you a quick response.

It has worked incredibly well. We launched at a time when a lot of people were worried about the state of the roads. So FixMyStreet was an excellent tool to allow people to feel like they were taking part, rather than just grumbling that there’s a pothole and the council hasn’t filled it. So it’s making people slightly more active citizens rather than passive grumblers. And that’s very important and quite empowering for people.

Why did you choose to have a map-based solution, as opposed to forms which are the more traditional approach to reporting?

For us, there's two things, and one goes back to how we've worked with mySociety. FixMyStreet's ease and mobility was a real seller for us.

The fact that somebody contacts their council while standing in the street is very important to us. Residents appreciate that it's the council who comes and fills the pothole, but they don't necessarily want to know the details of the process. So the more we can strip out that process and get them straight to the issue, the better.

What was the impact of FixMyStreet on the council's engagement with residents?

I suspect that if you look at the figures, there hasn't been a huge increase, because most of our online contact is about where schools are, standard things you'd expect.

But what it has done is make the council far more open and transparent and more responsive. Generally, people's perception of the council is that stuff goes in and you never hear again. At

the same time the council never hears back either once we've fixed the problem. FixMyStreet enables the reporter to go back, and to say 'that's sorted; we're done'.

We get Facebook comments, we get tweets saying 'I reported flytipping to Barnet Council - that mattress was gone the following day'. And that kind of stuff is gratifying.

This sort of transparency is relatively new in local government. What was your experience with FixMyStreet?

We welcome transparency and here it has been entirely positive. I haven't seen any particular grumbling around FixMyStreet itself. Grumbles tend to come through other media. FixMyStreet appears to be a medium for reporting rather than complaining, and that's what we've found such a positive experience about it.



Before now, we've tended to regard almost any contact as a complaint – say somebody's rung the council up and reported that a lightbulb in a streetlight isn't working. In fact, it's an entirely positive relationship with a resident. A resident has seen something in the street isn't working, they inform the council and we'll go and fix it. So I think it rather changes our relationship with residents – it makes

them our eyes and ears on the ground .

More recently Barnet took the next step and created a direct link with the council's CRM and FixMyStreet. What was the idea behind that?

The council has invested in an infrastructure – we're interested in seeing if we can move to a service where not only does somebody report something, but we can tell them the processes of being fixed.

So in an ideal world we could tell somebody "Thank you for reporting this" – "It'll be fixed tomorrow" – "It's now been fixed".

We're still some way off that, but it's that move to a greater transparency. I'm a great believer that in communications, just telling somebody what's going to happen next, is very important to building a good relationship with the resident.

How was mySociety as a partner to work with?

Challenging, but in a good way. The strength of mySociety is that you bring new ideas and approaches. mySociety did a review of some of the old screens we had in customer services, where the information we were presenting on screens to the people answering the phones was over complex, and mySociety helped us to strip out that complexity.

Another lesson from the work we've done with mySociety has been about the importance of making the information that we and our public sector partners hold more easily available to the community.

It's a very different relationship from most of our suppliers, in that there isn't a product in a box. Because of the nature of the things we've done, it's been quite testing – you've pushed us in one way, we've pushed you another way – we've worked together – which is both the opportunity and the pain of innovation.

That's a good thing in terms of the people we've worked with in mySociety – we've had an incredibly positive relationship.

▣ If you'd like to find out more about FixMyStreet for Councils, [drop us a line](#) or [read more](#).

[IMAGE CREDITS: FIXING UP THE NETWORK BY FABIO; PAALTJE IS KAPOT BY PIM GEERTS \(CC\)](#)