# FixMyStreet! Making citizens' digital participation work for a better Brussels

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# Key messages

**1** The FixMyStreet platform allows citizens in the Brussels region to digitally report incidents of urban disorder and minor offences in public space. Its integration within regional and municipal authorities engages citizens to make a positive contribution to their urban environment. Yet its introduction and adaptation brought forth several unintended social and political consequences.

**2** Municipal and regional work processes have yet to fully adjust to such direct, digital, and transparent reporting channels. There is a need for further training and consolidation of local authorities' responses to digital reporting. The way the platform is currently presented and used can create unrealistic expectations among citizens, municipal personnel, and policymakers alike, while inadvertently increasing inequality between citizens.

**3** FixMyStreet is not a policing platform, and its objective should not be to elicit reports on potential offenders. Regional and municipal authorities should be careful about opening spaces for vigilantism, lateral surveillance, and discriminatory action and they should inform citizens of the (lack of) admissibility of evidence on offences submitted on FixMyStreet.

**4** The FixMyStreet platform cannot replace other organizational and participatory platforms, digital or not, in the Brussels region. Fix My Street is not a suitable data warehousing tool for consolidating data on the urban environment and designing adequate and informed policies.

**5** Open Municipal Data is a key tool in promoting citizens' participation in building, safeguarding, and improving their own urban environment. However, more effort is needed to ensure that this data is as complete, accurate, timely, and transparent as possible. Adequate privacy protections, with dedicated automated screening and staffed personnel, are essential to increase trust in FixMyStreet and reduce social harm.

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# Introduction

New digital technologies transform the relations between citizens and their local authorities. Since 2013, municipal and regional authorities in the Brussels city region have used the FixMyStreet mobile and web application to prompt citizens to report incidents of urban disorder and minor offences in urban public space. Yet the adoption of FixMyStreet is not devoid of social and political implications. Together with our municipal partners, our mixed-methods approach delves into these implications.

The PUL-MOBIL research project explores the transformations to the work of municipal and regional authorities following the introduction of FixMyStreet. These include the work of prevention services, infrastructure maintenance, the growing data-led policymaking in setting municipal priorities and allocating budgets, the expectations of citizens, and the possibilities offered by open municipal data. Our research makes both a scientific contribution to discussions on (urban) governance in the digital age, and an applied contribution towards finding solutions to the pressing needs of local authorities confronted with a mismatch between the demands of citizens and their own capacities.

# Methods, approaches and results/body

Our research addresses the expectations, underlying assumptions, practices, and future outlooks that underpin the introduction and development of the FixMyStreet applications in the Brussels Region as part of a wider move towards digitalisation, smart city technologies and citizens' e-participation. We employed a mixed methods approach, combining a quantitative analysis of FixMyStreet reports from the open dataset with an in-depth qualitative, ethnographic research within the municipal services at a large and heterogenous municipality in the Brussels region. We also included a small-scale survey of citizens/users of municipal digital reporting channels.

As criminologists and urban scholars, our focus is on the role of FixMyStreet in shaping citizens' involvement and local authorities' interventions in tackling incidents of urban disorder and minor offences in public space. Our results highlight the myriad social, political, and organisational unexpected consequences to the introduction and growth of FixMyStreet, and the imperative need to address these when designing future municipal and regional policies.

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# Conclusions

Our findings highlight how FixMyStreet contributes to engaging citizens in digital reporting on urban disorder and minor offences, but also on the significant limitations to how FixMyStreet was adopted by local authorities in the Brussels region. There are major discrepancies between municipalities and between different services in how they (timely) handle incidents, in how they provide accurate feedback to citizens, in how they maintain the FixMyStreet dataset, and in how they integrate FixMyStreet in existing internal procedures. These discrepancies, together with the operational limitations of the FixMyStreet applications, make FixMyStreet not a viable solution for centralized municipal and regional data warehousing in the Brussels region.

FixMyStreet is used differently by different citizens. Some citizens are more inclined to report incidents than others, primarily due to differentiation in digital literacy, socio-economic conditions and expectations. This limits the usability of FixMyStreet in designing technical interventions and developing policy. There is also a sizeable number of citizens who report not only on what is wrong in the city, but on who did something wrong in the city. This can prompt undesired surveillance and a decrease of social cohesion. There is a need for clearer and more robust guidelines and protocols for municipal officers and citizens alike when eliciting, authoring, and handling FixMyStreet reports.

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# Policy recommendations

**1.  Reform the municipal work process in handling FixMyStreet reports to increase efficiency and reliability.**

Currently, residents' reports on FixMyStreet often reach the relevant service with significant delays, and many citizens do not receive accurate or timely information on the action taken following their report. We suggest that a reform of the municipal work process, in consultation with the relevant municipal personnel, is more urgent than ever. We recommend that incoming reports should go directly to a trained contact person at the relevant municipal service, rather than be filtered by a centralised dispatcher. Citizens should always receive feedback on their reports directly from the relevant service, even when no intervention was carried out. When submitting reports in certain categories (cf. potholes), FixMyStreet users should be made aware that their report will be taken into account, rather than necessarily handled, in order to moderate their expectations. To improve the quality of citizens' reports, an online tutorial or guide on best practices in digital reporting should be offered to the users. No new reporting categories should be added to FixMyStreet without a detailed vetting process that evaluates the need for each category and without having identified which exact team will design adequate interventions and provide timely feedback.

**2.  FixMyStreet should not be used as a policing tool.**

All FixMyStreet reports should focus on what is wrong, not on who did something wrong. Currently, numerous reports on FixMyStreet promote vigilantism or lateral surveillance. This poses a risk to social cohesion, the safety and privacy of some citizens, and opens a path for potential discriminatory action. Citizens should be made aware that FixMyStreet reports do not lead directly to punitive measures, and that the FixMyStreet reports do not constitute admissible evidence for policing or legal action. Suppression or inspection services should receive only anonymised and aggregated information on reports from FixMyStreet, rather than individual reports. Local authorities should instead encourage the use of FixMyStreet in solidarity initiatives, such as participatory mapping exercises of local concerns.

**3.  Acknowledge the limitations of FixMyStreet and its data when designing policy.**

FixMyStreet elicits reports from a limited number of citizens, often from those from specific demographics, with sufficient digital literacy skills, and at times with specific interests in their reporting. Many neighbourhoods blighted by incidents of urban disorder and minor offences receive little to no reports while other areas are over-represented. If local authorities accept the FixMyStreet dataset as an accurate representation of the condition of the urban environment, they risk making uninformed decisions that favour some citizens on the expense of others. To improve the legibility of the city, and to promote a fair distribution of rights and resources between citizens, local authorities should acknowledge the partiality of reports (and their aggregated data). Other reporting channels should continue to exist and be consulted, together with an extended

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# Policy recommendations

number of other, non-digital, forums for citizens' participation.

**4.  Make privacy a central element of FixMyStreet to increase trust and minimize social harm.**

Integral to this approach is the implementation of robust privacy protection measures within FixMyStreet itself. This should include automated screening of private information (images uploaded to the platform by users may include faces of individuals or photos of license plates, or other personal information in text or graphic form). Techniques such as anonymisation of data and encryption are essential to ensure that personal information is shielded, especially in situations where the identity of individuals is not crucial to the public safety issue being reported. This technical safeguard is a cornerstone in maintaining users' trust in the platform. All collected data should be handled in compliance with privacy regulations and stored securely to prevent unauthorised access. This includes defining how long data is retained and accessible. Additionally, there should be guidelines for who can access the data under what circumstances, also ensuring transparency in how the data is used for policy making.

**5.  FixMyStreet, a tool beset by technical and operational limitations, is not an appropriate data warehousing solution for the Brussels region.**

As such, it should not be used to organise all information on the urban environment, not even in an ad-hoc manner. We recommend developing a more sophisticated, designated system. This system should be capable of handling complex data, offer specialized interfaces, and provide robust privacy and confidentiality protections. In an urban context, the development of more sophisticated data warehousing solutions, particularly leveraging cloud and open data technologies, is a crucial step towards enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of city management and urban planning. Data warehousing needs to facilitate open data initiatives. Currently, datastore.brussels offers limited solutions for citizens to engage with Brussels' open data, as it often requires technological skills to interact with APIs or quite specific data sources. Making this data more accessible to citizens (for example, by adopting the Open311 standards) can significantly enhance transparency and public engagement. Furthermore, data warehousing should foresee robust privacy and confidentiality protection - in dealing with sensitive urban data, it is crucial to embed strong privacy and security measures within the system. This involves encrypting data, ensuring compliance with data protection regulations, and implementing strict access controls to prevent unauthorised data access or breaches.

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# **Policy recommendations**

It is of vital importance to address the interoperability of data - the system should be designed to integrate data from various municipal departments and external sources, ensuring interoperability. This comprehensive integration allows for a holistic view of urban challenges, facilitating coordinated and effective responses across different municipal services. Lastly, data warehousing is never complete - the data warehousing solution should be designed for continuous improvement, incorporating feedback from all stakeholders and evolving in response to technological advancements and changing urban needs.

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# List of publications

**Volinz, L. (2024)** *The municipal legal order in a digital world: Tackling minor offences and shaping law enforcement policies through a municipal app in Brussels.* Legal Pluralism and Critical Social Analysis. Online first. DOI 10.1080/27706869.2024.2310364.

**Steenhout, I., Volinz, L., Beyens, K., & Melgaço, L. (2023).** *The long road to Municipality 2.0: Mobile city apps as catalyst for change?* Social Science Computer Review. Online first. DOI 10.1177/08944393231184533.

**Steenhout, I., & Volinz, L. (2022).** *Towards transparent municipal open data: Risks, illusions and opportunities in a growing field.* Paper in Conference Proceedings at STS Graz Conference 2022. STS Graz.

**Volinz, L., Steenhout, I., Beyens, K., & Melgaço, L. (2021).** *FixMyStreet! Een criminologisch-theoretisch perspectief op de afhandeling van overlast via mobiele applicaties.* Panopticon, 42(6), 527.

**Volinz, L. (2021).** *Technical solutions to social problems: On digital participatory surveillance and the threat of the homeless.* Criminological Encounters, 4(1), 217-222. DOI 10.26395/CE21040118.

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Prospective
research

Through the Prospective Research program, the Brussels-Capital Region is hoping to fund research projects from a dual perspective: to provide a solid regional prospective vision; to build solutions to

the specific challenges it will face in the years to come. The solutions proposed by the funded projects must take into account Brussels' urban complexity as well as the Region's environmental, social and economic transition objectives. The program targets researchers in human science as much as researchers in exact or applied science

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