

GOING TO THE DOGS?

POTHOLES AND DOG FOULING

Can relying on citizen reports make neighbourhoods worse?

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Complaints about dog-fouling and potholes on the road are well-known to make up a large chunk of the postbag of local councils and local elected representatives. There are even social media accounts - notably 'Angry People in Local Newspapers' - devoted to gently mocking these irate residents.



Managers and elected representatives may, anecdotally, be aware that they get more of these requests from some residents than others, but there has been surprisingly little research into these patterns. Researchers from mySociety, a British social enterprise, research consultancy Automatic Knowledge, the University of Stirling and Oxford Brookes University have analysed data from across the UK to understand who reports 'place-keeping' issues (e.g. roads maintenance and local cleanliness) the most.

The research team analysed reports from 2011 to 2015 to understand who was reporting what type of issue. In particular, the researchers were interested in whether people in deprived neighbourhoods reported more or less, or on different issues, than people in less deprived neighbourhoods. Levels of neighbourhood deprivation were measured using the national indices of deprivation in England, Wales and Scotland, equivalent to the National Deprivation Index for Ireland. The research was also interested in whether people in rural areas might report less because of poorer internet access. While managers and elected representatives might have an indication of these patterns, this research allowed for an exploration across the UK.

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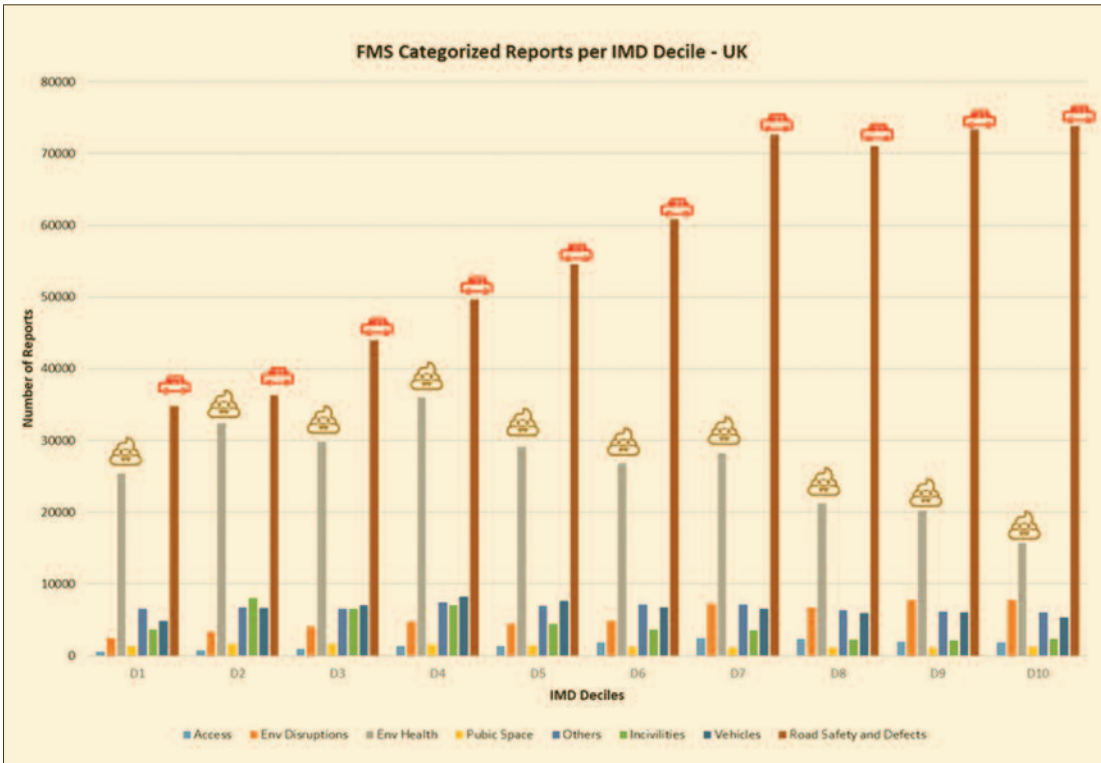
The results show that it was actually people in neighbourhoods in the middle of deprivation rankings who reported the most. This matches patterns found in previous similar research in the US, which has suggested that residents of such neighbourhoods would have lots of things to report, combined with knowledge about how to report problems, and they trust that problems will be fixed when they are reported. People in less deprived neighbourhoods are likely to have fewer issues to report; and people in more deprived neighbourhoods may struggle in finding the time or knowledge to report problems, or they may have an expectation that problems will not be fixed even if they are reported.

mySociety runs a UK-based digital reporting service called FixMyStreet, available to use both as a website and an app. FixMyStreet enables anyone in the UK to report a local issue without needing to know which authority is responsible. There is no cost to councils to receive email reports from FixMyStreet. Some local authorities pay a small fee for an integration to be set-up between FixMyStreet and their own customer relationship management system, or they can use it as their own reporting system by procuring FixMyStreet Pro. Provided by SocietyWorks, mySociety's wholly owned subsidiary, FixMyStreet Pro is a fully integrated version of the platform, which is branded to look like the authority's own site and which sends reports directly into internal systems.

However, looking a bit deeper into types of problems reported, the researchers discovered a further interesting pattern. The reports from less deprived neighbourhoods were more likely to be road defects, such as potholes. People in deprived neighbourhoods were more likely to report environmental issues such as dog-fouling, littering and fly-tipping. This reflects a mixture of the actual problems present, existing service provision, and how people use their neighbourhoods differently - with different modes of transport affecting the problems people are aware of. For example, we know that people in more deprived neighbourhoods tend to walk for more journeys, so are more likely to encounter problems of dog-fouling as a personal inconvenience, rather than being inconvenienced by potholes in the road surface.

In terms of rural access to such online reporting services, the research found no difference in reporting rates, suggesting that people can still use and access them even in more remote locations. However, the researchers noticed different kinds of issues being reported in rural areas. In general, areas with a higher population density had fewer reports made per person, possibly reflecting the idea that in denser areas, people may be more likely to believe that someone else will report a problem. This shows that so-called 'smart city' technology is perfectly adaptable to problem-reporting outside urban areas, where the greater amount of ground to cover can actually increase the importance of the role of citizens in spotting issues to be fixed.

This research is particularly significant because previous research tended to focus on individual cities or local authority areas, whereas the data from FixMyStreet is UK-wide, telling us that these patterns of reporting are persistent across different types of towns and cities.



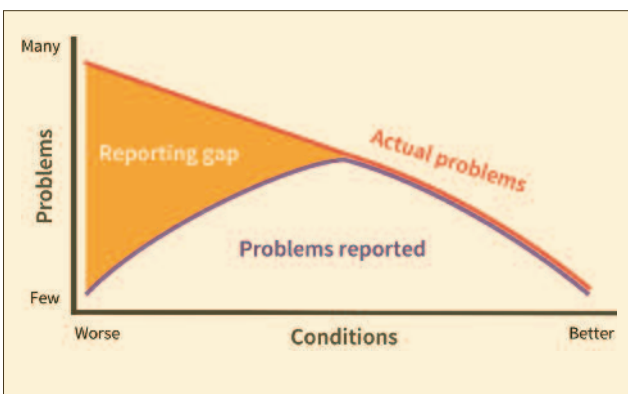
FixMyStreet categorised reports per Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) Decile

This graph ranges from the most deprived 10% (Decile 1) to the least deprived 10% (Decile 10).

The research team was driven to carry out the analysis because of a concern about possible inequalities in services provision for neighbourhood maintenance. In particular, a trend in the UK following budget cuts has been to move from planned neighbourhood maintenance towards reactive maintenance, 'co-produced' through citizens reporting issues. Given previous research, there was a concern that this would result in more services being delivered to less-disadvantaged neighbourhoods, as they would request more. The findings of this research do, indeed, suggest that this is a risk, and if local authorities want to maintain good-quality local environments, this aim needs to be supported by planned maintenance and regular inspection regimes. This is especially important in more-deprived neighbourhoods, where evidence from other research suggests that regular maintenance can produce a 'virtuous cycle' of reporting and effective management.

Further research involving the University of Stirling, this time using data from North Lanarkshire, Scotland, has also revealed a gendered dimension to this reporting. This research found that it was women in the most-disadvantaged neighbourhoods who reported the most, with 'super-reporters' reporting over 100 issues a year to the local council. This research suggests that local authorities should recognise the work of such women, instead of seeing them as being the 'usual suspects', and that planned maintenance would lift the burden of reporting for these women.

In recent years, Irish local government has been grappling with increased demands and increased costs. A key message from this research is that local authorities should continue to conduct planned maintenance and a regular inspection regime, while recognising the value of citizen reporting and responding to issues as they arise.



The 'reporting gap'. Source: Alex Parson, MySociety.

Both pieces of research can be accessed free online: Matthews, P., Parsons, A., Nyanzu, E. and Rae, A. (2022), 'Dog fouling and potholes: Understanding the role of coproducing "citizen sensors" in local governance', Local Government Studies, DOI: 10.1080/03003930.2022.2116575

Hastings, A., Matthews, P., and Wang, Y. (2021), 'Unequal and gendered: Assessing the impacts of austerity cuts on public service users', Social Policy and Society, vol. 1, no. 21, DOI: 10.1017/S1474746421000543