
Turbo

Transparency:

Why You Should Use Alaveteli To Open Up Your
Government

Version 1.0

By mySociety

What is this document?

Some countries have powerful freedom of information (FOI) or right to information (RTI) laws. Some have weak FOI and RTI laws. Some have no such laws at all.

Alaveteli is a free, open source software tool designed to let people easily launch websites that magnify the power of existing information laws in any country. It is also useful to help build pressure for such laws where they don't exist. In the UK we use Alaveteli to power the WhatDoTheyKnow.com website, which now contains over 100,000 FOI requests and responses from government agencies.

We've named this guide Turbo Transparency because, just like a turbocharger makes an engine more powerful, we believe that websites built using the Alaveteli software platform can make laws more powerful than legislators intended them to be.

Who is this document for?

We have written this document for anyone who works or volunteers in the transparency, accountability and anti-corruption sectors in any country in the world.

More specifically, this document has been written for people who are excited by the idea of large amounts of currently hidden government information being systematically made available via the Internet, fast.

It does not require any technical knowledge to read.

Who wrote it?

This guide was written by mySociety, the open source not-for-profit which started the Alaveteli FOI platform.

Why did mySociety write this guide?

We wrote it because we believe the free, open source Alaveteli platform offers real value to people who care about transparency and accountability. We want more people to take advantage of it, both for their own good, and so that the Alaveteli platform can be collaboratively improved for the benefit of people all around the world.

Alaveteli is free, and we are not trying to sell anyone anything.

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Key Terms

mySociety - the UK charity that builds democracy websites (and the author of this guide)

WhatDoTheyKnow - A Freedom of Information website powered by Alaveteli, <http://www.WhatDoTheyKnow.com>

Alaveteli - The name of the software that makes WhatDoTheyKnow run, which is being continuously improved to make it easier to install in countries and cities around the world.

Part 1: Why we built Alaveteli

We are mySociety

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

Between 2004 and 2007 we launched various websites that made it easy to do tasks such as:

- Identifying which politician(s) represent you
- Writing to politicians
- Reporting street problems to the local government (i.e. broken street lights)

In 2008 we launched a new, major website, which was called WhatDoTheyKnow.com.

What is WhatDoTheyKnow.com?

WhatDoTheyKnow.com is mySociety's Freedom of Information website for the UK. It was built to make it easy to make FOI requests, and easy to see the requests and responses made by other users. When it was launched it was entirely unique as a type of website.

Today, covering 5000 British and Northern Irish government authorities, WhatDoTheyKnow contains a totally public, totally free web archive of over 100,000 responses to FOI requests. It is almost certainly the largest FOI website in the world, and over 1.5m people visited it in 2011. It is also a tool for making FOI requests quickly and easily.

What change was mySociety trying to create by building WhatDoTheyKnow?

All NGOs are in the business of creating change. To that end they often set themselves goals. The goals that WhatDoTheyKnow was set up to deliver were:

- Lower the barriers that prevent normal people using our Freedom of Information law
- Make it easier to find potentially useful information that the government holds
- Provide ongoing pressure to all parts of the government to resist the temptation to back-slide in the provision of information which citizens need

Why we built Alaveteli

WhatDoTheyKnow.com is a website, powered by software written specially for the purpose.

In 2011 we decided that it would be a good thing if other people could launch their own websites like WhatDoTheyKnow.com, without having to write all the computer code that we had already developed.

So we took the computer code that powers WhatDoTheyKnow, and started to change and improve it so that it would be easy for other people to use in different countries, with different laws and different languages.

The computer code that powers WhatDoTheyKnow.com is what we call Alaveteli – it is a software package designed to make it as easy as possible for you to set up open government sites which work in ways similar to WhatDoTheyKnow.com

The name Alaveteli was chosen to stress that the project is not about Britain – it is about a global service that anyone can use, for free.

The Open Society Foundation and Hivos have helped to fund the creation of Alaveteli as a software platform that is easy for you to reuse.

Part 2: What Alaveteli is, and what it offers

Alaveteli is software that you can use to help you launch your own powerful FOI or RTI website

Alaveteli is a software package designed to make it easy for people to launch website that make it easier to make FOI requests, and to find information released under FOI-like laws.

Current websites powered by Alaveteli include:

- WhatDoTheyKnow.com – Covering the UK Government
- AskTheEU.org – Covering the EU institutions
- Queremossaber.org.br – Covering the Brazilian Government
- Pravodaznam.ba – Covering the Bosnian Government

All of these sites are run by different organizations, but they all use the free Alaveteli software platform.

Alaveteli enables you to build websites which combine two powerful functions – a requesting tool and a public archive.

Alaveteli enables people to launch websites that users can make information requests through. It makes it easy to find the relevant department or agency, and removes the need to find the contact address for the recipient.

This alone would make Alaveteli a powerful tool for helping people to use FOI laws. But it is the second function that makes it outstanding – the public archive.

When a user makes a request through an Alaveteli-powered website, the request is immediately published online. And when a government agency emails back (if they use email), their response is immediately published too.

Alaveteli Features List

- Automates the process of helping people write messages to the relevant authority – no manual intervention is required to assist people send their request
- Eliminates the need to find the contact address for an authority
- Supplies guidance about how to make a good request as the user is actually composing their message

- Uses simple, plain language and avoids legal jargon
- Encourages users to think of using FOI as a 'normal' thing that any citizen can do
- Encourages and enables users to look for existing information before they make an FOI request, which can actually lead to a quicker result
- Offers various features designed to make it easier to find information previously known only to authorities:
 - Automatically publishes all requests made through the site, and all government responses (hiding requests is possible too)
 - Publishes FOI responses instantly - as soon as a public authority send a reply to a request is appears on WhatDoTheyKnow
 - Provides a search engine to search for words and phrase of interest
 - Provides a browsing interface to increase the chance of finding interesting materials that users weren't specifically looking for
 - Integrates well with Social Media - provides attractive material for users of Facebook, Twitter etc to link to
 - Has good Search Engine Optimisation to make information show up well in search engines
 - Provides a powerful alerting system so users can get sent email alerts whenever information is released that contains words or phrases they care about.

Part 3: What is it like to use a website powered by Alaveteli?

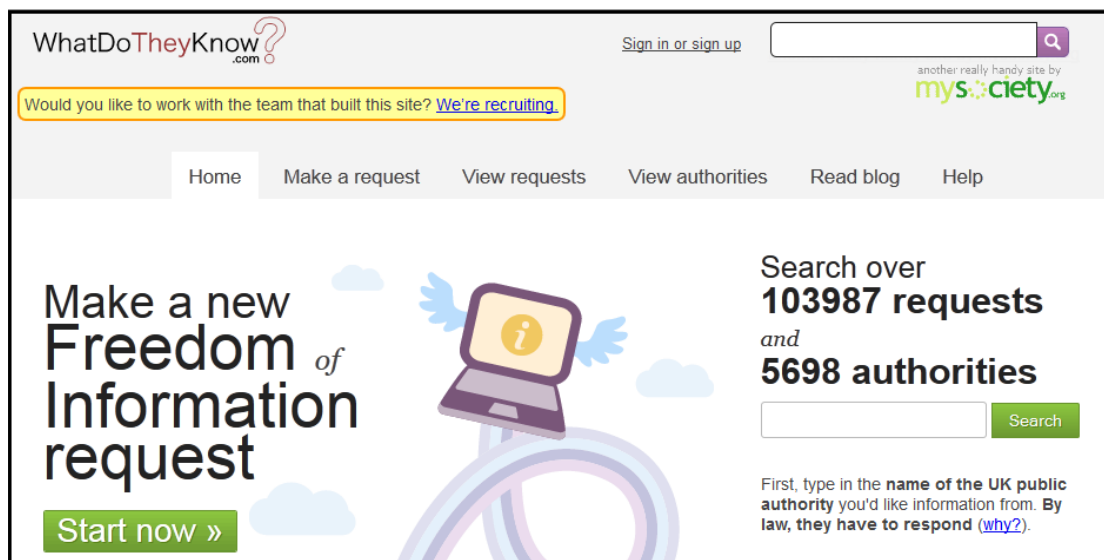
The best way to understand what an Alaveteli-powered website is like is to actually use one. We offer a sample, dummy website at test.alaveteli.org which you can use to make as many sample FOI requests as you want.

This part of the guide shows you how users typically make use of the site.

An example user journey for someone making an FOI request using an Alaveteli powered site

It all starts with someone deciding that they need to ask the government for some form of information. One way or another, a user finds their way to the website homepage, and this is what they see.

Figure 1: The homepage of an Alaveteli-powered site



From the homepage, they click 'Start Now' to make a request. In this case, the user chooses to write to the Home Office.

Figure 2: Information box about the Home Office, from WhatDoTheyKnow.com

Home Office

[A ministerial department](#)

The Home Office is the lead government department for immigration and crime. The Home Office's areas of responsibility include police, counter-terrorism, passports and drugs policy. The Home Office is lead by the Home Secretary and five other ministers.^[2] The Home Office is often referred to in official documents and in Parliament by its former name 'the Home Department'.^[3]

Make a new **Freedom of Information** request to Home Office

The user then writes an email containing their request, using the form provided on the website. When they are done they press 'send'.

Figure 3: The user writing an information request which will be sent to the Government

2. Ask for Information

To: Home Office
Browse [other requests](#) to 'Home Office' for examples of how to word your request.

Special note for this authority!

The Home Office is the lead government department for immigration and crime. The Home Office's areas of responsibility include police, counter-terrorism, passports and drugs policy. The Home Office is lead by the Home Secretary and five other ministers.^[2] The Home Office is often referred to in official documents and in Parliament by its former name 'the Home Department'.^[3]

Summary:
(a one line summary of the information you are requesting, e.g. 'Crime statistics by ward level for Wales')

Your request:

- Write your request in **simple, precise language**.
- Ask for **specific** documents or information, this site is not suitable for general enquiries.
- Keep it **focused**, you'll be more likely to get what you want ([why?](#)).

Everything that you enter on this page, including **your name**, will be **displayed publicly** on this website forever ([why?](#)). If you are thinking of using a pseudonym, please [read this first](#).

Can I request information about myself? **No!** ([Click here for details](#))

The email is then sent to the named public authority, via email in this instance (paper is an option, see below). Simultaneously a copy of the email is published on a web page on WhatDoTheyKnow.

The user then waits for the government to write back. When the reply is sent, a copy is automatically published on the same webpage as the request, and a copy is forwarded on via email to the original requestor.

Figure 4: A public page showing a request and a response from the government

Proceeds of crime

[Luna Taylor](#) made this Freedom of Information request to [Home Office](#)

✔ The request was **successful**.

From: Luna Taylor
26 December 2011

Dear Home Office,

Leicestershire Police has received £127,000 from the Home Office for the value of assets confiscated from criminals by its officers. In 2009/2010, the force said it had seized £542,000 of cash and property, with the money going to the government. Leics has the eighth highest confiscation figures in the country.

Please could you let me know the amounts given to all other Police Forces for this time period, or point me to where it is published?

I would also like a copy of / directing to the policy / procedure or legislation which determines how much is given back to Police Forces and how much is kept by central government.

Yours faithfully,

Luna Taylor

GD

From: FOI Responses Home Office
18 January 2012

CR21177 Response.pdf
161K [Download](#) [View as HTML](#)

Please find attached our response to your FOI Request.

Home Office
2 Marsham Street

Follow this request

There is 1 person following this request

[Follow by email](#)

[RSS feed of updates](#)

Act on what you've learnt

[Tweet this request](#)

[Start your own blog](#)

[Get help investigating](#)

[Write to your politician](#)

[Pledge with others](#)

Similar requests

Commercial Standing of SWPF.
To South Wales Police by David Grothier 6 November 2008

Speed camera funding and financial queries
To West Midlands Police by dennis fallon 4 April 2011

POCA 2002 Act Cash Recovery
To Tayside Police by michael flood 18 April 2011

MPS - Procedures relating to Siezed Property
To Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) by Ms Segretti 19 October 2010

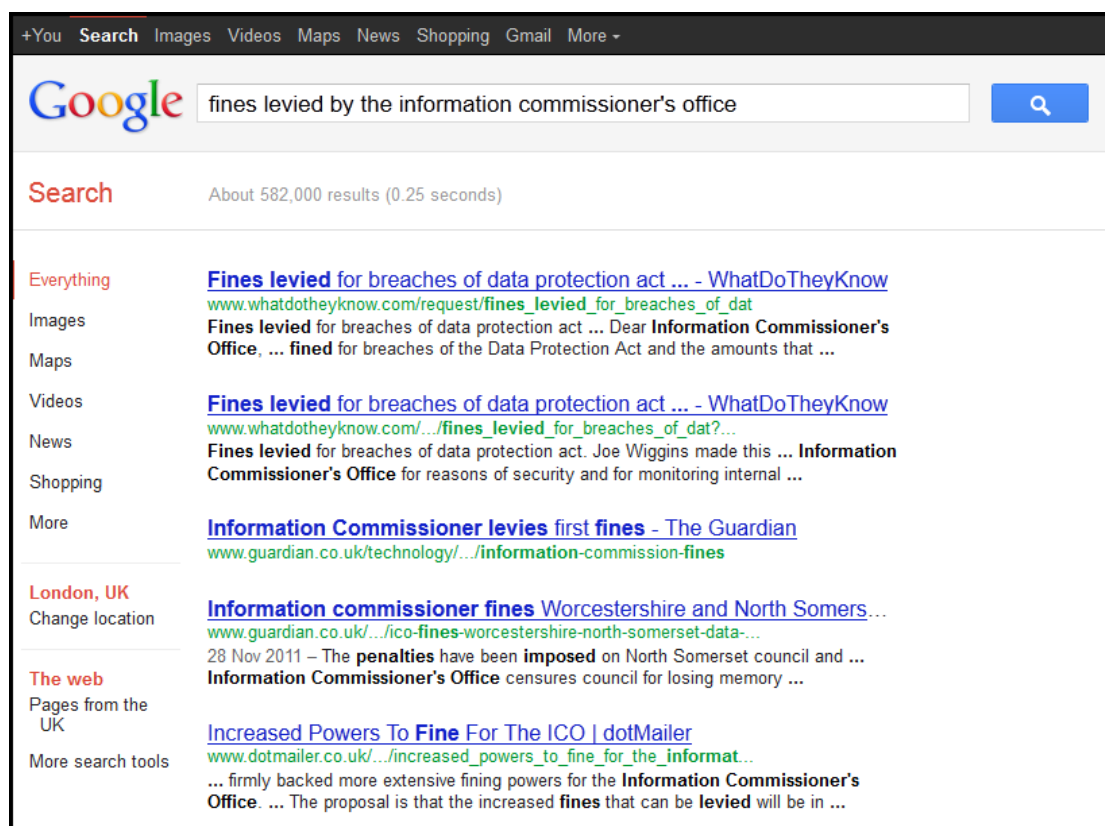
The user journey of someone using the site to discover information that has already been published

For every user that makes a request using WhatDoTheyKnow.com, about twenty users visit the website to look at materials that have been published online automatically.

Most of these users do not know about WhatDoTheyKnow before they start searching. Instead they arrive through a journey like this.

A user goes to Google and searches for some information of relevance to them. In this example, they search for "Fines levied by the Information Commissioner's Office"

Figure 5: A Google search page showing results from an Alaveteli-powered site



The user sees an appropriate seeming search result that is hosted on WhatDoTheyKnow. They click through from Google to WhatDoTheyKnow.

The user is then presented with a web page on WhatDoTheyKnow that contains a request about fines made by a user, and a series of subsequent replies sent by the government body.

Figure 6: A page containing a response from the government

Fines levied for breaches of data protection act

[Joe Wiggins](#) made this Freedom of Information request to [Information Commissioner's Office](#)

 The request was **successful**.

From: Joe Wiggins
12 April 2011

Dear Information Commissioner's Office,

I would like a full list of all the organisations that have been fined for breaches of the Data Protection Act and the amounts that they have been fined.

Yours faithfully,

Joe Wiggins



Information Commissioner's Office
12 April 2011

 **ICORReviewProcedure V8.doc**
232K [Download](#) [View as HTML](#)

Link: [1]File-List

12 April 2011

Case Reference Number IRQ0386206

Dear Mr Wiggins

Thank you for your email of today's date in which you have made a request for information to the Information Commissioner's Office.

Your request reads:

"I would like a full list of all the organisations that have been fined for breaches of the Data Protection Act and the amounts that they have been fined."

Your request has been considered under the Freedom of Information Act 2000

Other ways that people use Alaveteli-powered sites

Keyword based alerts – Some users subscribe to be sent an email when a certain keyword or phrase occurs in a new request or response anywhere on the website (also works in RSS)

Public body alerts – Some users subscribe to be sent an email when any response is received from a particular public body

Comments and Annotations – Some users leave comments and annotations on requests and responses on the website, in order to provide better context about what is going on.

Part 4: Reasons why you should consider deploying Alaveteli, instead of building a similar site from scratch

Money

It is **hugely** less expensive to modify Alaveteli to do what you want than it is to write such a site from scratch. We estimate that replicating all the current functionality in an Alaveteli-inspired website would cost around \$200,000US. By using the free Alaveteli code you can get your site running for a fraction of this cost.

Speed

A basic version of Alaveteli can be installed in just a couple of hours, 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

mySociety is here to help you make use of Alaveteli, and our community is growing all the time. The people who are developing, documenting and supporting Alaveteli include people who were involved in building the initial web site at WhatDoTheyKnow.com, and people who are in exactly the same position you'll be in - having installed Alaveteli themselves and now running new FOI web sites.

It is a friendly, knowledgeable group and new members are warmly welcomed.

Reliability

You should use Alaveteli because it is proven to work.

Using Alaveteli dramatically reduces the chance that your FOI website will never launch.

Alaveteli can also cope with large volumes of users and documents. WhatDoTheyKnow.com has processed over 100,000 FOI requests and hundreds of thousands of attached documents, and is working well. We have put a lot of time and effort into fixing bugs so that you don't have to.

Languages

You can run Alaveteli in your language **very** simply.

You can even start on translating Alaveteli into your language right now, by visiting <https://www.transifex.net/projects/p/alaveteli> - you don't need any technical skills at

all to get started. And every single line of translation you do increases the chance that the site will work in countries or regions where your language is spoken.

The alternative

If, for whatever reason, you decide not to base your new FOI website on Alaveteli 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 source your own:

- email server, handling the many incoming and outgoing email messages,
- web server, parsing incoming web requests and handing them off to the web app,
- web cache, returning cached responses to previously-seen requests, to reduce the load on the server,
- web app framework, running the web app,
- database, to store the request and response data.

In addition to these core components, you will probably require others. For example, Alaveteli has an email alert system where people can ask to be updated on particular requests, particular authorities, or particular keywords. When a request or response is made that matches someone's alert settings, that person is sent an email to alert them. This email alert system is not part of the web app as such, but runs separately.

Altogether, these make for reasons why we strongly recommend building on the Alaveteli platform, not starting from scratch.

Part 5: How to use Alaveteli when your laws and culture are very different from Britain

Countries vary hugely, as do FOI regimes, governments and cultural norms. An FOI site may vary in the following ways, and many more:

- FOI laws exist in some countries, but don't exist in others
- FOI is charged for in some countries, and free in others
- Requests have to be on paper in some countries
- Responses from governments can be sent on paper
- Some FOI sites are for campaigning on just one issue, others (like WhatDoTheyKnow) are general
- In some countries it may be dangerous to make requests

Out of the box, Alaveteli cannot help you with these problems. However, with suitable additions and modifications, it can handle all of them.

Alaveteli can be modified to cope with FOI systems that are **entirely on paper**.

Alaveteli can be modified to cope with FOI systems that require **payment**.

Alaveteli can be modified to cope with FOI regimes that are **very different** from the UK law.

Alaveteli can be modified to make it part of a wider campaign.

Alaveteli can be modified to make some or all requests and responses **private**, in the short term and in the long term.

In short – Alaveteli can help in **incredibly diverse countries, languages, cultures and environments**. But we need your help to tune the system to adapt to your needs.

It will almost always be easier to adapt Alaveteli to your local environment than to write a new site from scratch. Often it will be tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars easier and cheaper.

Important note: Some of the modifications mentioned above are built in to the current Alaveteli software, and can be enabled at the flick of a switch. Others require major new additions to the software. But these are additions that 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 Alaveteli, and 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 Alaveteli doesn't have, please come and talk to us about what it would take to get it added.

Part 6: What you will need to launch and maintain a website based on Alaveteli

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

However, despite our best efforts, there are some problems that just can't be solved through clever computer programs. WhatDoTheyKnow 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 Alaveteli is and isn't

Alaveteli-powered websites, like WhatDoTheyKnow, are a genuinely new kind of service. It isn't the exact equivalent of a book or a newspaper or a campaign put onto the Internet. It is something powerful, but different from offline equivalents.

As a consequence of these differences, it is very important for you to have a deep understanding of how or why Alaveteli is 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.

This guide is about helping you to develop a preliminary understanding, but to develop a really deep understanding you should play with the demo and the live sites, and engage mySociety and other users in direct conversations about what running these sites is like.

You will need a project manager

Whilst initial installation of Alaveteli can be quite quick, there is quite a lot to do to make your site as successful as WhatDoTheyKnow.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, lawyers, 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 Alaveteli and use it to run your web site, you'll probably want to customise the way it looks, and you'll almost certainly need to change some details that relate to the information laws in your country.

You must at 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 volunteers, or funding for a dedicated support team

Once the website has been built and launched, it needs maintaining, publicising, updating and generally looking after. The more popular your service becomes the more intensive this workload becomes. mySociety has an active volunteer community of seven very dedicated individuals, and 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.

A successful FOI website needs a lot of effort to ensure it becomes and remains successful. Often, volunteers are the most effective way of dealing with this workload: not only because funding is often short for paid staff, but also because there are people who care passionately about transparency and the right to know whose expertise is only available in small chunks.

Volunteers can carry out the majority of the tasks lists above, such as:

- Provide user support to people who need help using the website
- Provide advice on FOI laws when users encounter difficult authorities or situations
- Act on takedown or redaction requests in response to legally or ethically reasonable requests from users or authorities

Investigate and report on bugs in the software

You will need access to legal advice

Whilst you will probably not need a full time lawyer, you will need access to occasional legal expertise to set up your site, and to make it a success. There are two main reasons you will need a lawyer.

Firstly, your team needs people who are very familiar with the freedom of information laws in your country (if there are any) in order to be able to advise users on what their options are, and to correctly identify which requests are not being answered in the legally-required timeframe. You also need to have an understanding of which authorities are subject to these laws, and which are not, and what limits and extents have been placed upon the types of information people may request of them.

Secondly, by publishing these conversations in public we believe (from our own experience running WhatDoTheyKnow.com) that you should expect yourselves and your users to get some legally-framed correspondence insisting that the response to a request for information is copyrighted material and you must take it down, or that the requests sent from your web site to authorities are in some way deficient. Occasionally in the UK (which famously has rather aggressive laws about defamation) we encounter demands to take down requests or responses on the grounds that republication constitutes libel.

Some requests to take down or delete material are obviously reasonable (such as when someone's personal information has appeared on your site by accident, for example). Some are less reasonable: we take the view that copyright takedown

notices received from UK authorities are likely to be irrational unless there's a very good reason provided. And some are dangerous. A litigious person seeking to threaten you with legal action when you're entirely in the right doesn't alter the fact that you may suffer significant costs in establishing your right-ness in a court.

So you need legally-aware people on your team, and you need -- as a backup -- to have professional legal advice available when you have to ask for it.

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.

However, this kind of website can be a significant success **even if only a small proportion of the wider population has access** to the internet. As long as key political figures, media figures and campaigners have internet access, this site can still be effective.

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 WhatDoTheyKnow will require regular attention to ensure that it thrives and survives.

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

Running an Alaveteli-powered site 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 Alaveteli-powered site 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 7: Interested? We're here to help

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

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

The project lead is Seb Bacon – seb@mysociety.org – please feel free to write to him about anything relating to the project.

If you want to follow the project on twitter, or talk to us via Twitter, follow @alaveteli_foi

If you want to read more about the project on its own website, visit Alaveteli.org

On that website you can also opt to join the community mailing list for Alaveteli, where you can post questions for other community members to see and answer.