



# The Aspiration Gap

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Prepared for ThreeLochsCommunity  
Project Three Lochs App

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# Contents

<b>Introduction</b>	3
<b>Where Users Start</b>	3
<b>Where Users Should End</b>	4
<b>The Gap</b>	5
<b>The Three Critical Moments</b>	6
<b>Emerging Themes</b>	8
<b>Root Causes</b>	10

## Introduction

There is always a distance between how someone feels when they first encounter a product and how they feel when that product is working as it should. That distance is not a flaw in the design. It is the design opportunity. The Aspiration Gap maps that emotional journey: where the user starts, what they are carrying when they arrive, and what becomes possible when the experience earns the right to move them somewhere different. Understanding that arc is what separates a product that functions from one that changes the way people feel about the thing they are using.

For Three Lochs, that gap is unusually specific and unusually legible. Residents arrive at this product already formed by experience. They have a relationship with the community that is partly pride and partly quiet frustration, and they bring both of those things to the first screen. The distance between where they start and where they should end up is not theoretical. It is the distance between feeling like an account holder chasing a management company and feeling like a valued resident of a place that quietly has everything in hand. That is a real emotional journey, with real moments where it can deepen or collapse, and the design has to account for every step of it.

What follows came directly from the workshops and conversations between ThreeLochsCommunity and We Are Affective. These are not assumed user states or projected personas. They are what surfaced when the right questions were asked of the people who know this community and its residents best. The starting points are real, the friction is real, and the aspiration is real. The work now is to close the gap between them.

## Where Users Start

**People are feeling** resigned, braced, mildly dreading, invisible, frustrated, ignored, cautiously hopeful, uncertain, quietly disappointed.

There is something particular about arriving at a product you did not choose. Residents did not select this app after comparing alternatives. They were handed it as part of the administrative reality of living at Three Lochs, and they arrive carrying everything that preceded it. The generic web portal. The unreturned calls. The maintenance request that disappeared. That history does not reset the moment an app is downloaded. It walks in with the person. What the workshops surfaced was not hostility but something harder to shift: a low-grade resignation that has calcified into a default assumption. That whatever this is, it will ask more than it gives.

Running underneath that resignation is something worth noting not as a problem but as a resource. Residents are not indifferent to Three Lochs. The pride in the physical community is genuine and strong. The frustration exists precisely because the expectation was high and the administrative experience failed to meet it. That coexistence, real pride alongside real disappointment, means the emotional distance to close is not from apathy to engagement. It is from braced and let down to

quietly confident. That is a shorter journey than it might appear, but it requires the product to earn ground rather than simply declare it.

**People are thinking** "What do they want from me now?", "Is this going to cost me something?", "Did I do something wrong?", "How long is this going to take to deal with?", "Will anyone actually respond if I engage with this?", "Has my request even been received?", "Am I allowed to do this or will I get fined?", "Who is actually responsible for sorting this out?"

These are not the questions of disengaged people. A disengaged resident would not be asking anything at all. They would have already stopped trying. The fact that these questions are still present, still sharp, still carrying a faint edge of anxiety, tells us something important: these are residents who wanted a relationship with their community and found the means to have one consistently fell short. The question "will anyone actually respond if I engage with this?" is not cynicism. It is the entirely reasonable conclusion drawn from repeated experience of silence after submission, of phone calls that went unreturned, of a streetlight that stayed dark for three weeks while a request sat unacknowledged in a portal nobody was watching.

What these questions also reveal is how much of the anxiety is structural rather than personal. Residents are not worried about Three Lochs in the abstract. They are worried about specific things: payments, accountability, rules they might be breaking without knowing it, whether their voice connects to anything real on the other side. Those worries are answerable. Every one of them points to a piece of information the app could surface, a confirmation it could send, a question it could answer before the resident has to ask. The internal dialogue present at the start of this journey is not a barrier to overcome. It is a map of exactly what the product needs to do first.

## Where Users Should End

**Users need to feel** recognised, relieved, informed, heard, confident, connected, looked after, proud of where they live and certain they made the right choice in calling it home.

That destination is both specific and achievable. What the workshops made clear is that residents are not asking for very much. They are not expecting to be delighted by property management software. They are asking to feel like a person rather than an account number, to know that what they submitted went somewhere, to trust that the community they invested in is being run by people who are paying attention. When the experience delivers those things consistently, something shifts. The bracing stops. The default assumption, that this is going to cost them time and produce nothing, quietly retires. In its place is something closer to ease. Not excitement. Ease. The feeling that this part of living at Three Lochs simply works, and that they do not have to think about it anymore.

That shift is the destination. The moment a resident closes the app having done what they needed in under two minutes, having received a confirmation that sounds like it was written by someone who knows them, having seen that the issue they reported last week has been resolved without them having to follow up, they are no longer the person who arrived. They are a member of a community

that quietly looks after itself around them. That is not a small thing. For the resident who stood on a dark path beside one of the lochs having been told their request did not exist, it is the repair of something that mattered.

**The end beliefs, in users' own words are** "I live somewhere that actually works", "I know exactly where to go and someone will respond", "My voice matters here", "I chose the right place to live", "I'm a member of this community, not just a payer", "This place looks after itself and I'm part of that."

These are not positioning statements. They are not the language of a brand promise or a marketing brief. They are what people genuinely feel when an experience has earned its place in their life, when the gap between expectation and reality has closed enough that trust becomes the default rather than something that has to be rebuilt each time. The Aspiration Gap exercise and the Identity Shift work both pointed to the same underlying shift: from "I own a home here" to "I belong here." That distinction, between ownership and belonging, is the emotional work the app has to do.

What makes these beliefs worth attending to carefully is that not one of them is about the product. Nobody says "this app is easy to use" or "the interface is clean." They say "my voice matters here." They say "I chose the right place to live." The product has receded entirely and what remains is how the resident feels about themselves and about Three Lochs. That is the mark of a product that has done its job properly. It does not draw attention to itself. It simply makes the thing it serves feel better. That is what the Three Lochs app is for.

## The Gap

The gap between where a resident starts and where they should end up is not a single distance. It is several, running in parallel, each one asking something slightly different of the design. Mapping them separately makes it possible to see where the experience is doing real work and where it is leaving people stranded.

Dimension	Where users start	Where users should end
Trust	Assuming silence means nothing is happening	Confident that submission leads to visible, accountable action
Identity	Feeling like an account number paying a monthly obligation	Feeling like a member of a community that knows who they are
Agency	Wondering whether reporting something is even worth the effort	Knowing their voice connects directly to something real on the other side
Emotional safety	Bracing for bad news every time the HOA makes contact	Receiving communication that is calm, clear, and already one step ahead

Dimension	Where users start	Where users should end
Clarity	Unsure who is responsible for what, and what the rules actually permit	Knowing exactly where to go, what to expect, and what is and is not their concern
Belonging	Sharing a postcode with 846 other people	Living in a place with neighbours they know and a community they feel part of
Visibility	Invisible to the organisation managing the place they invested in	Seen, addressed by name, and served with information relevant to their property and neighbourhood
Pride	Proud of the physical estate, quietly embarrassed by how it is run	Proud of both, and willing to say so to a new neighbour without hesitation

## The Three Critical Moments

The gap between where residents start and where they need to end up does not close gradually, through accumulating small improvements and incremental reassurances. It closes at specific moments, or it does not close at all. There are points in the experience where the emotional stakes are higher than anywhere else, where trust is either earned or forfeited, where the resident either leans in or quietly confirms what they already suspected. Those moments do not distribute evenly across the journey. They concentrate at three particular points, and the design has to treat each one as if everything depends on it. Because at that moment, it does.

### Moment 1: The First Screen

The Aspiration Gap exercise was direct on this point. The critical first realisation is the moment a resident sees their own name, their own address, and information that is visibly relevant to their specific property and neighbourhood, before they have done a single thing. Not a welcome page. Not a menu. Their name. Their dues status. Their neighbourhood. The pool open this afternoon. A barbecue on Saturday they have not yet responded to. All of it there, immediately, without them having to navigate anywhere to find it.

This matters because residents arrive already braced. The internal dialogue present at the start of the journey, as surfaced in the workshops, runs to "what do they want from me now?" and "is this going to cost me something?" That is the emotional room the app walks into. A generic dashboard with a hamburger menu and a list of options does nothing to change that atmosphere. But a screen that already knows them, that reflects their specific life in this specific community back at them before they have pressed a single button, communicates something that no onboarding copy can say directly: this is a different kind of relationship.

The shift this creates is not from bad to good. It is from braced to curious. That distinction matters. Curiosity is the emotional state in which a resident is willing to go further, to explore, to trust that the

disappointment. The first screen either opens that possibility or closes it. It is the only moment in the experience where the resident has not yet been let down again, and where the accumulated history of every previous interaction with the HOA is still sitting in the balance. The app has to win that moment cleanly, without hesitation, before it has earned the right to ask for anything.

### **Moment 2: The First Confirmation**

The first time a resident submits something, pays something, or reports something through the app, what happens next is more important than the submission itself. The Aspiration Gap and First 60 Seconds sessions both returned to the same point independently: silence after submission is the single most destructive pattern in the current resident experience. The resident who submitted a maintenance request about a streetlight on Waterside Walk, called twice, received no callback, and was eventually told the request had not been received at all, was not primarily upset about the streetlight. They were upset because they had become invisible at the exact moment they were trying to be heard.

The first confirmation the app sends has to break that pattern in a way that is felt rather than merely noted. Not a ticket number. Not "your submission has been received." A human name, an estimated timeframe, and language that sounds like it was written by someone who knows what kind of place Three Lochs is. "Picked up. One of the facilities team will be in touch by Wednesday." That is a different register entirely from anything the current experience delivers, and that difference is what the resident needs to feel. The confirmation does not just acknowledge the submission. It demonstrates that something has already changed about how this community communicates with the people who live in it.

The emotional shift here is from uncertainty to relief, a movement from the open-ended anxiety of not knowing whether anything has happened to the quiet confidence that it has. That relief sounds modest but its cumulative effect is significant. A resident who has received three or four confirmations that arrived fast, sounded human, and were followed by what they promised is a different kind of user from the one who arrived. They have started to develop a new default assumption. Not yet trust, trust comes later, but the absence of the old dread. That absence is where the relationship begins to repair.

### **Moment 3: The Loop That Closes**

The turning point identified in the workshops was precise and it is worth repeating precisely: the first time something a resident submitted gets resolved and they find out through the app, unprompted, before they had to ask. Not a prompt to check an update. Not a status change they discovered by logging in. A notification that arrives and says, quietly and clearly, that the thing they reported has been fixed.

This is the most strategically important moment in the entire experience because it does something none of the earlier moments can do on their own. It provides proof. The first screen creates curiosity. The first confirmation creates relief. But this moment, the unprompted closed loop, retires the anxiety

that surrounds every future interaction. A resident who has experienced this once will report the next issue without hesitation. They will pay dues without dread. They will check the app without bracing. They will stop filling silence with worst-case assumptions because experience has now taught them that the silence will be broken before they have to break it themselves.

The Aspiration Gap exercise named three things, in sequence, that build this evidence: the speed and humanity of the acknowledgement, the visible track record of the community-wide issue board showing issues logged and resolved, and the first monthly summary that connects individual transactions into a coherent story of a well-run place. Together, these constitute the evidence architecture the app needs to build. But they all depend on the third moment landing correctly first. A resident who has not yet experienced the loop closing has not yet been given a reason to believe the other signals. Once it closes, once they feel the tap on the shoulder that says we handled it and we thought you should know, everything that came before is recontextualised. The curiosity and the relief settle into something more durable. The belief that takes root at that moment, "my voice connects to something real on the other side," is the belief the entire experience was built to create.

## Emerging Themes

Three Lochs works as a landscape. The water, the maintained paths, the freshly painted gate, the summer evening at the clubhouse where for one night it genuinely feels like a community. That physical reality is not in question. Residents feel it and they are proud of it. What the workshops made clear is that the administrative experience has drifted so far from the physical one that residents have stopped expecting them to belong to the same organisation. They have quietly filed them as two separate things: the place they love, and the management company they tolerate.

This matters emotionally because the gap erodes something specific. Pride in a place and pride in belonging to something well-run are not the same feeling, and residents have learned to hold the first without the second. When a neighbour asks how they like living at Three Lochs, they talk about the lochs and the trails. They change the subject before the administration comes up. That selective pride, pride in the setting but not in the institution, is the exact dissonance the app has to close. The opportunity is not to make administration loveable. It is to make it invisible enough, and competent enough, that residents stop experiencing it as a separate category at all. When the app works as it should, the experience of being a Three Lochs resident stops having two modes. There is just one: a beautiful place that quietly looks after itself.

### **Silence has been mistaken for neutrality, but residents experience it as abandonment.**

Every gap in communication, every unreturned call, every submission that produced a ticket number and nothing further, has not landed as neutral. It has landed as confirmation of a suspicion the resident was already carrying: that their problem is not a priority, that the community is not watching, that engaging is not really worth the effort. The Heartbreak Scale work was explicit about this. Silence after submitting something is the single biggest trust killer in this community. And the Aspiration Gap sessions returned to the same moment repeatedly: a resident on a dark path beside

one of the lochs, having been told their request did not exist, feeling completely invisible in a place they had chosen specifically because it looked well-run.

The emotional consequence of sustained silence is not just frustration. It is learned disengagement. Residents who have submitted things and heard nothing do not submit things again. They absorb the problem, grumble to a neighbour, lower their expectations, and stop participating in the community they paid to be part of. That withdrawal is invisible to the HOA because it produces no complaint, no escalation, nothing to measure. But it produces exactly the kind of quiet attrition that makes a community feel less like a community over time. The design response to this is not to communicate more loudly or more frequently. It is to communicate at the right moment, in the right tone, and with the next step already visible. A resident who receives a calm, human acknowledgement within minutes of submitting something has not just been informed. They have been given a reason to stay engaged. That reason is worth more than any feature the app could offer.

**The HOA is experienced as something that happens to residents rather than something that works on their behalf.**

The structural assumption that community management is an administrative function rather than a service one has shaped every decision about how the HOA communicates with residents. Forms, compliance, contracts. The result is that residents experience the institution as an entity with requirements rather than one with responsibilities. Dues arrive as bills. Maintenance updates do not arrive at all. Rule communications read as warnings. The vocabulary is transactional throughout, and the cumulative effect is a relationship that feels closer to a utility provider than a community steward.

What sits beneath this, surfaced clearly in the Identity Shift work, is a question of whose needs the product is organised around. A home screen built around the HOA's information architecture, a confirmation that sounds like a system generated it, a notification framed around compliance rather than reassurance, all of these signal, quietly but unmistakably, that the product exists to serve the organisation rather than the resident. The shift required is not cosmetic. It is not about using warmer words. It is about genuinely reordering the experience around what a resident needs to know, feel, and do, rather than around what the HOA needs to record and enforce. When that inversion happens, the relationship changes. Not because any single interaction is dramatically different, but because the cumulative message, repeated every time the app is opened, becomes "this is working on your behalf" rather than "this requires something of you."

**Clarity is a form of care, and its absence has created a background anxiety that residents carry constantly.**

The confusion score surfaced in the workshops was not the kind of confusion that comes from a complicated product. It came from a simpler, more corrosive problem: residents genuinely do not know what they are entitled to, what they are responsible for, who is accountable for what, or whether the thing they are about to do might accidentally get them into trouble. The Heartbreak Scale responses named this precisely. Residents unsure whether their landscaping changes, their

rental plans, or their new fence require approval live with a background unease that has no obvious outlet. They do not complain loudly because they are not sure they have grounds to. They simply carry the uncertainty, quietly, alongside everything else.

The emotional cost of that uncertainty is hard to see from the outside but it is real. A resident who is not sure whether they are inadvertently breaking a rule is not fully at home in the community. They are half-tenant, half-compliance subject, holding the physical comfort of the place against an ambient worry about whether they are doing it right. The app cannot resolve that anxiety through personality alone. It resolves it through information, made accessible, made findable, and delivered in a tone that treats the resident as someone who deserves to understand the rules they live by rather than someone who needs to be reminded of them. Clarity here is not a UX goal. It is an act of respect. A resident who can find the answer to any reasonable question in under a minute, in plain language, without calling the office, is a resident who can relax. That ease, the absence of low-level worry about getting something wrong, is part of what they thought they were buying when they chose Three Lochs. The app has a chance to deliver it.

## Root Causes

Three Lochs is not failing because the community is badly run or the underlying service is poor. The estate is genuinely well-maintained, the amenities are real, and the people behind the HOA care about the place. The gap exists because the way the experience is delivered consistently undermines what the place itself earns. That is a structural problem, not a values one, and structural problems have structural solutions.

### **1. There is no feedback loop between what residents experience and what the organisation sees.**

The people running Three Lochs have been measured on whether dues are collected, maintenance is contracted, and the estate stays compliant. Those things can all be true while residents feel completely invisible. Because no mechanism has ever connected resident experience to operational success, the signals that something was going wrong, the unreturned calls, the submitted requests that disappeared, the mounting silence after every submission, never registered as a management problem. A broken gate got fixed eventually. Whether the resident who walked past it for three weeks ever recovered their trust was nobody's metric and therefore nobody's responsibility. The app has to close that accountability gap by making the resident experience visible to the board in the same way that dues collection is visible, not as a sentiment score but as a live record of what was submitted, acknowledged, resolved, and how long each step took.

### **2. Every communication touchpoint has been designed around the organisation's information needs, not the resident's emotional ones.**

Forms built for record-keeping. Confirmations that produce ticket numbers rather than reassurance. Announcements written in compliance language that arrives sounding like a legal notice regardless

of what it actually contains. The cumulative effect is a product that consistently signals, before a single word is read, that it exists to serve the HOA rather than the resident. Dues arrive as bills rather than membership renewals. Rule communications read as warnings rather than guidance. That framing is not accidental. It reflects a structural assumption, never examined, never challenged, that community management is an administrative function rather than a service one. Reversing it is not a copy-editing task. It requires a deliberate decision about whose experience the product is organised around, made at the level of information architecture, confirmation design, and notification logic, and held consistently across every surface the resident touches.

### **3. The experience has no continuity. Each interaction starts from zero.**

A resident who submitted a maintenance request three weeks ago, followed up by phone, and was eventually told the request had not been received was not let down by a single failure. They were let down by a system with no memory. The current experience treats every interaction as an isolated transaction rather than a moment in an ongoing relationship. There is no record the resident can see, no status that updates, no thread connecting what they did to what happened as a result. That absence of continuity is what makes silence feel like abandonment rather than simply delay. When the loop never closes, when the resident has to ask rather than being told, when their history with the community exists nowhere they can access, every interaction resets their anxiety to the same starting point. Continuity, visible, persistent, owned by the resident rather than filed in the HOA's back office, is what converts a series of transactions into a relationship. Without it the app can be warm and well-designed on the surface while reproducing, underneath, the exact dynamic it was built to replace.

### **4. The welcome moment has never been treated as a strategic opportunity.**

The first experience a new resident has with Three Lochs as an organisation sets a tone that is very difficult to revise. Right now that experience is a welcome pack PDF, a phone number, and a login to a generic portal. The gap between the physical quality of the estate on move-in day and the administrative quality of that welcome is the gap in miniature. A new resident in the honeymoon period, still optimistic, still willing to be impressed, still forming their beliefs about what kind of community they have joined, is handed a filing cabinet. That moment does not just fail to capitalise on goodwill. It begins the process of eroding it, quietly, before the resident has had a chance to build any. The absence of a considered, personal, well-designed first experience is not a gap in the product roadmap. It is a structural failure to understand that the emotional relationship between a resident and their community is formed early and lasts.

Each of these is a solvable problem. None requires the community to be rebuilt or the board to be replaced. They require the experience to be redesigned with a clear understanding of whose needs it serves and a genuine commitment to the operational behaviour that makes the design's promises real. Together, they form the brief.