

5. ETHICAL ISSUES & MITIGATIONS

ISSUE 1: PRIVACY & DATA PROTECTION

To participate in the platform, users must share personal information such as their name, general location, contact details, skills offered, and items shared. If mishandled, this data could:

- Be exposed in a data breach
- Enable stalking or harassment
- Be misused for profiling or targeted advertising
- Reveal sensitive personal habits or locations

Risks

- **High:** Location data could indirectly reveal home addresses
- **Medium:** Profile data could enable identity misuse
- **High:** Private messages may contain sensitive information
- **Medium:** Browsing history reveals personal needs or possessions

Legal Considerations

- Compliance with UK GDPR
- Clear and accessible privacy policy
- Informed user consent
- Right to data access and deletion
- Breach reporting within 72 hours (where applicable)

Our Mitigations

1. Data Minimisation

- Collect only essential user data
- No payment or credit card details stored
- Store general area instead of exact address
- Remove inactive accounts after a defined period

2. Security Measures

- Secure passwords using trusted, industry-standard hashing techniques
- Enforce HTTPS for all connections
- Secure session handling
- Regular dependency and security updates
- Limit repeated failed login attempts

3. Privacy Controls

- User-controlled location visibility
- Option to use first name only
- Block and report functionality
- Profile visibility limited to registered users

4. Transparency

- Clear privacy policy written in plain language
- Explanation of what data is collected and why
- User access to download or delete their data

ISSUE 2: SAFETY & TRUST

The platform facilitates interactions and meetings between people who may not know each other, creating potential safety concerns including:

- Physical safety during meetups
- Theft or damage of items
- Scams or dishonest behaviour
- Harassment or inappropriate conduct

Risks

- **High:** Personal safety during in-person meetings
- **Medium:** Damage or loss of valuable items
- **Medium:** Misrepresentation or scams
- **Low:** Platform misuse for illegal activity

Real-World Context

Similar risks have been observed on platforms such as Craigslist, Facebook Marketplace, Uber, and Airbnb, where user-to-user interactions occur offline.

Our Mitigations

1. Identity & Account Verification

- University email verification for students
- Email verification for all users
- Optional enhanced verification in later sprints

2. Reputation System

- Ratings after each exchange (planned for Sprint 4)
- Public rating history to encourage accountability
- Contribution-based points system

3. Safety Guidance

- Clear safety tips displayed throughout the platform

- Encourage meetings in public locations
- Advice to avoid sharing full addresses early
- Emphasis on user discretion

4. Reporting & Moderation

- Simple reporting and blocking tools
- Review of reported users
- Removal of repeat or serious offenders

5. Liability Awareness

- Clear Terms of Service explaining platform role
- Platform acts as facilitator, not guarantor

ISSUE 3: EQUALITY & ACCESSIBILITY

Some users may face barriers to participation due to:

- Limited digital literacy
- Language barriers
- Physical or sensory disabilities
- Limited access to modern devices or internet
- Lack of skills or items to offer initially

Risks

- **High:** Exclusion of users with disabilities
- **Medium:** Exclusion of older or less tech-savvy users
- **Medium:** Language barriers limiting access
- **Medium:** New users disadvantaged by lack of reputation

Groups at Risk of Exclusion

- Elderly users
- Users with visual or motor impairments
- Non-native English speakers
- Users with limited internet access
- New community members

Our Mitigations

1. Accessibility Standards

- Follow WCAG 2.1 AA guidelines where feasible
- Keyboard navigation and screen reader compatibility
- High contrast mode and adjustable text size
- Simple, clear language

2. Inclusive Design

- Mobile-responsive design
- Works on older devices
- Low data usage where possible
- Multi-language support considered for future versions

3. Fair Participation

- Welcome points for new users
- No requirement to contribute before requesting help initially
- Skills and time valued equally to physical items

4. Support Resources

- Step-by-step guides and FAQs
- Clear onboarding process
- Simple contact support mechanism

ISSUE 4: LIABILITY & RESPONSIBILITY

Disputes may arise when items are damaged, services are unsatisfactory, or misunderstandings occur. Ethical concerns include:

- Responsibility for damaged or lost items
- Harm caused by poorly delivered services
- Platform responsibility for user actions

Risks

- **High:** Damage to valuable items
- **Medium:** Harm from poor service delivery
- **Medium:** Loss of trust due to unresolved disputes

Legal Considerations

- Platform acts as facilitator, not a party to agreements
- Users are responsible for their own actions
- Terms of Service must clearly define responsibilities

Our Mitigations

1. Clear Terms of Service

- Clarify user responsibilities
- Platform does not guarantee exchanges
- Right to suspend or ban users who violate rules

2. Best Practice Guidance

- Encourage documentation of item condition
- Suggest clear communication of expectations
- Safety guidance for skill-based exchanges

3. Dispute Handling

- Encourage direct communication between users
- Use ratings to discourage poor behaviour
- Track repeat issues to identify problematic users

4. Risk Awareness

- Clear warnings about participation risks
- Safety and responsibility guidance made visible

ISSUE 5: EXPLOITATION & FAIRNESS

The platform may be misused in ways that undermine fairness, including:

- Users repeatedly taking without contributing
- Commercial users disguising themselves as individuals
- Fake accounts manipulating ratings
- Unequal visibility between users

Risks

- **Medium:** Free-riding behaviour
- **Low:** Commercial misuse
- **Low:** Fake reviews
- **Medium:** Unequal access to opportunities

Our Mitigations

1. Contribution-Based System

- Points earned by helping others (Sprint 4)
- Soft limits on repeated requests without contribution
- Bonus points for early participation

2. Behaviour Monitoring

- Monitor request-to-offer ratios
- Flag unusual usage patterns
- Apply gentle limits rather than hard bans

3. Community Guidelines

- Clear expectations of reciprocity
- Encourage positive participation
- Promote generous contributors

4. Anti-Commercial Rules

- Business use prohibited in Terms of Service
- Limits on number of active listings
- No payments handled through the platform

5. Fair Distribution

- Recommendation logic considers new users
- Avoid over-promoting a small group of users
- Encourage geographic diversity

SUMMARY

We recognise that a platform designed to connect community members carries significant ethical responsibilities. Our approach prioritises:

1. **User Safety** – through verification, guidance, and moderation
2. **Privacy** – through minimal data collection and transparency
3. **Fairness & Inclusion** – through accessible and inclusive design
4. **Trust** – through ratings, clear policies, and accountability
5. **Legal Awareness** – through GDPR compliance and clear Terms

We commit to:

- Monitoring ethical risks throughout development
- Updating policies as the platform evolves
- Responding to user feedback
- Prioritising safety and fairness over growth

Ethical considerations will inform design and development decisions throughout this project.