



# From Brownfield to Green Space

The potential to increase green space is consistently in the top three topics for all ages.

# Foreword

**Commonplace is a digital engagement platform that connects people to the places they live, work and play, helping them to shape and influence changes in their neighbourhoods.**

Our online tools empower communities to engage with planners, developers and decision-makers. Commonplace's online community engagement platform connects you with a wider community than ever before. Listen to their voices to make future-proof and more inclusive decisions about places.



**Mike Saunders**  
CEO & Co-Founder  
**Commonplace**

Our projects cover **242,000 km<sup>2</sup>** in the UK, helping **5.5 million people** to engage with **over 1600 projects** over the past seven years, enabling quicker, more consensual and more effective decisions about the future of their communities. We can help you connect with them to reduce project risks, speed up project delivery and generate evidence of social value.

During the past seven years, we have clearly identified **three vital ingredients for success**:

- **The correct starting point** on engaging with your communities,
- **The best practices** of consulting the community,
- **The continuity of the process and how to 'close the loop'.**

There is no 'too soon' to start talking to people who will be most affected by changes to their neighbourhood. And the longer the engagement, the greater a community's capacity to meaningfully engage with strategic as well as more local questions.

**'Meaningful conversations'** - Our approach to engagement is building a relationship that deepens and evolves over time. We view engagement as a conversation- not a survey, a process or an event. The way to begin these 'conversations' is the same as any other conversation: establish who we are talking with; discuss our respective interests; and create a rapport - before tackling topics that require deeper thought, reflection or debate.

**'Home is where the heart is'** - Our research shows that people instinctively engage on local issues - and from there, strategic conversations can grow. We design our service and encourage our customers to use it in a way that makes local issues accessible to the wider public and simple to interact with. Trust in the planning system is an important ingredient of establishing rapport, but it is at rock-bottom. Trust can be built over time and all our evidence shows that longer community involvement leads to more constructive engagement. In wider, more strategic projects, **67% of responses on Commonplace** were supportive or neutral to the plans being consulted.

# Introduction

There has been a strong interest in brownfield sites as development locations for some time. The government's Levelling Up white paper has recently underlined the acceleration of this trend with funding and resources, such as the newly webified database of brownfield sites.

The [Levelling Up white paper](#) also makes it clear that engagement and community (mentioned 451 times in the paper) are priorities that will not be diminishing. So how do you bring brownfield sites and engagement together?

Commonplace is a community engagement platform that has been used on over 1,600 projects across the whole of the UK, engaging more than 5M people in the process - for developers, councils and housing providers. We are in the unique position of sitting across large numbers of engagement projects, which provides the opportunity to look at trends and to suggest best practice that will reduce project risks and uncertainty, and improve outcomes.

This report looks at 20 brownfield projects that have elicited over 8,000 comments from the public. We have sliced and diced this data to come up with insights and recommendations for anyone thinking about or starting a brownfield development project.



## **GREEN SPACE**

**"More green spaces where the community can come together during summertime for example"**

*- Suraj, 42, living with family in Peterborough*



## **CAR PARKING**

**"It would be lovely if we didn't need parking spaces, but it's just not realistic without better public transport."**

*- Marianne, 28, student in Newcastle upon Tyne*



## **LOCAL BUSINESS**

**"It is important to have independent shops close by for local people"**

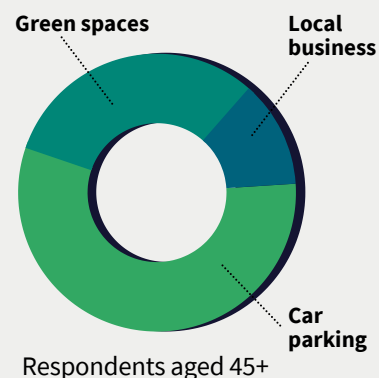
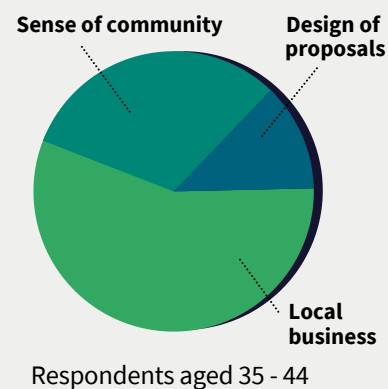
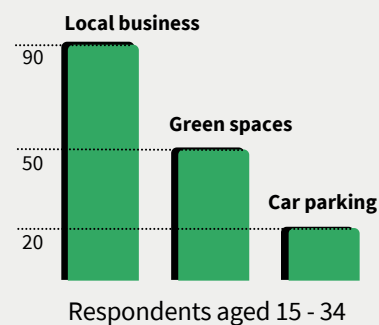
*- Yan, 35, recently moved to a London Suburb*

# Summary of findings and recommendations

When talking about brownfield sites, the potential to increase green space is consistently in the top three topics for all ages. For younger people, encouraging local business and retail is top of the list; whereas getting a fix on the provision of parking is what most motivates older people.

Overall, **parking, green space and local business** are the three most talked about topics in our research. Of these, car parking elicits the most negative feedback, and green spaces and local business the most positive.

## Top talking points by age



We also found five other important insights that create actionable recommendations. Continue reading..

# Recommendations

## 01. Age matters

Younger people are more positive and care about different things from older people. **Recommendation:** Use digital tools to target younger people earlier: you'll get a more constructive dialogue.



## 02. Green spaces

Or the most exciting thing about brownfields. **Recommendation:** Start early with digital engagement and co-design to attract positive and creative buy-in around green spaces.



## 03. Local business is everyone's business:

Diversity, convenience and jobs are the key: **Recommendation:** Use digital engagement to understand and capitalise on good news about the economic impact of regeneration.



## 04. Green space and car parking

New tools to talk about density. **Recommendation:** Use the popularity of green spaces to talk about trade-offs that can be made. Digital tools can help show scenarios.



## 05. Move to mobility

And away from the issue of car parking. **Recommendation:** Car parking can be a red flag. But integrated with a mobility discussion on public transport and cycling, it is less toxic.



## 06. A sense of community

To make community sense. **Recommendation:** People care about how their community will feel. Discussing it achieves buy-in. Showing examples is fantastic to maintain interest.



# 01. Age

Age of respondent has a significant impact on the response you can expect on brownfield sites. The most positive responses come from the youngest age groups: 15-24 and 25-34, while those likely to be most negative or challenging are in the 45-54 age group. This is reflective of the topics that draw most positive and negative comments: Younger people talk more about green space; older people talk more about parking.

## ● Recommendations

By targeting younger people and explaining green space priorities you'll get more positive responses. Digital tools like Commonplace, which are mobile first and use social media, are an excellent way to target younger people: we get a larger proportion of younger respondents than expected from the local population.

# 02. Green Spaces

There is very strong interest and positive sentiment in the potential to create new green spaces as part of brownfield development. The most talked about aspects are a desire to increase nature and biodiversity, because people believe this will increase the quality of life for people using the new development. However, there is a secondary aspect to some brownfield sites, which is that they have become used as 'meanwhile' green spaces, eg. for dog walkers. So in these cases the green space offer needs to be more compelling. This finding chimed strongly with our findings from our work on ParkPower.

## ● Recommendations

- Create an early listening phase to 'audit' or understand the demand for local green space, and prioritise its uses.
- Co-design is a great way to generate ideas and buy-in about green space and nature. We've found in some projects that people involved in the engagement will also volunteer to help upkeep green spaces in their neighbourhood. Commonplace has an exciting new raft of visual co-design tools such as our 'comment on an image' feature.
- Maximise the opportunity for new green space in proposals, and focus on this as a key message to communities.

# 03. Local Business

Interest in local businesses is driven by three factors in approximate order of popularity: convenience (eg. proximity of shops to new homes); a desire for diversity of local retail; and a need to support the local economy and jobs. This topic is particularly interesting for people aged 15-34: it is the most talked about in this age group. This is an ongoing theme from our research about young people in 2019, which showed that the local high street was the most important issue for younger people.

## ● Recommendations

- Use early-stage engagement to understand the relative importance of retail, lifestyle, leisure provision and jobs.
- Involve younger people on these topics. If they are a key age group then this topic should feature heavily in your engagement design. You will also then benefit from more constructive and creative feedback.



## 04. Trade Off

People recognise there is a trade-off between green space, car parking and density. More than 50% of people who talk about car parking also talk about either green space or density. Comments about building height and density gather some of the least positive comments.

### ● Recommendations

- Being clearer about such trade-offs will increase understanding and acceptance. Digital tools are a great way to demonstrate interactively how a trade off such as greater height can open the possibility of more or higher quality green space (which attracts more positive comments).
- If green space is given enough forethought and space (and the layout, design, usability is good) then respondents are more forgiving on issues of building height or density. There's less negativity.

## 05. Car Parking

Car parking is too often seen as a single issue rather than in relation to other transport and mobility. But when people do make the link between parking and either public transport or cycling and walking, they give much more positive feedback.

### ● Recommendations

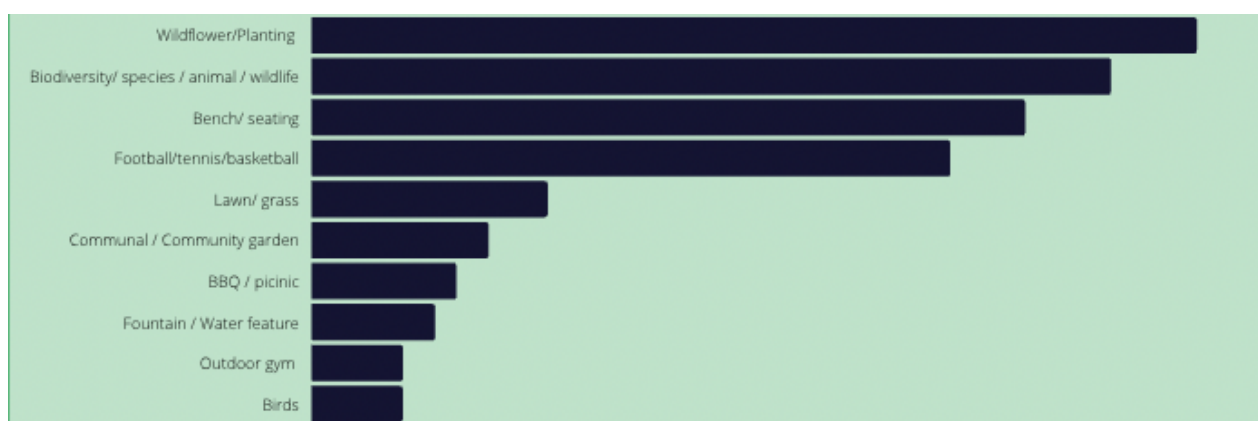
- In an early 'proactive listening' phase, gather as much information as possible about holistic mobility needs, including car parking but also public transport, walking and cycling provision, with consideration for e-bike / e-scooter charging. Digital tools like Commonplace's heatmap are ideal for this.
- If there is strong interest, think about prioritising this as a topic for co-design using digital or a hybrid of digital and non-digital techniques.



# Topic analysis in detail

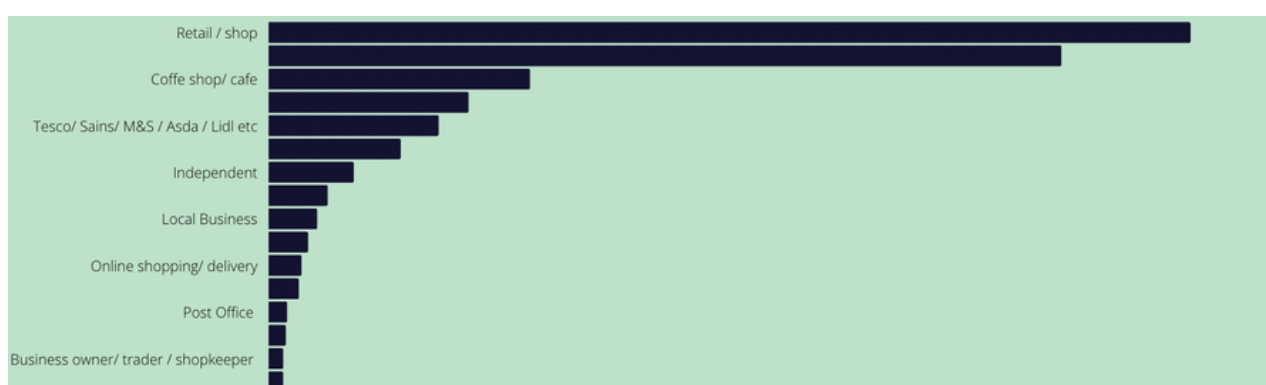
## Green space

The desire for biodiversity and nature are what drive the high interest in green spaces. This is consistent with findings from the ParkPower project that Commonplace and the LDN-Collective carried out with Get Living in 2020, which concluded that people use green space as a means of escape, which is significantly enhanced by nature.



## Local business and retail

In our 2020 report on young people, we found that the top concern for people aged under 30 was the experience of their local high street. It is reinforced again by this study. Everyone - but particularly younger people - want to be served by a diverse offering of independent local businesses. But this is not just a practical consideration, it is about lifestyle and quality of life. And it is also about a concern to create a vibrant local economy.

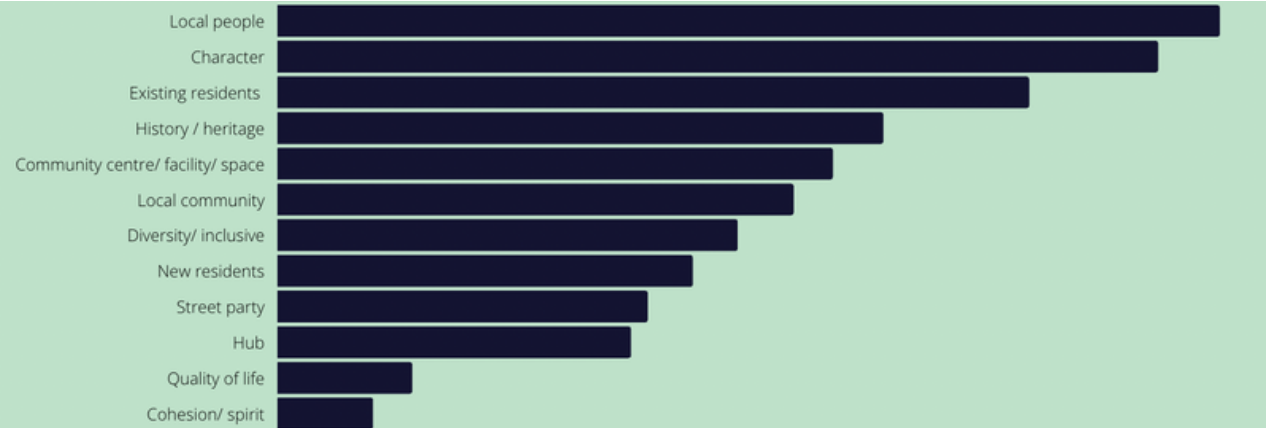


## Sense of community

Sitting just below the top three topics, the question of what creates a sense of community is a discussion that has high traction in our research. We think this is particularly interesting for two reasons: the idea of community features highly in the Levelling Up white paper (it is mentioned 451 times); and brownfield sites often have a rich and significant



history that people feel is important to the definition, character and heritage of the community. There is clearly a high level of interest in many different facets of this topic - including the opportunities to have fun together, such as street parties.



## Car parking

Car parking is less important to younger people, because fewer own cars. People aged 45-54 are most negative in relation to car parking, and their comments are primarily about perceived lack of availability of parking spaces for all residents. The main drive is for sufficient or more dedicated parking spaces. There is an interesting discussion topic around multi-storey or underground parking, which makes sense given that it could allow for greater green space, which is the major topic of interest for all ages.



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# Conclusions

When designing an engagement strategy for the development of a brownfield site there are some simple approaches to increase the constructive nature of the discussion. They are universal and will be equally valuable to developers, councils or housing providers. They fall into three categories:

- **Start early:** create a clear idea of community priorities before commissioning design. We suggest creating a 'Statement of Community Need'. Digital tools are fantastic at doing this quickly and at low cost. They give you a direct channel to the community, and particularly attract younger people. This will also give you early warning to plan around issues that could otherwise become roadblocks later in the project.
- **Address the big ticket items:** your early start will provide nuance, but you are likely to need to address green space, local business opportunities and car parking. We suggest ways of approaching all of these in our recommendations.
- **Communities want a sense of community:** particularly for brownfield sites, where there is often a rich history and heritage, there is huge value in leaning into this aspect of a project as much as possible. People value it and respond positively to being part of the sense of community being created.
- **The need for housing is accepted:** it's the quality of the place to live that is of interest. People want to get under skin of the topics that will make them feel like it's not just a place to live, but their place to live.

## Appendix

- **Engaging for the Future:** <https://www.commonplace.is/blog/introducing-engaging-for-the-future>
- **Parkpower:** <https://parkpower.commonplace.is/overview>
- **Young people's report:** <https://www.commonplace.is/youngpeoplereport>



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