

Digital Community Engagement 101

Everything you need to know about engaging communities.



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. We have helped 4.5 million people to engage with over 1,500 projects over the past seven years, enabling quicker, more consensual and more effective decisions about the future of their communities.

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During this period we have clearly identified **three vital ingredients for success:**

- The point at which **we start to engage communities**
- **How we do it**
- **Whether it is an ongoing process.** 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, **66% of responses on Commonplace** were supportive or neutral to the plans being consulted.

In this eBook you will find practical, evidence-based approaches and examples that will help you to run effective digital engagements that produce more responses and better data to inform your planning and decision-making.



Mike Saunders
CEO
Commonplace

Introduction

All of our data points towards a digital-first approach to engaging local communities and delivering the greatest reach and responses. But digital first does not mean digital only - and our aim is to encourage strategies that create user experiences encompassing online and face-to-face interactions.

A well-designed online strategy is an essential way to empower the local community and get the data you need to create positive change. Historically, local planning engagements have low engagement rates; a digital-first strategy can help reverse this by reaching many more people.

At Commonplace we always recognise that local people have the greatest knowledge about their area. By running an online community engagement correctly, you will be sending a clear message that you care about local views and are committed to taking them on board when considering future plans. Ensuring that you choose the right tools; start early; leave enough time, and host an open conversation that generates trust will all pay dividends in support and constructive collaboration.

This Engagement 101 guide covers the most important aspects of a digital consultation as well as how to create new value from the data you collect. In over **1,500 Commonplace projects** we've seen that continual and meaningful engagement really matters for all stakeholders because:



It removes the conflict that can alienate local people from being a part of planning decisions



It results in better decisions made more swiftly and with fewer obstacles since many of the problems can be resolved earlier in the process



It fosters long-term trusted relationships between residents, planning authorities and developers.

All in all, you can think of Commonplace as the essential underpinning you need to minimise planning risks.

Digital-First community engagement

Having worked on **over 1,500 projects** with more than **4.5 million unique visitors**, we have seen first-hand how continuous digital-first engagement isn't just a good approach, but a really exciting way forward for planning.

The opportunity is for planning to become part of the local conversation in a nuanced and continuous way, making communities better informed and more ready to adapt to and accept change, discuss its mitigations or explain objections to change.

For any community engagement project to be a success, it needs a well conceived and consistent communications strategy as part of it to get local people interested. Communities want to know they are a key part of the process before deciding whether they will participate and how they will respond.

Our definition of 'engagement' is a meaningful two-way conversation that achieves visible, positive and more collaborative change. However, by that definition, 'public engagement' is presently at a low ebb. In a recent survey we ran, only **27% of the public had ever taken part in a planning decision.***

Not only that, but of those who had engaged, twice as many had signed a petition to oppose a development compared to those who'd actually attended a public meeting. However, despite this worrying statistic, we also found that people still wanted to engage. In fact, 76% of respondents said that 'people need to be given a greater say over new developments in their local area.' One of the main barriers here is lack of awareness. **48% of the locals that took part in the survey had never even been aware of any local planning consultations.**

To break down these barriers, a strong, digital-first planning engagement strategy is essential. The average group of people who regularly attend town hall meetings in your area is most likely small and unrepresentative of the whole community. But they are important, and so your strategy has to be both digitally-led but also channel other methods too: fluidly combining on and offline. .

A purpose-built all-in-one platform for planning engagement can help remove the barriers more quickly and effectively. It will combine:

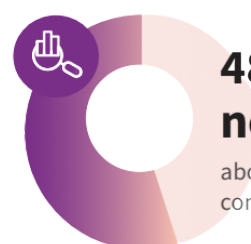
- **Accessibility**
- **Ease of use**
- **Consistency**
- **Enable data capture from online or offline events.**

More and better quality data from the local community transforms your engagement from a simple box-check to something that drives real value.


*Sample of 1003 people taken from our Engaging for the future report



76% want to participate in planning



48% have never heard
about a local planning consultation



People who live, work and play in any area have the most useful knowledge about it, so fostering a long, ongoing conservation can frequently surface new ideas

When it comes to engagement on strategic projects such as local plans (which only come around every five years), an already-involved community that has engaged in more specific conversations about travel, housing or regeneration will provide a great starting-point from an already experienced and involved community.

This approach has the potential to reduce costs by reducing time wasted through failed or reworked projects; through greater efficiency of data capture and analysis, and lower reputational risks associated with planning projects. It also gives you the best possible opportunity to deliver to the fully understood needs of the community, thereby increasing accountability and trust in elected representatives.

The Commonplace platform combines your surveys, map data, email and social media programmes into one responsive platform. You can think of it a little like **Google Maps, Survey Monkey, Google Analytics, a GIS platform, Mailchimp and Facebook Groups all combined into one coherent, easy-to-use package**. It keeps all your results together and shows exactly how many people are engaging. Other benefits include:

- **Accessibility:** The pandemic has shown not only how innovative online tools can be, but how important they are for members of the community to stay in contact. Having an online hub available 24/7 eliminates the need to craft meetings around people's schedules and lets the community view and comment on your project whenever it suits them.
- **A safe space for the community:** Commonplace as a platform was designed to empower communities and encourage citizen participation without fear of judgement. For example, other community members are able to upvote comments, but not downvote. This way, others can clearly show if they like an idea and, if they don't, can drop another comment and leave an alternative solution. This helps prevent any negative discourse and encourages more people to leave a pin if they feel there are other ideas to be explored.
- **Improved visibility:** As part of Commonplace, your engagement website will also rank much higher on Google if people search for it organically. Thanks to strong backlinks to both our website and yours, this will show search engines that it's a high quality website connected to many others.
- **Commonplace expertise:** You can also be sure that we will also be here to help you take your project from inception to completion and iron out any technical issues along the way.

“Commonplace has enabled us to reach thousands of residents and helped us better understand what they'd like about our town centre and what they'd like to see improved.”

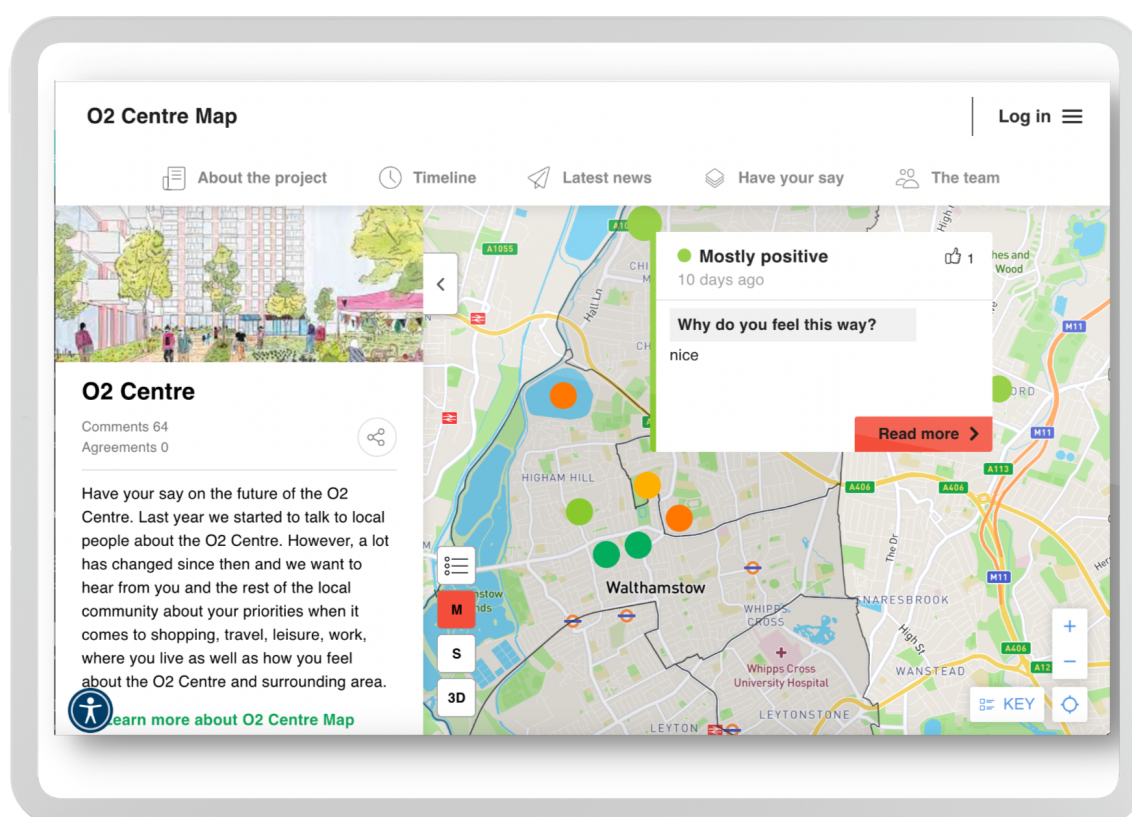
– Deborah Efemini, Town Centre Manager, Lewisham

*Sample of 1003 people taken from our Engaging for the future report

Five engagement gems to get your engagement projects flying

A successful community engagement will always be a process, not an event. It takes time to build trust with the community which isn't something that can be found overnight.

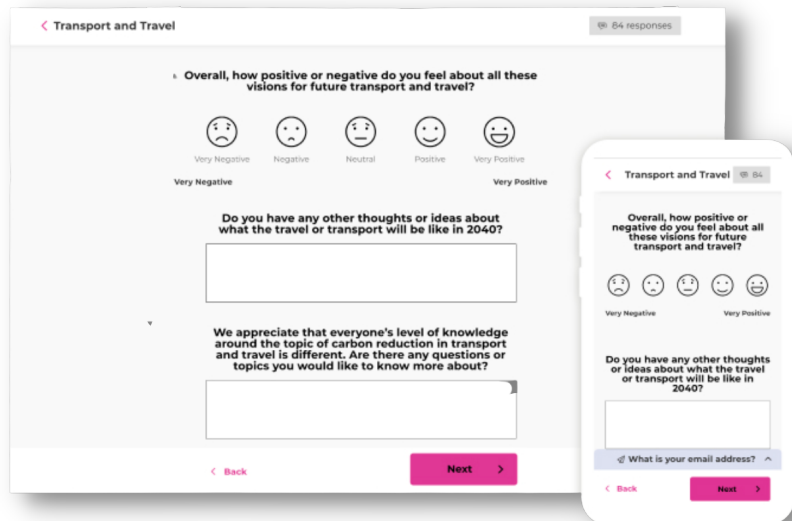
1. The importance of mapping



The flexibility of our engagement maps encourages a shared understanding of a community's needs. When setting up a map, it's easy for you to create custom shapes to draw attention to specific areas and even add informational layers so users can more easily understand the context of the project. When it comes to gathering insight, you can invite local residents to simply drop a pin and answer bespoke survey questions chosen and designed by you. Some of our partners have collected tens of thousands of comments on a single map project, all of which are visible to the rest of the public. By adding this layer of transparency, it creates a bigger sense of trust between an authority and their local people. With clear evidence that each comment is part of a big conversation that includes the whole community, people are much more likely to engage.

2. Super-powering your surveys

You can create quick and intuitive online surveys with our platform so your citizens can easily participate in decision making and feedback on your proposals. Our survey builder helps you to create and customise surveys using a range of different questions. We gathered data from a range of different projects to design questions that will get you the most useful data from your community but can also build in your specific question formats as well.



We know just how crucial it is to ask the right questions as these will get you the best quality data in the long run. It's all about choosing questions that not only gives the community a choice, but a choice that you'll be able to actually implement.

3. Visualisations vs Design Feedback

Your project will probably have a few different threads and messages which will need to be explained as clearly as possible. Thanks to our 'Design Feedback' feature, it's easy to get the interaction and feedback you need.

Commonplace can present your scheme in bite-sized chunks, and include a variety of content (including video and 3D models). You can ask targeted contextual questions, monitor feedback and respond to individuals or groups as well. As your engagement progresses, you can quickly update your plans, or open and close different sections which helps your audience stay on top of the different project phases.



4. Keeping the community updated



Email: If you have or could form a list of opt-in subscribers, you can contact them directly through email. You can send a steady stream of updates to show that progress is being made and highlight exactly how the community's participation has helped. This creates more transparency within your project and encourages people to continue engaging as well. Nothing shows that people are being listened to more than presenting exactly how they've bettered their neighbourhood. We also have a range of tried and tested email templates for you to use, so setting up a campaign is simple.



News Feed: No news is too small or post too big - if people have engaged they're going to want to know that their thoughts and efforts have actually achieved something. A lot of projects take time to show results on a ground level, but with the Commonplace 'New Feed' feature, you can easily write and publish updates directly to your community hub giving greater visibility to the successes of your project.



Social Media: Posting regular organic content helps keep your existing followers up to date while a well crafted paid campaign can reach those who haven't seen your project yet. Our team can help you set up a targeted campaign, focussing on factors such as age, location, interest and more.

5. Digital first, not digital only

A digital strategy will never ignore the benefits of physical engagement tools. In fact, it finds a way to incorporate them in the best way possible. At Commonplace, we always advocate for a blended approach to community engagement. Digital tools are a great way to enhance existing planning methods rather than replacing them completely.

- **Offline surveys:** You can either hand out physical surveys or use a tablet to capture opinions at exhibitions, town hall meetings, or community feedback on location.
- **QR codes:** To get people interested while on the street, our offline engagement pack helps you to generate designs so that you can set up QR codes on bus stops, billboards and more.
- **In person meetings:** If you find that a sizable portion of the community prefers to participate in person, there's always a place for physical meetings as well. To make it as accessible as possible, consider recording it and posting later or streaming live so the rest of the community can easily see what was discussed.



The right approach for your particular project

One of the challenges of engagement is that there isn't an out of box approach that works for every type of project. If you're engaging with people about a local plan it will be very different from a low-traffic neighbourhood, a new estate regeneration, a neighbourhood plan or a commercial development proposal.

To maximise participation, get the right type of feedback, and reduce your risks, it makes it much easier if you can start from a point of building on the success of others. It's always a good idea to incorporate the best ideas from watching how a particular project has been done successfully elsewhere. A huge benefit of digital platforms is that they can **build this into the heart of their engagement engine**: using clever templates, benchmarks and custom filters to apply accumulated knowledge and learning to each of your new projects.

Let's illustrate this with an example: if you are about to launch an engagement about low-traffic neighbourhoods you don't want to start with a template survey designed for local plans. Neither do you want your data analytics tools to think you are about to submit a housing planning application.


Commonplace meets this challenge by offering a number of specialist solutions that get your project up and running quickly, stop you making mistakes, and provide you with integrated best practice, tips, tricks and performance enhancements that are specific to your project.

Potential barriers and overcoming them

As you have seen from our data earlier in this eBook, people are hungry to engage and make positive change, so it's crucial to make it as easy as possible for them to do so. People **love their familiar areas and have deep connections** to the places they live, work and play - even if they think that there are some major improvements that could be made.

The reason that this hunger is not always translated into engagement numbers is because whether from fear, confusion or general lack of awareness, there are several barriers you need to factor into your planning before you even launch your website.

- **A lack of trust:** The single greatest barrier to engagement is a lack of trust in the planning process as a whole. This is a historic problem and can stem from a number of different areas.
- **Believing their thoughts won't be heard:** In a recent survey, we asked over 1000 people in the UK who they thought had the greatest influence on planning decisions. **58% thought the local council, 40% developers, and only 27% believed that the local people had any say.**
- **Thinking that there's no desire for the community to be involved:** 52% of people we asked said that new planning decisions were all taken 'in secret to avoid a public backlash.'
- **Distrust of planners:** When asked to rank whose views they listened to before deciding on whether or not to support local development, the same group of people revealed that the most trusted were residents associations and other locals with councillors or their local MP being trusted much less.



To break down these opinions, you need to clearly show how much you value community input and that this process isn't being done just because it's a legal requirement. It's more than just a survey or a map, it's about having an open and involved dialogue designed to make change that the local people both want and support. A digital-first strategy is a solution lead approach. If you lead with clear answers and an openness to tackle any and all concerns, then it helps mitigate some of that fear straight away.

This is also where a longer and more involved consultation process comes in. Trust in general is built over time and that includes when trying to gain the support of the community. A longer involvement usually leads to more constructive engagement and more strategically planned projects.

- **Lack of awareness:** As mentioned previously, **48% of our survey had never been aware of any planning consultations happening around them.** To break down this barrier, it all comes back to communication again, with plans like this needing to be part of a longer and ongoing conversation. Our research shows that four times more people take part in consultations on Local Plans when these are part of a number of local conversations rather than just a one-off event.
- **Confusion about what citizen participation means:** Another engagement barrier is that many people aren't exactly sure what it means to 'get involved.' Does it mean taking part in and organising meetings? Contacting planners directly? Leading public opinion? In our research, many people were scared to participate as they thought they'd have to take charge and they didn't want to risk appearing 'stupid' or 'ill-informed'. To tackle this issue, people not only have to have access to information, but they need to properly understand it as well.



Analysing your data

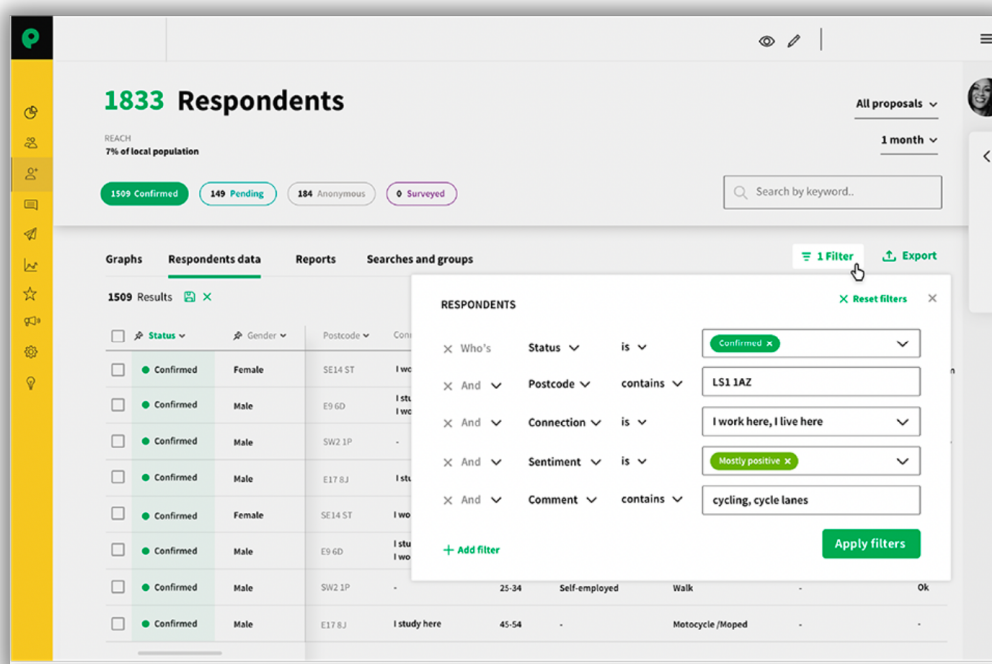
One of the greatest benefits you will derive from a digital engagement platform is that you will have straightforward, meaningful and timely access to all of the information that you collect. You will no longer need to wrestle Microsoft Excel line by line to create sensible insights, or to produce the chart that you want for your report.

Nor will you need to combine surveys from workshops, online forms and one-to-one conversations because all the data is in one place and a common format.

All of this and more should be built into the analysis engine of your digital engagement platform. On our Commonplace platform you get much more as well: we provide custom reports and filters for different project types, access to AI that can analyse even long-form text comments, and a set of nudges and suggestions to make your project more successful.

Having the right data and its correct interpretation at your fingertips, you can do all of this as you progress through a project rather than right at the end, which can be extremely valuable. Here are a few reasons why:

- **Collect balanced data:** Checking your surveys along the way is the best way to make sure you're collecting balanced data as well as getting a good cross-section of the local community as a whole. Our dashboard can collect a variety of data on those who participate in your engagement, including age, gender, ethnicity and the sentiment of their answer. If you notice that a group is being under-represented, you can concentrate your resources on encouraging members of that part of society to engage. That could be through a paid social campaign, email or by talking directly to community leaders. You can benchmark your findings against the latest ONS data to be sure.
- **Monitor sentiment:** You can also see how sentiments develop as your project goes on. If you notice a large number of negative comments after a while, you can see exactly when it started and see what you need to do to reassure those people.
- **Pick the top channels:** you can easily keep on top of which channels are the most effective at driving engagements. One key thing to remember is that once your project is completed, your engagement should still be ongoing. Keeping in touch with the community between works will keep that trust alive and help to show your genuine interest in the community as a whole.



Using data to help build a relationship will make an engagement work much harder for you and present ideas and project opportunities that you hadn't yet thought of. It flips the conversation, making the projects very much community-lead and giving local people the power to present their own ideas and make positive changes to the places they live, work and play.

“Commonplace has helped us understand more about the needs of businesses, visitors and residents in our area. It has given a valuable new perspective - we're delighted with what it's delivering.”
- Nadia Broccardo, Executive Director at Team London Bridge.

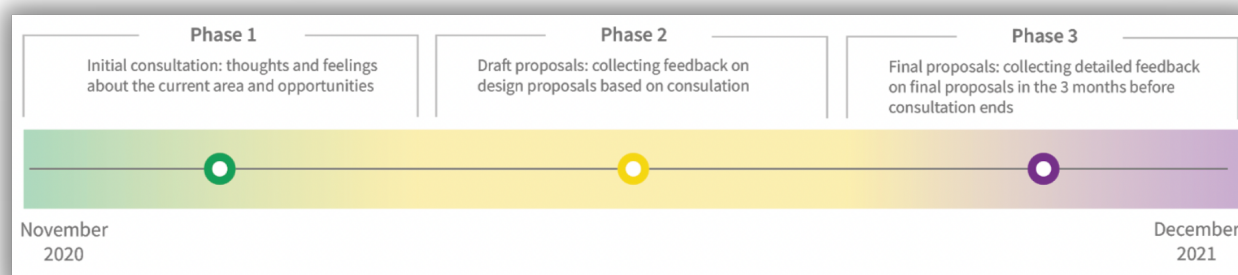
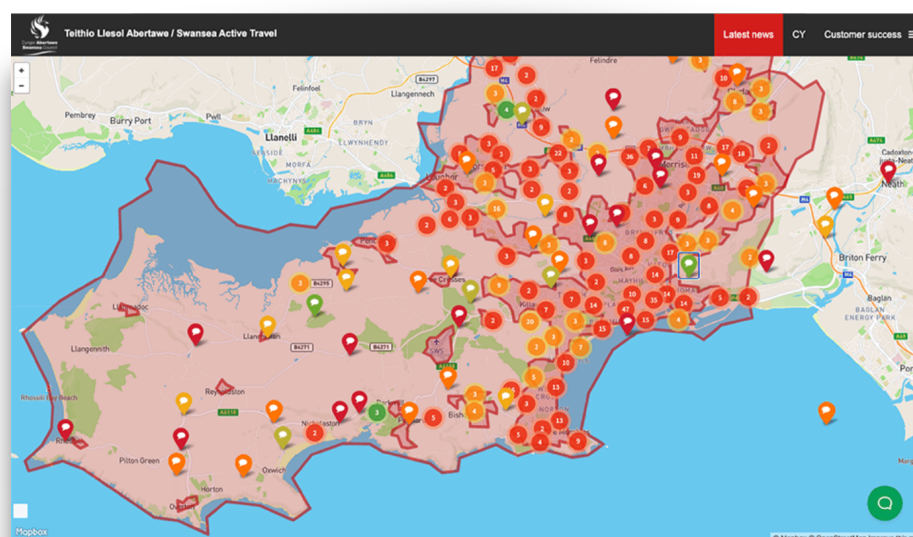
Engagement Examples

Check out a range of Commonplaces below to see how these engagement ideas work in practice:

Active Travel in Wales

Every three years, the local authorities across Wales update their active travel network plans. This is part of their commitment to the Welsh Active Travel Act 2013, which ensures that all Welsh citizens get the opportunity to have their say in the future of active travel in their local areas.

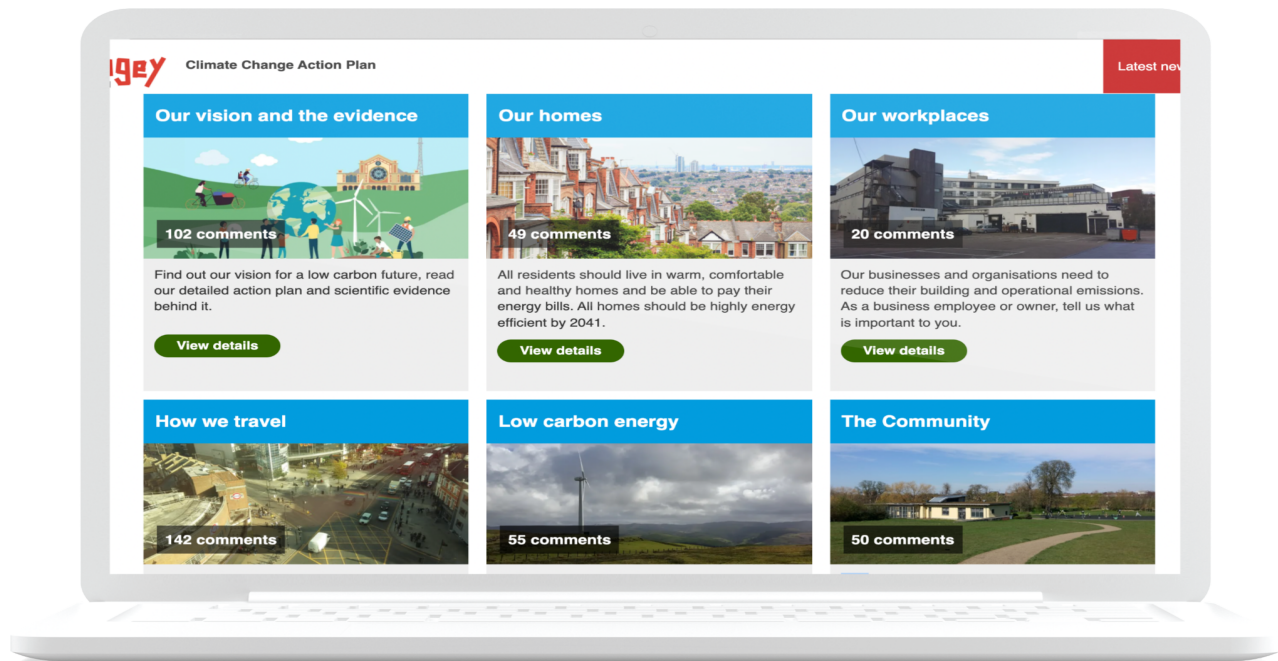
Using the Commonplace platform, the local authorities wanted to gather views from an accurate cross-section of the country so that their active travel network plan would be built on a foundation of community support.



During this three-phase consultation, they've gained **66,000 contributions** across **17 different sites** in the span of a year. This is showing just how clearly the local residents wanted new active travel opportunities. There has been a desire from residents across Wales calling to increase the safety and connectivity of travel networks, to enable accessible active travel across all age groups.

All these consultations culminated in a statutory consultation in the Autumn of 2021 ahead of finalised ATNMs being submitted to the Welsh Ministers at the end of December 2021. This will result in newly updated Active Travel plans in early 2022, all shaped by the real feedback from Welsh communities.

Climate action in Haringey



The London Borough of Haringey wanted to put the community at the centre of their new Climate Action Plan. Using Commonplace, they gathered the opinions of local residents and businesses to understand their views and ideas to help reach Net Zero Carbon by 2041.

Using Commonplace's Design Feedback tool, the local council broke down the elements of their plan so that local residents could more easily understand what was going on and comment if they had any thoughts or questions. It also gave residents the opportunity to see the real scope of the plan so the community could understand the gravity of what the council was really trying to achieve.

One of their areas for development is low-carbon community projects, to showcase the power and passion of the local community for this subject to other community members. To get the community's thoughts on existing or potential low-carbon community projects, they embedded a Community Heatmap under this proposal.

The consultation was a great success. In total, the project **collected over 700 contributions** including suggestions for new green spaces and solar panel installations across the area. **Over 70% of respondents** were very concerned about climate change and **over 85% stated** that climate change needs to be a larger priority.

LLDC masterplan consultation

The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC) is a regeneration agency responsible for the long term planning, development for Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park. To give local people the chance to show their views and opinions on new neighbourhoods there, LLDC launched a Commonplace engagement together with VU.CITY.

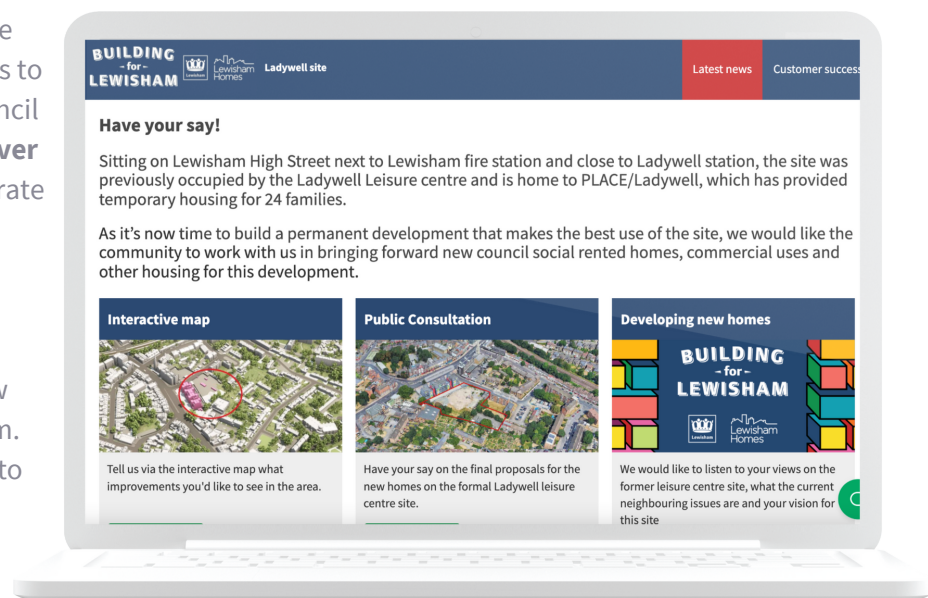
The Pudding Mill and Bridgewater sites will together deliver **1,500 new homes** and a workspace for up to **2,000 people**. For such an ambitious project, it was important to get feedback from local people on the proposals and hear their suggestions so work wouldn't be slowed down.

As part of the Design Feedback tool, LLDC worked with Commonplace to incorporate clear VU.CITY visualisations of each site. Locals could view the development in 360 and understand what it would like from different focal points in the surrounding area. This immersive experience meant that users visualise and analyse the developments in a completely new way and engaging way.

Housing developments around the Ladywell Leisure Centre

Organised by Lewisham Council, Building For Lewisham and Lewisham Homes, this consultation brought together the views of local people on what they would like to see done with the vacant site once occupied by the Ladywell Leisure Centre.

With London in the midst of a severe housing shortage, the main goal of this project was to increase the number of council houses across Lewisham. **Over 2,300 families** are in desperate need of this kind of accommodation and the Ladywell site was acknowledged as a great potential space to build new permanent housing for them. The centre is already home to PLACE/Ladywell, which has **provided temporary housing for 24 families**.



They ran a public consultation from October to November 2021 to explain their initial plans for the development and gain the citizen's views on these ideas. They used both a heatmap to gather feedback on specific areas as well as a number of carefully selected surveys to gather insight on how the new site could benefit the community. All of the proposal documents are still live for the community to view at their leisure throughout the next stages of development.



Outro

At Commonplace, we have the expertise and passion to create a platform for a vast range of projects you might be planning to deploy or already are working on. Having worked on **over 1,000 different engagement websites in the past 8 years** we now have all the data, templates and question formats you'll need to get the most out of your community consultation.

In time, we became very proficient and developed a quick turnaround on bespoke features, hence we are always curious in learning - but also coming up with ideas of - what could be the 'little extra' that would help your project to become an outstanding one.

- If you'd like to discover how a digital-first consultation platform can encourage more positive participation in your area, feel free to book a free Demo HERE: <https://www.commonplace.is/demo>

Or, if you are still on a learning curve, we can help you via our other free resources below:

- Engaging for the future white paper: <https://www.commonplace.is/ebook-engaging-for-the-future>
- Climate Hub guide: <https://www.commonplace.is/ebook-climate-emergency-guide-community-climate-change-action-plan>

**Interested in
booking a free
Demo?**

Get in touch with our team



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