



Engaging for the Future

January 2021

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.



**Mike Saunders,
CEO
Commonplace**

Our online tools empower communities to engage with planners, developers and decision-makers. We have helped 2.5 million people to engage with over 1,000 projects over the past 7 years, enabling quicker, more consensual and more effective decisions about the future of their communities.

The Government has recently launched its consultation on planning reforms with the Planning for the Future white paper. This is a once-in-a-generation opportunity to re-shape the planning system to make it fit for the years ahead. Within this vision, the Government has been clear that more effective engagement of communities in plan-making is a priority, and that harnessing digital technology to give neighbourhoods and communities an earlier and more meaningful voice is the way to do this.

As specialists in digital community engagement, we wish to use our data and experience to help inform the Government's vision to put public engagement at the heart of their planning reforms. To fortify our own data and experience, we commissioned Public First to conduct public opinion research including a UK-wide poll of 1,003 people and two focus groups.

In this report we have combined insights from our own data with this new research, which together demonstrates a huge appetite and desire for greater involvement in planning. The issue is not that people don't care, but that there are a variety of barriers to them actually participating.

In the seven years Commonplace has been delivering digital public engagement to local authorities, private developments, social housing and infrastructure, three things have become clear: the point at which we start to engage communities; how we do it; and whether it is an ongoing process are all vital ingredients for success. There is no 'too soon' to start talking to people who will be most affected by changes to their neighbourhoods. And crucially for this discussion, the longer the engagement, the greater a community's capacity to meaningfully engage with strategic as well as immediately local questions.

The approach to engagement we propose could more accurately be described as the building of a relationship that deepens and evolves over time. The planning system should view engagement as a conversation not a survey, a process not an event. It is difficult to envision this being possible unless such a conversation takes place throughout the planning lifecycle, rather than just during the relatively brief window of local plan-making.

The way to begin a plan-making 'conversation' is the same as any other conversation: establish who we are talking to; discuss our respective interests; and create a rapport - before tackling topics that require deeper thought, reflection or debate.

Trust is an important ingredient of establishing rapport. We know that trust in the planning system is at rock-bottom. Trust is built over time and all our evidence shows that longer involvement also leads to more constructive engagement with wider, more strategic planning projects: 66% of responses on Commonplace are supportive or neutral to the plans being consulted.



**The planning system should view engagement as a conversation
not a survey, a process not an event.**



We strongly endorse the Government's 'digital-first' approach to giving the public maximum access to information, while allowing them to decide for themselves how much or little involvement they want. But digital-first should not mean digital-only: part of the digital opportunity is the ability to identify gaps in engagements in real time, so that resources can be better targeted at people who might otherwise be excluded.

An important learning from our research is about language and identity: in our focus groups we found that certain concepts or phrases resulted in us talking either at cross-purposes or in specialist language that people simply did not understand. Two examples illustrate why this is a problem: Firstly the phrase 'taking part' in planning was often interpreted as taking a leading role that people felt unable or unwilling to do. Secondly, the phrase 'levelling-up' is not something that most people in our Middlesbrough focus groups had even heard of. When the meaning was explained, they didn't like the implications that there was any levelling up needed in their towns, for which they feel an intense civic pride.

We write this report in the midst of the Covid pandemic lockdowns. Despite the gravity and desperation of this crisis, we have seen a surge of interest and connection to communities and local neighbourhoods: over 1.5M people have engaged in 750 conversations on Commonplace around the UK since the beginning of 2020.



**Over 1.5m people have engaged in 750 conversations on
Commonplace around the UK since the beginning of 2020.**



There has never been a better time for the planning system to establish a framework for the kind of continuous conversations that can harness this enthusiasm to make better decisions about places that benefit everyone.

Introduction

This report brings together data collected on our platform from over 1,000 projects across the UK, with new public opinion research commissioned by Commonplace and delivered by Public First.

The Public First research comprised an online poll and two focus groups. The online poll received 1,003 responses from UK adults between the 6th and 12th October 2020. Results are weighted by interlocking age and gender, region and social grade. Public First is a member of the British Polling Council and abides by its rules. Full tables are available [here](#). Two focus groups were then conducted virtually with residents in south Middlesbrough on 14 October 2020.



To draw conclusions from our own data we have analysed the behaviour of respondents on the Commonplace platform, using anonymised data drawn from the over 1,000 projects that have been run on our platform.

This report has been written in response to the Government's Planning for the Future white paper and focuses specifically on the issue of community engagement: how the public understand and respond to planning; what the barriers are to them engaging with it; what they want and don't want; what constitutes good and effective engagement; and how it can be done digitally to maximise the benefits.

Our concern is that careful understanding should be given to the mechanics of online engagement, so that the Government's impressive ambition for greater engagement in plan-making can be successfully fulfilled.

Proposal 8 of the white paper is 'a streamlined, more engaging plan-making process'. It sets out steps to speed up the decision-making process in which it says: "We propose that the process covers five stages, with meaningful public engagement at two stages". We don't believe this is sufficient for the Government's ambition or for the needs of the planning system: successful engagement has to be not only at every stage of the plan-making process, but throughout the whole five to ten year planning cycle.



In this report we demonstrate through new public opinion research, analysis of our own data, and illustrative examples, that continual and meaningful engagement really matters for all stakeholders because:

- It helps remove the conflict that can alienate local people;
- 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.

Engagement in planning also matters to a national Government that wants to revitalise, rebuild and re-imagine those communities most in need of regeneration: the so-called ‘levelling-up’ agenda. Engagement is vital to ensure that those people who feel so connected to their local communities, and have such civic pride in the places they live, also feel ownership over the future of their cities, towns and villages. We hope that this report makes the case that such engagement is only really successful when it is done early on in the process and continues throughout – from strategic principles to final build and use of a development.

Executive Summary

Commonplace is a digital engagement platform that has involved nearly two million people in planning decisions about places where they live, work and play. This report combines our existing evidence and data with new insights which we hope will help share the Government's proposed planning reforms.



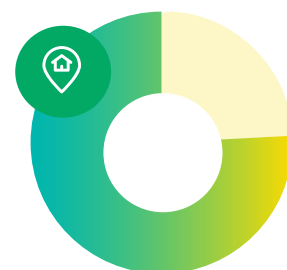
1. Successful engagement is a conversation not a survey; a process not an event

Commonplace data collected over seven years, and from 2.5 million people and 1,000 projects, has clearly demonstrated the value of longer-term, continuous engagement in planning to increase involvement and build trust: our data shows that people who have previously engaged in a consultation by reading or interacting are 5 times more likely to participate themselves by adding a comment. To better understand the reasons behind this, we commissioned a national-wide survey of 1,003 people and conducted focus groups in Middlesbrough.

2. Desire for long-term involvement in planning

The results of our survey demonstrated that the public want to be continually involved in how planning affects them:

- People want to participate in planning: 76% of our polling sample thought that 'people need to be given a greater say over new developments in their local area.'
- People want to be kept continually involved: 71% of people we polled said that it was important to them 'to have access to regular updates on planning issues.' Only 8% said it was unimportant.



76% want to participate in planning

3. Demand for strategic input: ill-informed and left out

- On the question 'I do not know what developments to expect in my local area going forward', 59% of our polling sample agreed and only 14% disagreed.
- More than half of our sample (55%) said 'there is rarely any point opposing a development at the planning [application] stage as it will likely go ahead anyway.'
- When asked whether 'new developments are at odds with what people who live in my local area want', 50% of our sample agreed and only 10% disagreed, agreements rising to 61% amongst the oldest group (65+), 58% amongst Conservative supporters and 65% for those who live in villages.

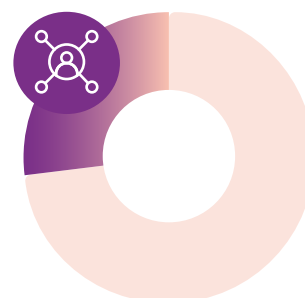
Overcoming barriers

Our report itemises and details some of the barriers that we have identified to engagement with evidence and proposals for breaking them down.

4. We found several important barriers engagement

These barriers go some way to explaining why Grosvenor found that only 7% of people trust local government to make decisions in the best interests of their area, and only 2% trust developers to act in an honest way in planning for development:

- **There is a lack of awareness of planning:**
48% of our polling sample said they had never even been aware of a local planning consultation.
- **Current engagement with the planning system is low and negative.**
Only 27% of our sample had taken part in a planning decision. Of those who had engaged, twice as many signed a petition to oppose a development (60%) as attended a public meeting (32%)
- **People do not feel that their voices are heard when planning decisions are made.**
When asked who had the greatest influence on planning outcomes, 58% thought the local council; 40% developers; and only 27% thought local people.
- **People feel that the planning system as a whole lacks transparency and that decisions are taken behind closed doors.**
Over half of our sample (52%) said that planning decisions about new developments were taken ‘in secret to avoid a public backlash.’
- **Our poll respondents trust their neighbours much more than planning decision-makers.**
Asked to list in order of importance whose views people listened to before deciding on whether or not to support a local development, the most trusted were residents associations (75%) and neighbours (70%). Local councillors (58%) or their local MP (48%) held significantly lower trust.
- **There is a misconception about what participation means.**
In our qualitative research, we found confusion about what is meant by ‘taking part’ in planning decisions with many people reluctant to participate for fear that they would have to play a leading role (organising meetings, for example) for which they felt ill-equipped. In our polling sample we found that only 11% of people knew ‘how to take part in a consultation about developments’ and felt that they had a say in the outcome. 52% did not know how to take part in a consultation (36% plus 14% who selected ‘don’t know’).

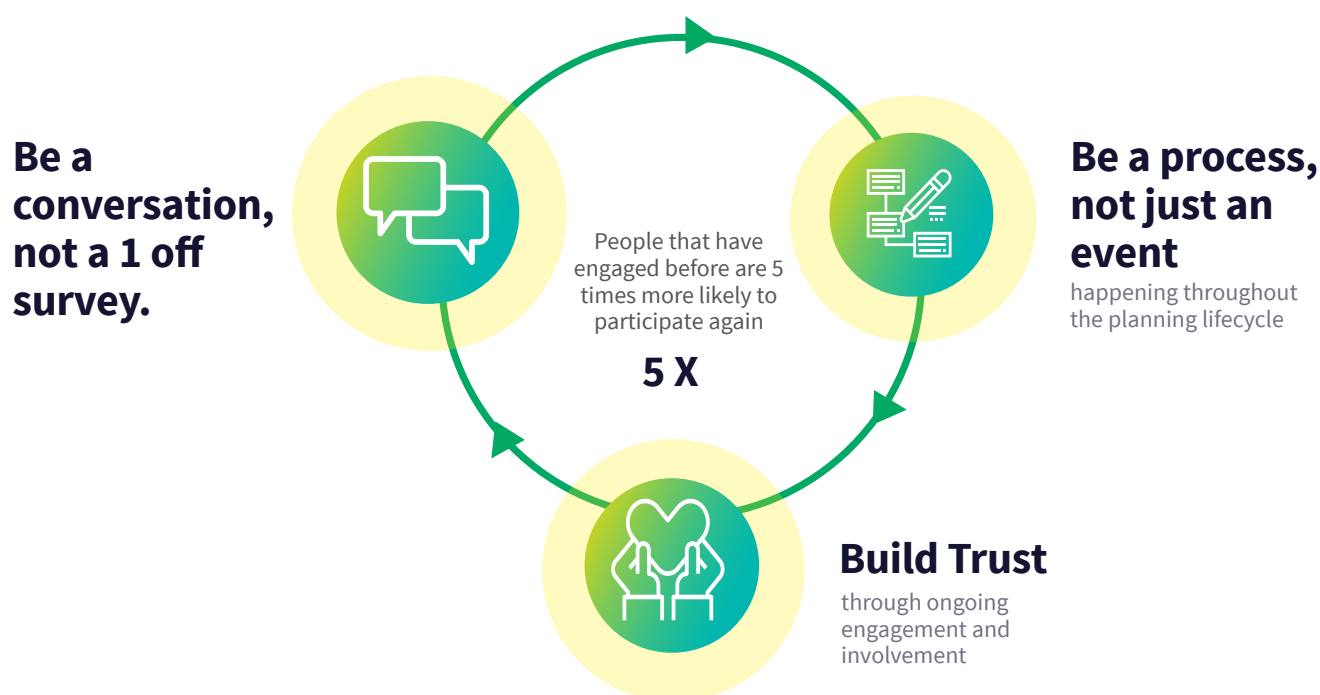


But only 52% have ever taken part.

We asked why?

5. Data shows how barriers can be overcome through open and ongoing engagement

- **There is demand to be tapped using digital engagement.**
Over 2.5M people have visited and read Commonplace engagements, resulting in 1.5M responses.
- **People want to be involved longer-term in connected conversations:**
87% of Commonplace respondents want to be notified about other local engagement opportunities. On average, a Commonplace respondent contributes 6 times.
- **Responses are higher from an already engaged community.**
People who have previously engaged in a consultation by reading or interacting, are 5 times more likely to participate again by adding or agreeing to a comment.
- **More people respond when they see their neighbours responding:**
people are twice as likely to add their own comment when there are many other comments (more than 1,000) to read, as if there are few comments (25 or less). The openness of Commonplace offers a 'social proof' of the process. This resonates with the insight from our polling that people trust neighbours highly when it comes to deciding whether to support a planning proposal.
- **Open, longer-term engagement is constructive:**
When people participate via the Commonplace platform, their responses are constructive: 66% are actively supportive or neutral to the plans being consulted. There are several examples of this trend in case studies throughout the report.



Recommendations

We are supportive of the ambition and digital-first approach of the Planning for the Future white paper, and make the following recommendations to ensure that the ambition can be achieved:

1. Development of interoperability standards so that:

- Local planning authorities can easily work together to ensure that engagement is not limited to their boundaries, when neighbourhoods and infrastructure cross boundaries.
- The benefits of digital engagement in visual, map-based planning can be more easily and broadly accessible.

2. Development of exemplar engagement guidance demonstrating the benefits of developing and nurturing trusted conversations with the public over time, so that strategic conversations don't have to be conducted from a standing start, insights are more informed and useful, and collaboration starts to replace combat.

3. A digital-first approach significantly widens participation but should not replace traditional forms of engagement. Our research shows that 78% of our poll respondents use the internet to pay household bills and 79% to do online banking. Access to online information and consultation has the potential to vastly increase the pool of participants on local land-use planning. It can also be used to enhance rather than replace traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings, paper surveys and phone calls. A hybrid approach, for example using tablets at events, allows for a very broad representation of views and can also bring people who have not hitherto experienced it, into an online conversation. People need to be able to participate in the manner that suits them best.

4. Strong and clear expectations in the planning legislation that:

- Public engagement should be open and transparent to everyone.
- There is an expected engagement timetable with very clear feedback loops and opportunities for regular and open updates.
- Public engagement should happen throughout the lifecycle of plan-making and development management. This could be achieved by a Statement of Community Involvement (or similar document) being submitted in the planning application for any proposal in a Growth, Renewal or Protect zone.
- A 'Statement of Community Need', which expresses the collective needs of a community and explains how these needs will be met through local outcomes, should be added to the Statement of Community Involvement as a standard planning document.



Part 1

Engagement challenges and opportunities

Communities want to engage, so what is stopping them?

It is well known that levels of public and community engagement with the planning system are extremely low. Low engagement levels, though, are not an indication of apathy – quite the opposite. In both our own data and in opinion research we have found a huge and unmet appetite within communities to engage, for example, 71% of people we polled said that it was important to them ‘to have access to regular updates on planning issues.’

We examine here the barriers to engagement and present our evidence-based proposals for how those barriers can be broken down. We also highlight case studies of the positive and constructive community engagement that results from enabling participation.

Of course I care about the future of my local area, but I don’t know how to get involved. The information to do that isn’t always readily available.

Young woman in her early twenties, Stokesley



Image: Mosaic Place, Brighton Road

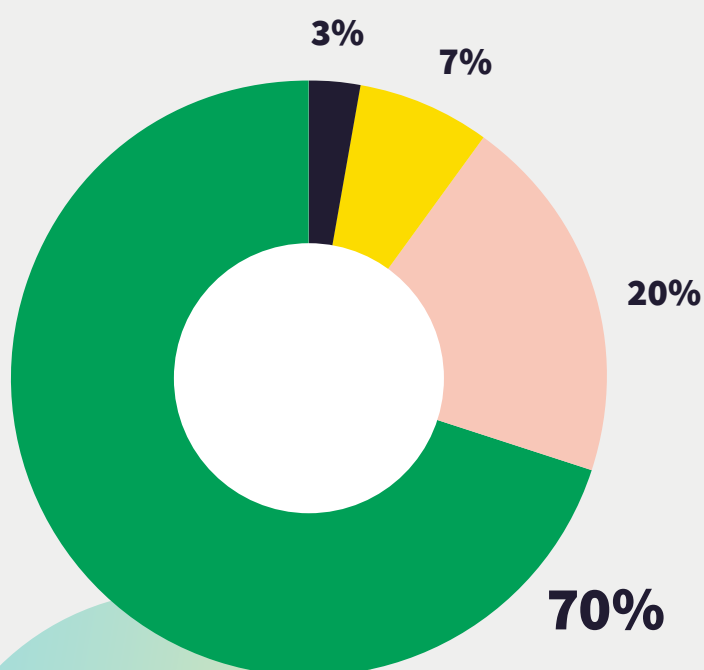
Engagement

Engagement with the planning process is low and negative

Our definition of ‘engagement’ is a meaningful two-way conversation that achieves visible, positive and more collaborative change. Under that definition, engagement with the planning process is, currently, low and negative.

When we asked if people had ever taken part in a consultation on a local planning development, 70% of our sample said that they had not. Of the 27% of people who had taken part, only 32% had attended a public meeting compared with the 58% who had signed petitions. Even then, 60% of those who had engaged did so to oppose an application.

The problem, though, is not that people are unwilling to engage nor that they are apathetic. Rather it is the way in which they are given opportunities to participate in the conversation.



**Have you ever taken part in a consultation about a local development?
e.g. housing or a new school**

- No
- Yes
- Yes, on multiple occasions
- Don't know

Future say

People love their communities and want to have a say in their futures

Particularly in our qualitative research, we found an overwhelming sense of civic pride. People love their towns and communities and feel deeply rooted in the places they live, even if they think that their towns are run down or have seen better days. When people in our focus groups were negative about their town centres, they always tried to add something positive about the area as a whole.

It's very run down.

There's a lot of homeless and drug users which is not nice to walk through, but the beach is amazing.

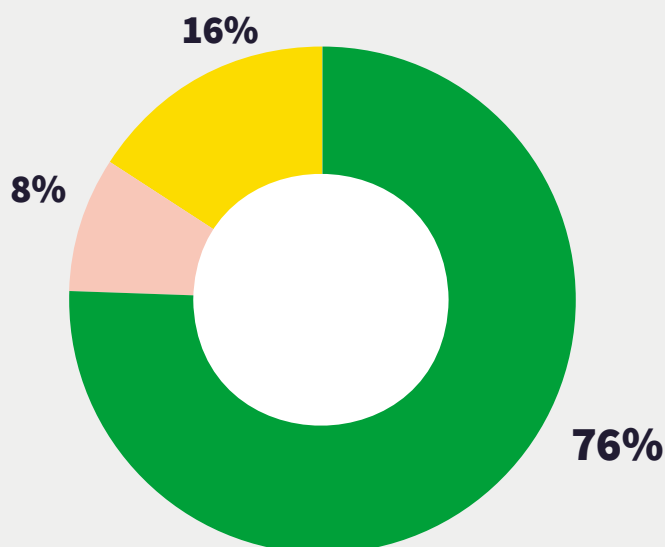
Woman in her twenties, Redcar

The town centre is in decline but there's a lot in the general area.

There's a lot of places you can get to like the North Yorkshire Moors just down the road.

Man in his late forties, Coulby Newham

People want to participate and have their say: in our polling, 76% said that 'people need to be given a greater say over new development in their local area.' And yet, when it comes to taking decisions that will impact the longer-term future of their areas, people are not taking part in decisions. So, what are the barriers preventing people from engaging?



Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- People need to be given a greater say over new developments in their local area
- People should have less power to stop new developments in their local area
- Don't know

Trust

A lack of trust in the system is the greatest barrier to engagement

The single greatest barrier to engagement is a lack of trust in the planning process as a whole. This is nothing new. Studies over many years have drawn the same conclusions, most notably the Grosvenor report in July 2019 which found that only 7% of people trust local government to make decisions in the best interests of their area and only 2% trust developers to act in an honest way in planning for development.²



Maybe people are trying to involve you just because it looks good to involve the public and get people's public opinion when in reality decisions are often made in advance and it's all just ticking a box.

Man in his forties, Coulby Newham



If people cannot trust the process, they are far less likely to engage with it and far more likely to be dissatisfied with the outcome. In our own opinion research, we found that those people who had taken part in a planning consultation, but were dissatisfied with the process, 76% said that 'it felt like a foregone conclusion', 49% thought that 'it felt like nobody listened to my opinions' and 26% felt that the process was conducted in such a way that 'some people were unable to take part'. We also found numerous examples of people who had been let down or promises that had remained unmet which had led to a loss of faith in the planning system.

2% of people

Trust developers to act in an honest way in planning for development.

7% of people

Trust local government to make decisions in the best interests of their area.

² [Grosvenor - Building Trust Report 2019](#)

There are many reasons behind this lack of trust, but chief among them are perceptions of a lack of influence over decisions and that the system as a whole is opaque and impenetrable for ordinary residents which speaks to another key barrier: knowledge. People do not know how to access the planning system, nor the information that would allow them to participate.

We take these barriers in turn.

76%

Said that ‘it felt like a forgone conclusion’

49%

Thought that ‘it felt like nobody listened to my opinions’

26%

Felt that the process was conducted so ‘some people were unable to take part’



Round the corner from my mum in Stockton they were supposed to build a park and there’s just been a fence round it for two years. So, I think if they say they’re going to do something they need to stick to it.

Woman in her sixties,
Newby



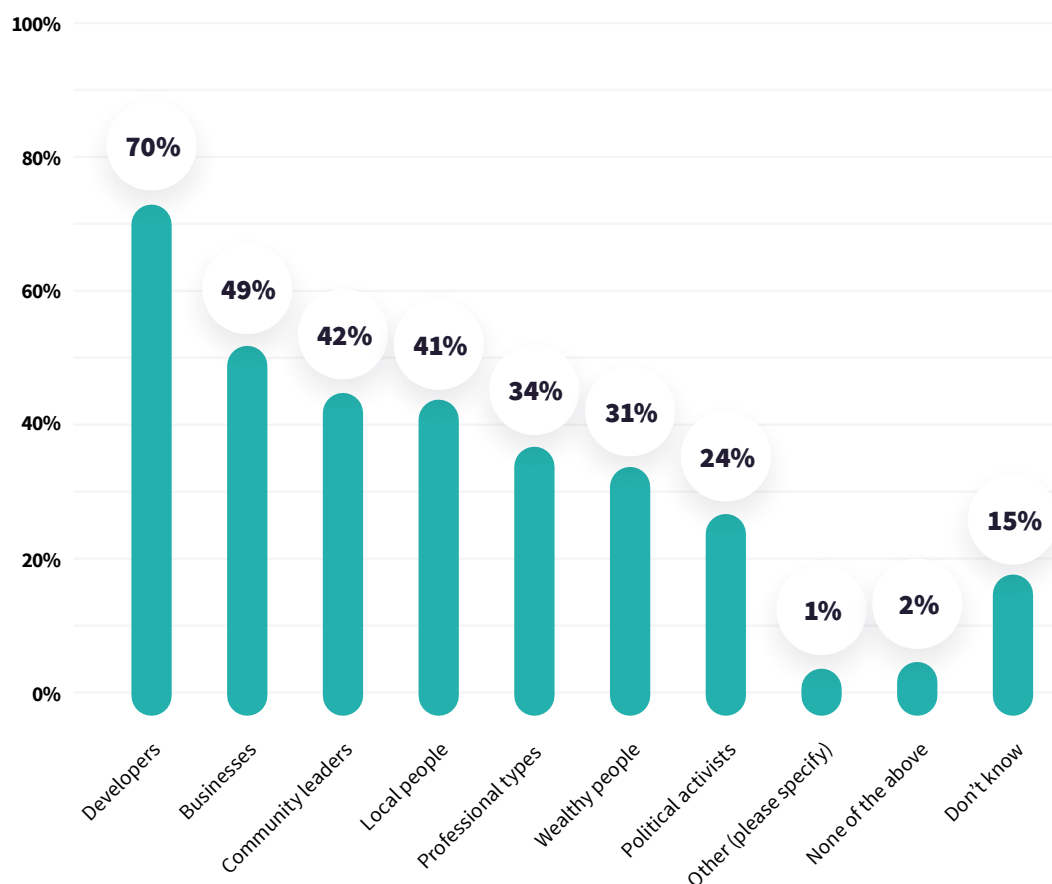
Influence

People feel that their voices do not matter and are not heard in the planning process

People do not feel that their voices are heard when planning decisions are made. When asked who had the greatest influence on planning outcomes, 58% thought the local council; 40% developers; and local people only 27% (on a par with ‘wealthy people’). More than half (55%) said ‘there is rarely any point opposing a development at the planning stage as it will likely go ahead anyway.’

The perception that local residents (41%) played a less significant role in the planning process than developers (70%), businesses (49%) and community leaders (42%) was particularly stark when we asked the question ‘What sort of people take part in the planning process?’

What sort of people take part in the planning process?

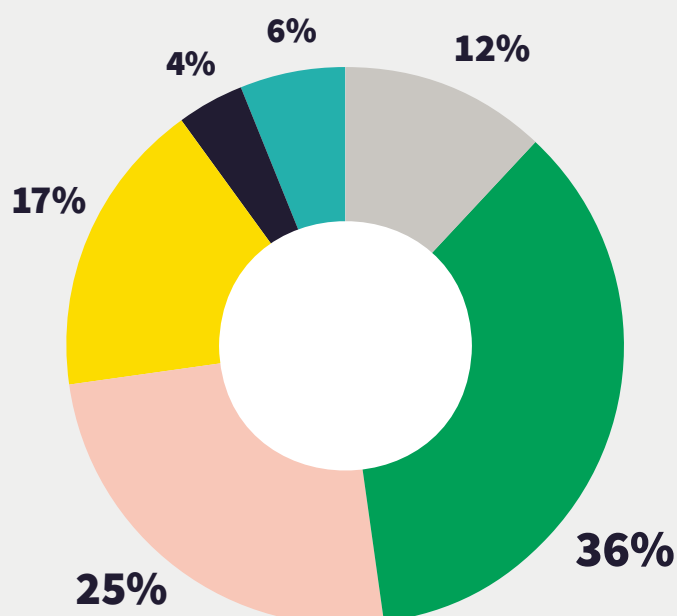


This was reflected in our qualitative research where people simply did not believe that councils or developers wanted to engage nor that they would act on what they heard. There was a general sense of futility in being involved in the process and a feeling that engagement would not lead to positive change – so why bother?

It just depends if something came out of it. Not that you get involved and nothing comes of it.

Young woman, Coulby Newham

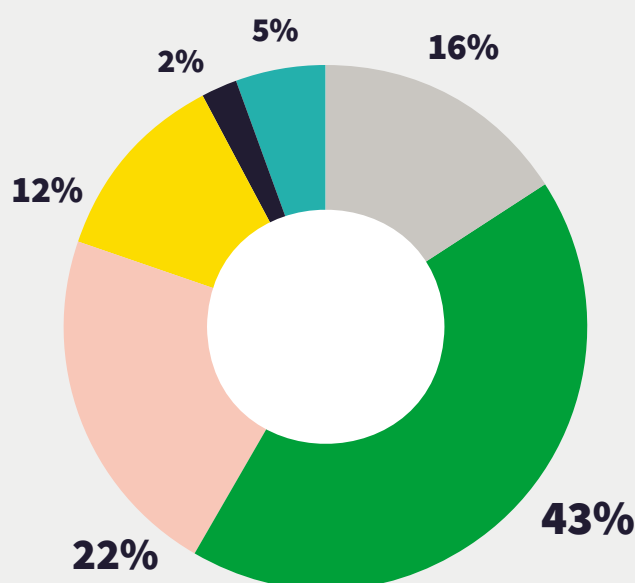
The perceived lack of influence over decisions that impacted the local areas in which people lived, left them feeling that they had no control or power over the future of the places they lived and cared deeply about. Rather, there was a sense of resignation that things just happened. Over half (55%) of our poll sample agreed with the statement ‘there is rarely any point opposing a development at the planning stage as it will likely go ahead anyway’ (only 15% of people polled disagreed).



New buildings and developments seem to just appear in the local area with no warning a lot of the time

- Strongly agree
- Strongly disagree
- Don't know
- Agree
- Disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

When we asked if people thought that 'new buildings and developments seem to just appear in the local area with no warning', 48% agreed while only 21% disagreed. On the question whether 'new developments are often at odds with what people who live in my local area want', 50% agreed and only 10% disagreed, a figure which rises to 61% among the oldest group (65+), 58% amongst Conservatives, and 65% among those who live in villages. On the question 'I do not know what developments to expect in my local area going forward' 59% agreed and 14% disagreed.



Thinking about the area that you currently live in, would you tend to agree or disagree with the following? 'I do not know what developments to expect in my local area going forward'

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Don't know
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree
- Neither agree nor disagree

The sense that things just happened to people and the places where they lived in a way that was beyond their control was even stronger in the focus groups where several of the participants were unhappy with the large-scale changes ‘just happening’ without them even realising until they see the demolition taking place. This was in spite of them thinking that regeneration was desperately needed in their area.

If the feeling of not having a voice and not being able to influence decisions leads to a sense of disempowerment, then the lack of transparency in the process further exacerbates a lack a trust in the planning system as a whole.



I went into the town centre for the first time in a while and they were knocking down old student accommodation. They were knocking full streets down. Nobody knew anything about it. It should have been more publicised to have meetings so people could have gone and listened to the plans.

Woman in her sixties, Newby



Transparency

“There has to be more transparency for trust to be there” Woman in her twenties, Stokesley

Over half of our sample (52%) said that planning decisions about new developments were taken ‘in secret to avoid a public backlash.’ Such a lack of transparency leads inevitably to a lack of trust. This problem was raised repeatedly in our focus groups as a barrier to engagement.



I think what you need from local councils to allow you to trust them more is more transparency.

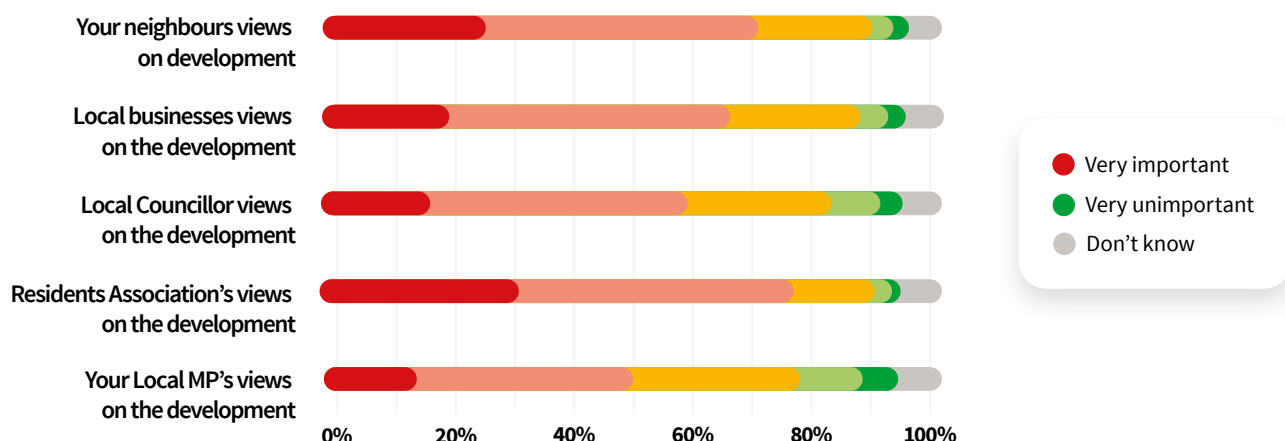
Man in his thirties, Maske



But the issues of trust and transparency are deeper than just the planning process and include who people trust. In our polling we asked people to list in order of importance whose views people listened to before deciding on whether or not to support a local development.

Neighbours (70%) are highly trusted, but the most trusted group were residents' associations with 75%. Arguably these are groups of neighbours too, and both were much more trusted than local businesses (65%), local councillors (58%) or their local MP (48%). Fundamentally, the closer and better known someone is, the more trusted they are, so these figures may also reflect how remote a person or organisation is perceived to be.

In a public consultation on a development happening in your area, how important are the following to whether you would support the development:



You have to gain trust and it's done by word of mouth.

I would trust someone if one of my friends says these people will do what they say they'll do.

Young woman, Redcar

I've never heard of them ever trying to take people's opinions on board, so if I thought that they really wanted to hear our opinions then I think more people would get involved.

As long as they took people's opinions on board.

Young woman, Coulby Newham

If there was a genuine platform to get involved then maybe it's something I'd consider,

but it depends on whether I could have genuine input and it would make a difference.

Man in his late forties, Coulby Newham

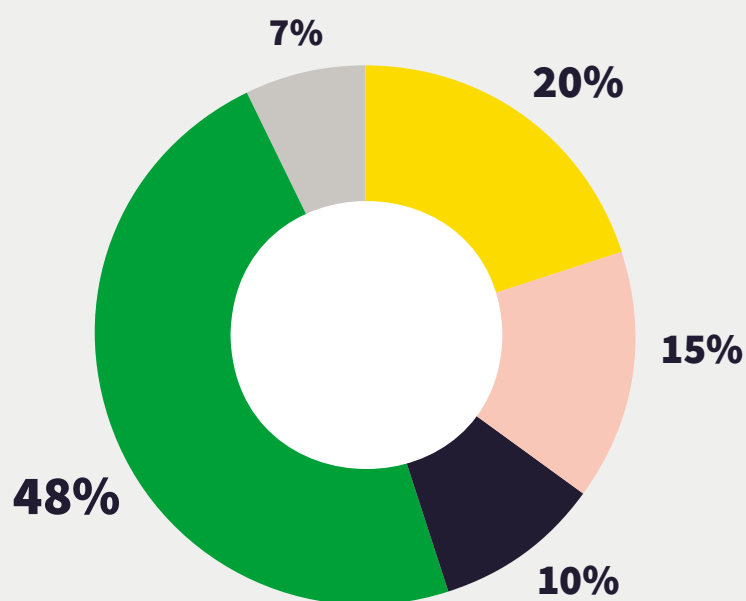


As with who people trust, so people became very enthusiastic in the focus groups about suggestions for making the system more trustworthy and how that would encourage them to take part.

Opaque processes with distrusted stakeholders are not the only problem. Disengagement with planning has led to a lack of knowledge about the process and this, in turn, has led to a lack of confidence in engaging with it.

Knowledge

People's lack of knowledge about the planning process leads to a lack of confidence



Have you ever been aware of a development consultation happening in your area but not participated in it?

- Yes, multiple occasions
- Yes, once
- No, I have always participated in consultations I am aware of
- No, I have never been aware of a consultation in my local area
- Don't know

To engage in the planning process, people must first be aware that a consultation is taking place. In our poll, nearly half of our sample (48%) said that they had never even been aware of a consultation in their local area.

This lack of awareness was compounded by a lack of knowledge. In our qualitative research where we found confusion about what is meant by 'taking part' in planning decisions. Many people were reluctant to participate for fear that they would have to play a leading role (organising meetings, for example) for which they felt ill-equipped.



It's more that I wouldn't have the confidence to. I don't really have the words or the knowledge to unless it's something that I'm really passionate about and then I find my voice.

Young woman in her twenties, Hemlington



Even though people feel deeply connected with their towns and neighbourhoods and even though they would dearly like to see improvements, people lack the knowledge about how to. In our focus groups this was initially expressed in terms of ‘not having enough time’ to engage in the process.

When probed, though, it was not a lack of time but a lack of confidence that proved the real barrier to participation. What people heard when we asked them if they had ‘taken part’ in a planning consultation was whether they had ‘led the way’ or instigated a campaign. That was something they thought they didn’t have time for nor felt equipped to do.



There’s a lot of things going on round here like regeneration. I’ve been following that on Facebook. But getting involved myself? No, I’ve got enough to do.

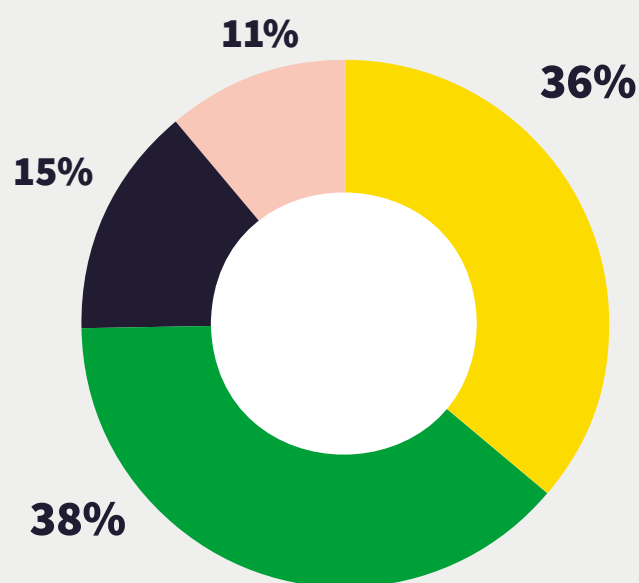
Woman in her sixties, Maske

It would encourage me to voice my opinion but not exactly take part and try and organise anything. If it was a matter of giving my opinion and they were going to listen to it, I’d give that any time.

Retired police officer in his sixties, Stokesley

I just follow the crowd. I wouldn’t lead the way for it. I’m not one of them people that would lead. I’d follow the people that did do it. But I wouldn’t get anything started.

Young woman in her twenties, Redcar



Which of the following comes closest to your view?

- I know how to take part in consultations about developments in my local area, and I feel like I get a say over the outcome
- I know how to take part in consultations about developments in my local area, but I don't feel like I get a say over the outcome
- I don't know how to take part in consultations about developments in my local area
- Don't know

This leads to two conclusions: firstly that many people are interested in involvement in planning that is convenient and feels less onerous; and secondly that when we offer such accessible and friendly ways to engage, we need to be careful about the language we use to describe the opportunity.

This lack of confidence to participate goes some way to explaining our polling figures:

11%

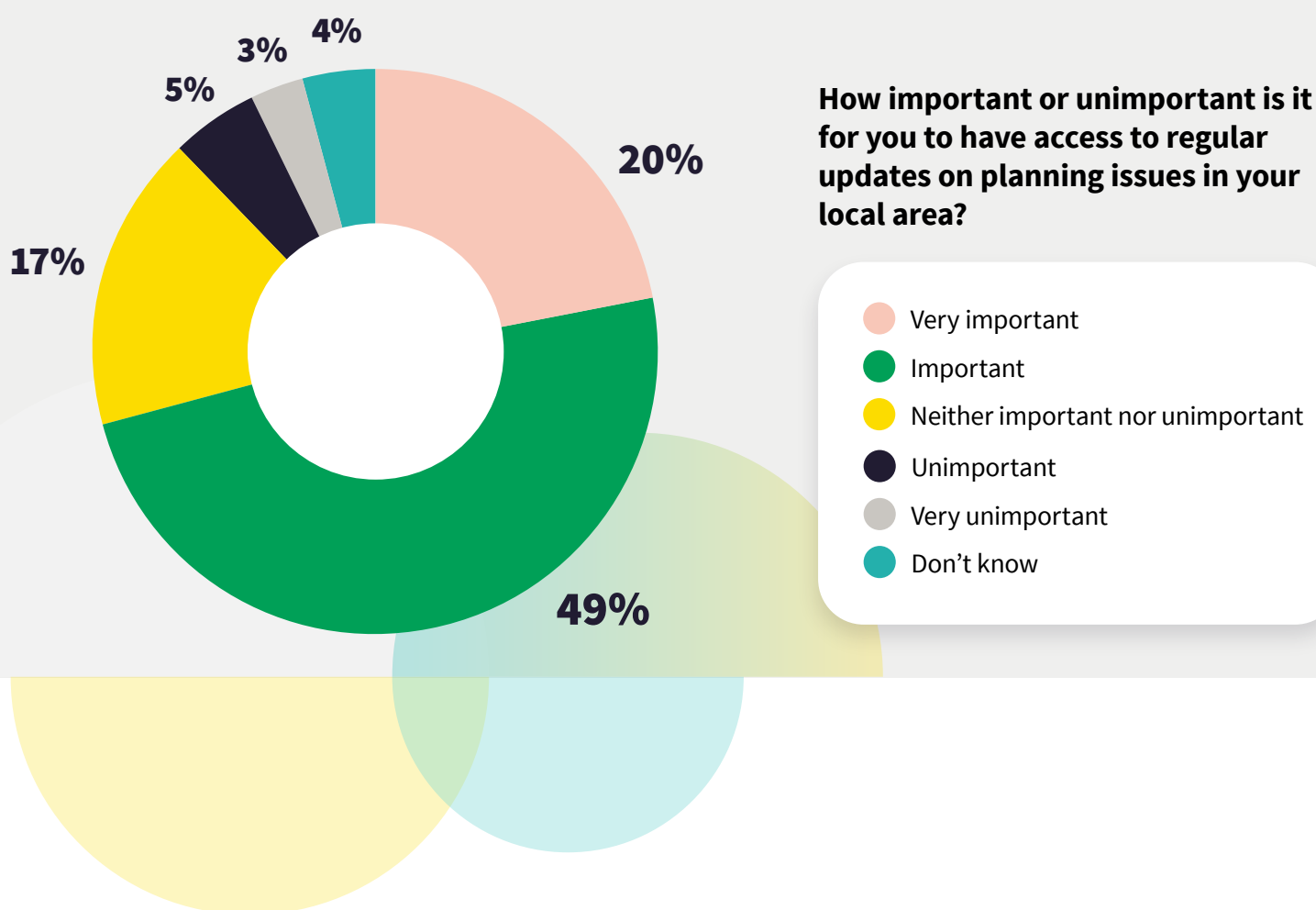
Know how to take part in consultations and feel like they get a say over the outcome.

38%

Of people don't know how to take part in a consultation about development in their local area.

36%

Know how to take part, but don't feel they get a say over the outcome.



Access

Key to trust, transparency and confidence is easy access to information

Engaging early and making the system easier to understand and navigate are key components of the Government's Planning for the Future white paper. Success in these areas, though, depends on how easy it is to access the information that people need to participate and to understand it when they find it. With 48% of people saying that they had never even been aware of a local planning consultation, it is no surprise that people do not know where to go for information, even if they did want to take part.

It would be a lot easier if you were told in layman's term what's going on. It would make it a lot easier for people to speak up and say what they feel.

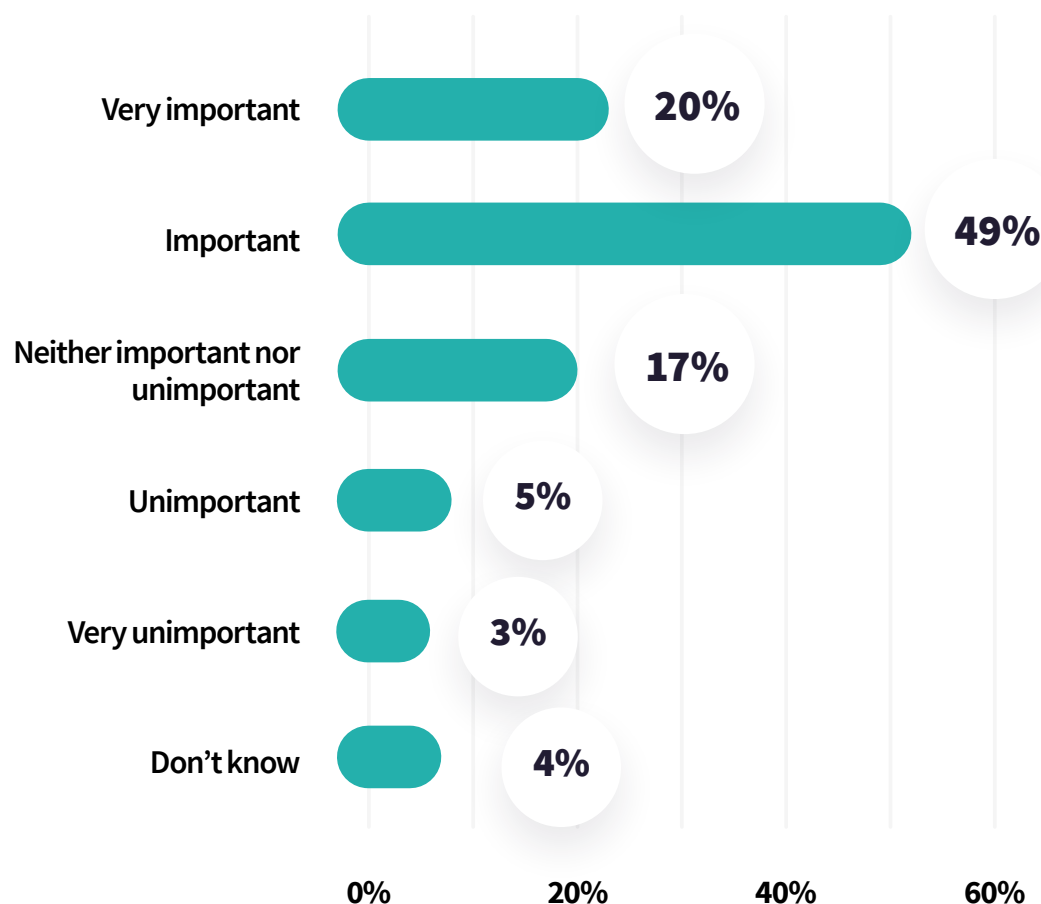
Young woman in her twenties, Redcar

I wouldn't get that involved. It feels like it's not for me to do. That's for other people to do.

19-year old man, Redcar

In all of our opinion research, finding and understanding information were identified as barriers to participation – and the onus of this was put firmly on developers and local authorities. A majority (56%) put 'better communication with residents on what is being proposed' among the top three measures that would encourage people to take part in a consultation. A sizeable minority (38%) of respondents say that they do not know how to take part in consultations about developments in their local area, including 50% of working-class (DE) respondents. This, in turn, led the younger people just not to engage.

How important is it to you to have regular updates on planning in your local area?



It is no accident that it was the younger group that raised this as a particular issue for them. It is, historically, younger people who are regarded as being the most disengaged from the planning process. Engaging younger people, making it easier to find information, speeding up the whole process and giving greater access in general is where the Government's 'digital first' approach will play a vital role.

As we have seen, people want the information, they just do not know where to find it at the moment. In our poll, 71% said that it was important to them 'to have access to regular updates on planning issues' in their local area. Only 8% said that it was unimportant.



Part 2

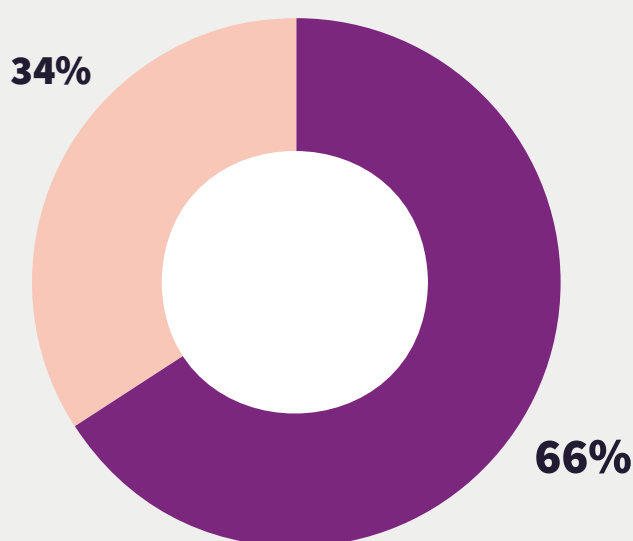
Overcoming barriers to engagement

Appetite to engage

There is a huge and unmet appetite in communities to engage

People care about the future of their neighbourhoods and they want to be part of determining their futures. Particularly in focus groups, people speak about their civic pride and how much the places they live matter to them. A large majority (76%) of the polled sample thought that ‘people need to be given a greater say over new developments in their local area.’

People want to have a say, and when they feel their voices are influencing change, they remain engaged. On our platform, 70% of people who engage via a Commonplace project have never taken part in a planning decision before, 87% of people who engage on our digital platform want to be notified about future local engagement opportunities – and engagement levels are considerably higher and more constructive: 66% are actively supportive or neutral to the changes that are put before them.



% of respondents actively supportive or neutral

Study of 211,650 responses to plans and design proposals on Commonplace over the past 12 months



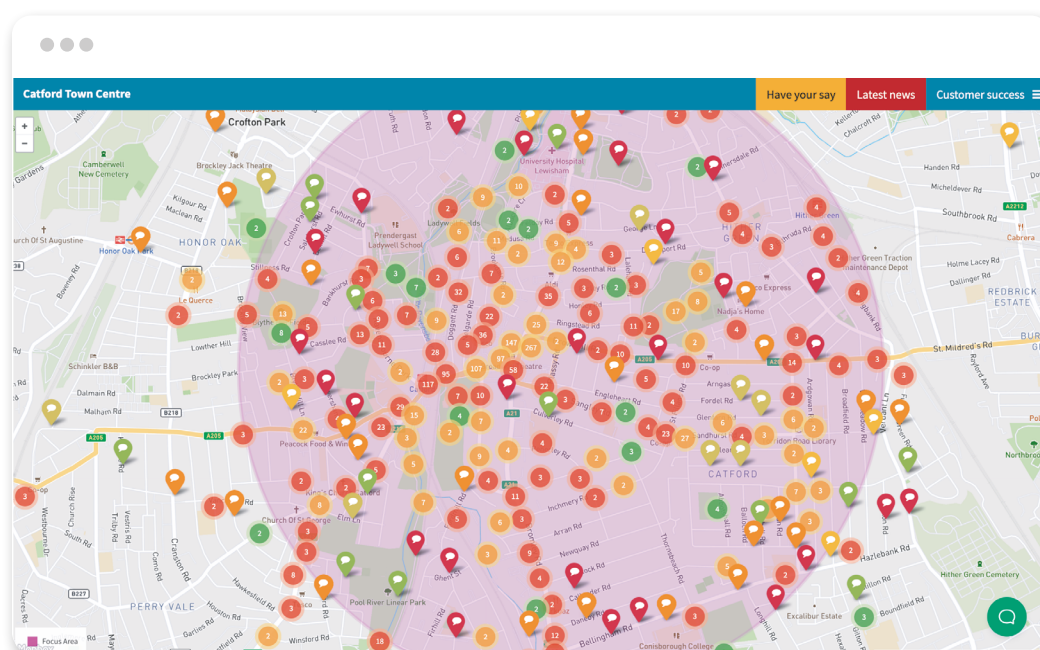
Case Study: Catford



Town Centre Regeneration

Commonplace has worked with the London Borough of Lewisham on the regeneration of Catford since 2017. At the earliest point of the project, and well before concept and design stages, Commonplace was used to gather views and ideas from the public.

Asking broad and open questions about people's likes and dislikes of the town centre from an interactive map, Lewisham Council were able to gather over 14,000 views and contributions. These responses served to ensure that the eventual regeneration framework reflected community priorities.



With regular updates on the progress of smaller tactical improvements to the town centre ahead of the framework being launched, Lewisham Council were able to keep residents apprised and updated on important projects that offered the public a sense that real action was taking place as a result of their views, comments and input.

Lewisham have now published their initial framework. Having reflected on the aspirations of the local community for Catford, placing them at the heart of their proposals, only 12% of those expressing an opinion have registered negative sentiment. The scale and transparency of engagement also enables those proposing new homes and commercial property to understand and integrate community sentiment within the strategic definition of their schemes.

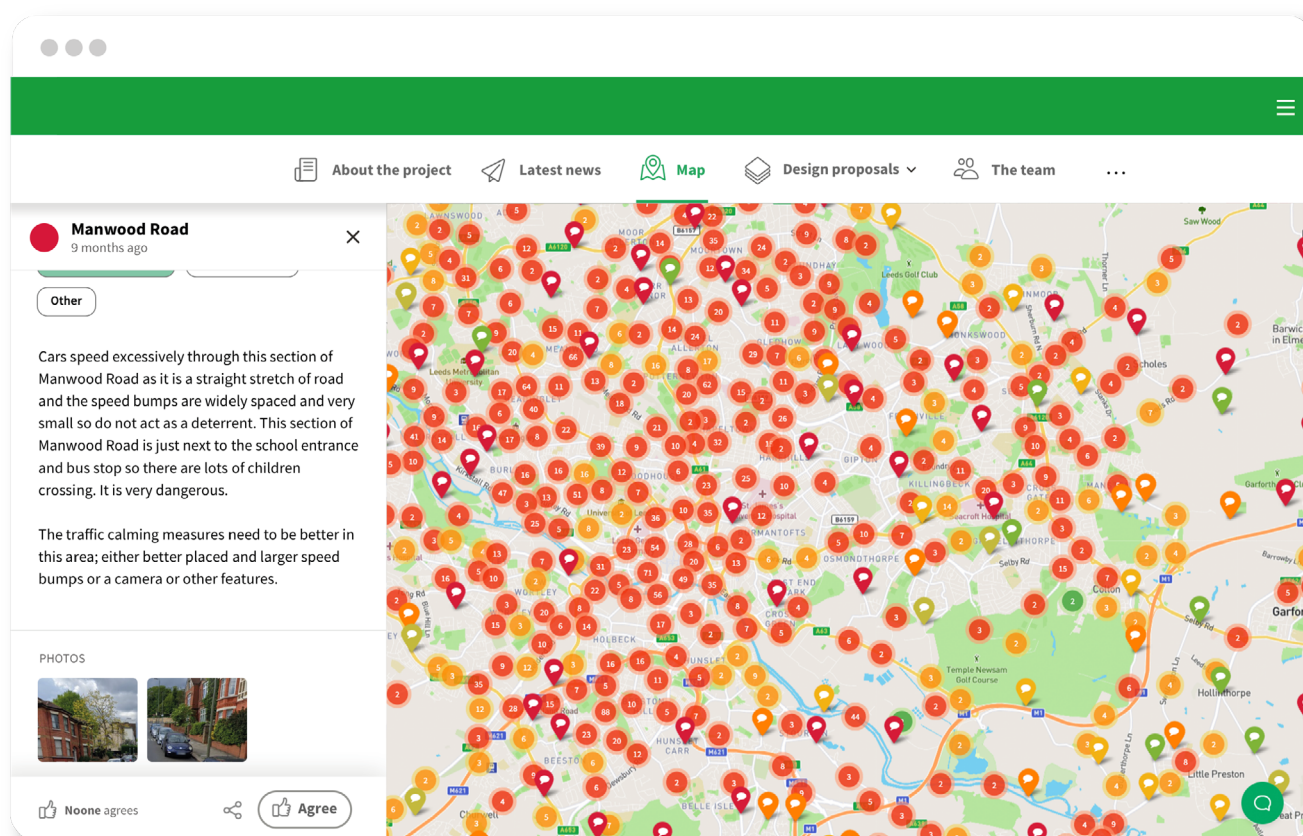


Achieving higher engagement

How have these higher and more constructive engagement levels been achieved?

Key to our success has been early and longer-term ‘active’ engagement. It is more in the style of a conversation than the survey that dominates today’s planning engagements. But this is only possible when people feel that they are listened to and trust the process. Transparency is vital to show participants that their feedback is not hidden, and also as part of the process of engagement, by reading the comments of other people.

By making what people say public, we demonstrate social proof. It means that other local residents and participants can see what their neighbours are saying and this, for and of itself, encourages higher levels of participation.



Early and ongoing

Why early and ongoing engagement matters

The importance of early and longer-term consultation is borne out in our data. While there is a 50/50 split between those who wanted to contribute to a forward-looking vision for a place as against those who simply wanted the opportunity to object to new plans (in a forced choice), this picture changes once people trust the system and become actively and continually engaged with the entire planning lifecycle. Four times more people take part in consultations on Local Plans when these are part of a series of local conversations rather than just a one-off survey. When plan-making is part of a continuous participation process, engagement is far more constructive.

Case Study: Haringey, London



Local Plan-Making

The London Borough of Haringey is currently seeking feedback on its Regulation 18 consultation for their new Local Plan. This is one of a number of active and ongoing conversations taking place on Commonplace within the Borough. To date, 60,000 residents have taken part in conversations on a range of issues, from active travel and climate change, estate regeneration and new housing.



Image: Haringey Local Plan-Making, active travel

Once engaged in one aspect of the council's work to improve their local communities, existing users are invited to take part in a bigger and broader conversation about the future growth of the Borough through the local plan. Through this open dialogue, Haringey Council is able to create greater visibility for all the changes being proposed.

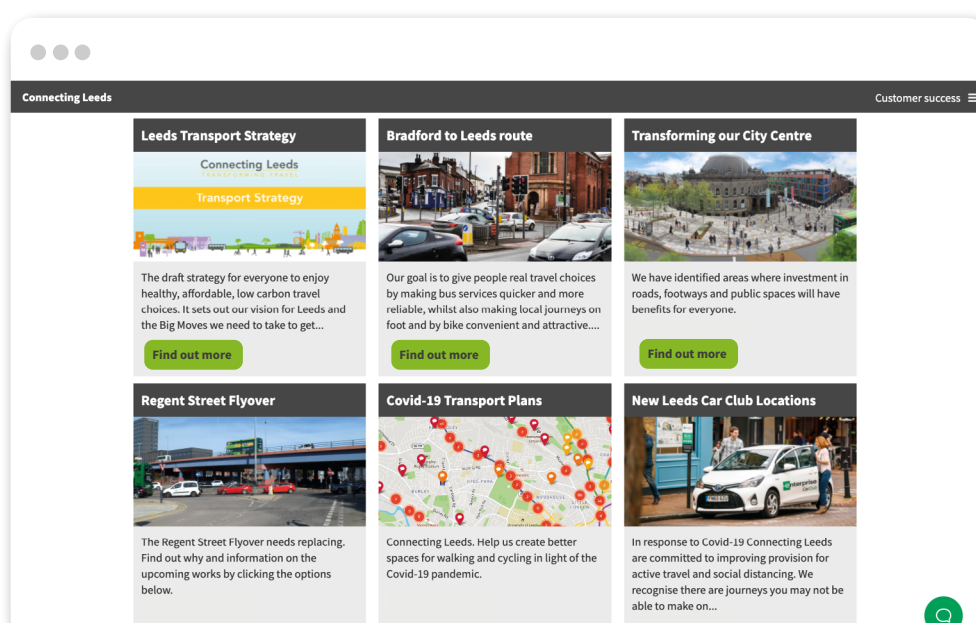
Early and longer-term engagement has been particularly successful for Neighbourhood Plans. Commonplace has worked with a range of Neighbourhood Forums, Town and Parish Councils to support grassroots, community-focused engagements to develop Neighbourhood Plans. These engagements, such as at [Batchworth](#), [Abbots Langley](#), [Acton](#) and [West Hampstead](#) will usually cover smaller areas which are closer to where people live and easier for participants to relate to.

Case Study: Leeds



Transport Strategy

Commonplace have been supporting Leeds City Council's transport planning over a number of years. Projects have been diverse, ranging from major road infrastructure works, planning for new and improved bus routes, the introduction of new park-and-ride programmes, as well as walking and cycling schemes. Public engagement in major changes to the built environment and travel have been substantial. Over the course of these engagements, Leeds have gathered 65,000 responses from 20 individual projects.



The scale of public engagement has enabled Leeds City Council to build a deep understanding of community need and expectations for infrastructure investment. The data not only serves to help strengthen the Council's decision making in relation to Transport Orders, but also provides the authority with deep insights for future transport plan-making, understanding where growth can be unlocked with the support of the community.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, Commonplace has supported 45 local authorities in their active travel planning. Across the UK, over 500,000 people have engaged with these projects, resulting in more than 303,475 responses to active travel engagements. Whilst immediately important in ensuring successful active travel schemes, the data produced can serve as strong evidence of community need and be integrated into transport planning decisions.

The area in which local communities are most engaged is in the allocation of planning gain with proportionately higher response rates when it comes to helping shape how planning gain is used. In central London, benefiting from higher rates of Community Infrastructure Levy receipts, Camden and Southwark have been able to engage thousands of residents in conversations on borough-wide priorities as well as the neighbourhood element of their levy. In Surrey, the County Council has sought out ideas for a broader community capital investment programme for £100m. Since November, they have generated over 11,000 ideas from 10,000 people.



Image: Transport Strategy, Leeds City Council

Social proof

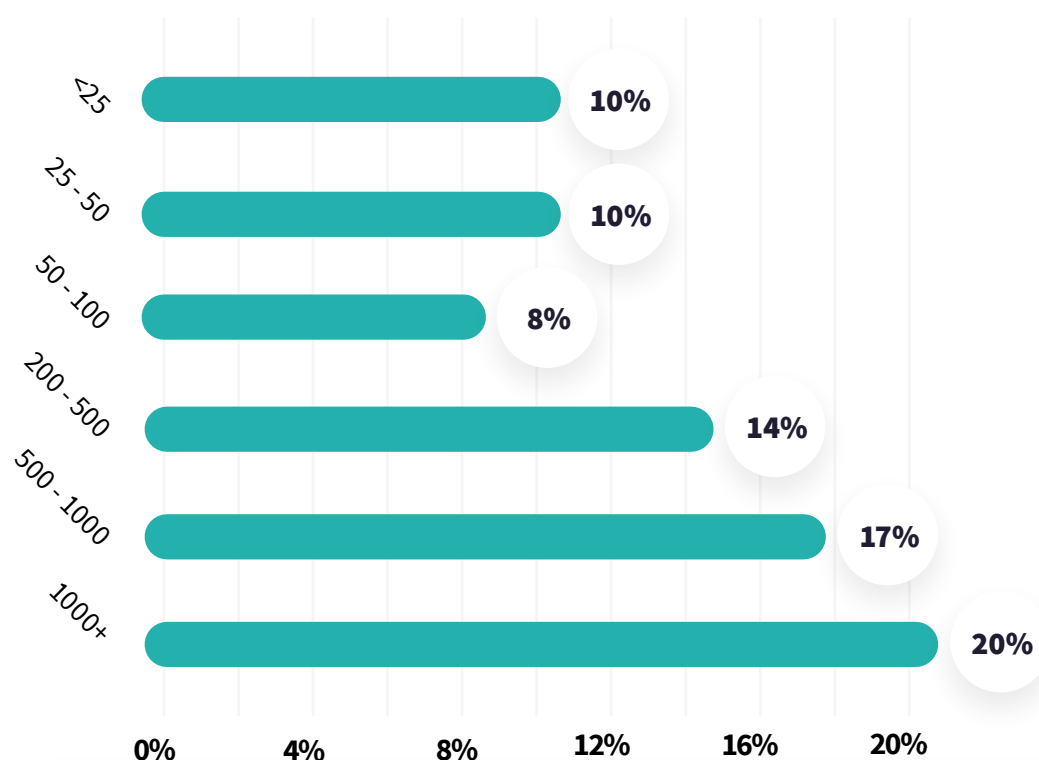
The importance of social proof: planning engagement as a social process

Our polling found that when considering whether to support a planning proposal, the public trust other local people more than any other group: 75% of the poll sample trusted resident's associations (who are themselves residents), and 70% of the poll trusted their neighbours.

This trust of fellow residents is evident on Commonplace, where one of the most effective ways to encourage local resident engagement in a planning decision has been for them to see what others in their communities are saying and thinking. On Commonplace, every comment made by a member of the community is visible to the community. This transparency is vital in building trust in the planning system.

Our data shows that respondents on Commonplace are twice as likely to add their own comment when there are many other comments (more than 1,000) visible, as opposed to when there are few comments visible (25 or less). The openness of Commonplace and the confidence derived from seeing neighbours participating offers a 'social proof' of the process. Seeing the views, comments, and contributions by their neighbours has a huge impact on people's faith in a process and encourages them to participate themselves.

Visitor conversion rate vs number of comments on the platform



Study of 67,000 Commonplace people who visited projects within 7 days of it launching:
Conversion rate of people who visited the site and then commented is twice as high if there is a large number (>1000) comments visible as if there is a small number of comments visible.



Image: Before and after interactive slider, Pudding Mill, LLDC

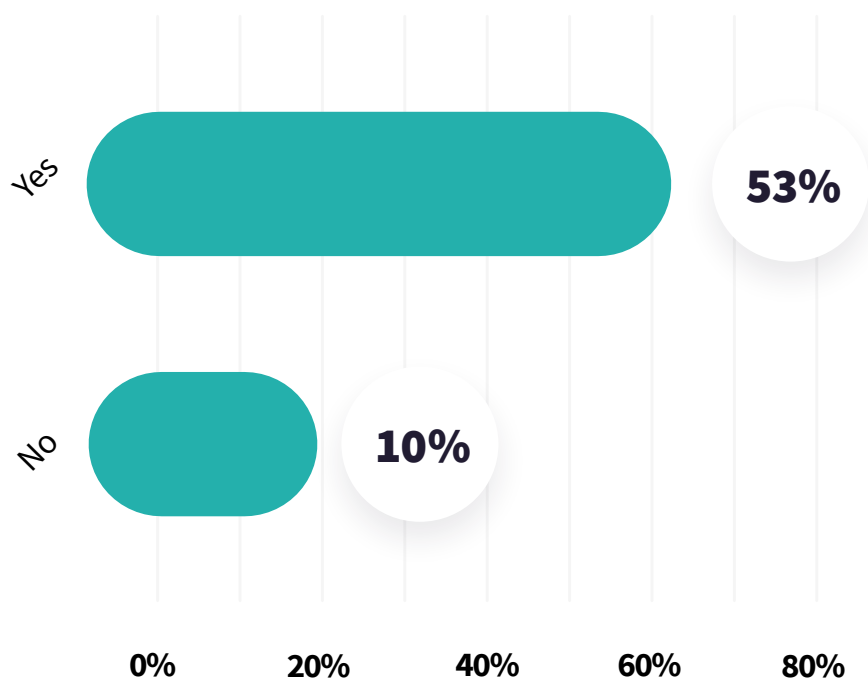
Evidence from focus groups shows that if ‘taking part’ is simple and quick, and that the level of engagement is up to the participant, then there is real enthusiasm, especially if information is presented in easily digestible terms. By presenting information online and making it visual, including interactive maps to display data, site allocations and proposals, more people are encouraged to participate than is the case with traditional methods alone.

Commonplace is a rapidly growing community of people ready to engage. Data from more than 1,000 projects we have run on Commonplace shows that people who have previously engaged in a consultation by reading or interacting are 5 times more likely to participate than others who have not previously engaged. Engaging repeatedly and often drives more engagement.

This can be used to great effect when it comes to strategic plan-making: if a community is already active and used to participating in discussions about the local built environment, then they are much more likely to engage constructively in a local plan.

An engaged community benefits applicants as well as planning authorities. Developers can access this community when preparing their design proposals, meaning that local government benefits from better quality community engagement and insight undertaken by these developers.

Has the visitor engaged in a past consultation?*



People who have engaged on a Commonplace project before are 5 times more likely to engage again.

*295,000 ‘first time’ visitors to Commonplace in 2020.

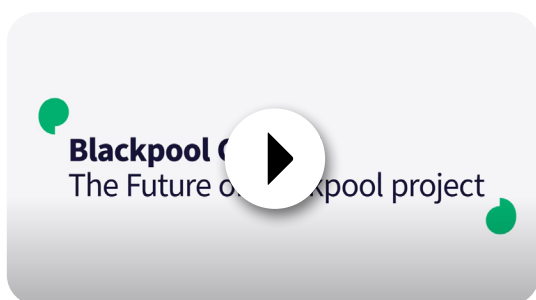
Case Study: Blackpool

Blackpool Council

Towns Fund

To support its successful application to the Towns Fund, Blackpool Borough Council engaged Commonplace to gather community views ahead of making a formal submission. With strong support from the community, Blackpool were later awarded £39.5m.

Despite the constraints of the pandemic preventing traditional face-to-face engagement, using Commonplace, Blackpool Borough Council received 3,600 contributions from 1,600 people in just six weeks. 70% of those responding expressed positive support for the early themes of Blackpool's Town Investment Plan with less than 10% saying they opposed the proposals.



Using an [interactive map](#), the Council collected ideas from the community directly on the improvements they would like to see made to the town. This also allowed residents to see the contributions made by others, agree with them or propose alternative ideas.

Digital and traditional

Digital-first widens participation but should not replace traditional engagement

In our polling, 78% of respondents use the internet to pay household bills and 79% do online banking. Access to online information and consultation vastly increases the pool of participants but our data shows that digital is most effective when used to enhance rather than replace traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings, paper surveys and phone calls. People need to be able to participate in the manner that suits them best. A hybrid approach allows digital engagement among those who have hitherto not experienced it, for example, by taking the tablet version of the Commonplace platform to offline events.

Case Study: West of Ilfield, Crawley

Homes England & Cratus

Cratus
Our world is local



Homes England and Cratus used Commonplace to support their engagement on plans for new neighbourhoods at West of Ilfield near Crawley. The long-term potential for housing growth in the area could see 10,000 new homes delivered over the next 30 years in a key growth corridor in the South East.

The first engagement took place over one month in early 2020, with Commonplace acting as an online hub to gather feedback directly from people engaging online, and also as a central point of data collection and analysis by the project team.

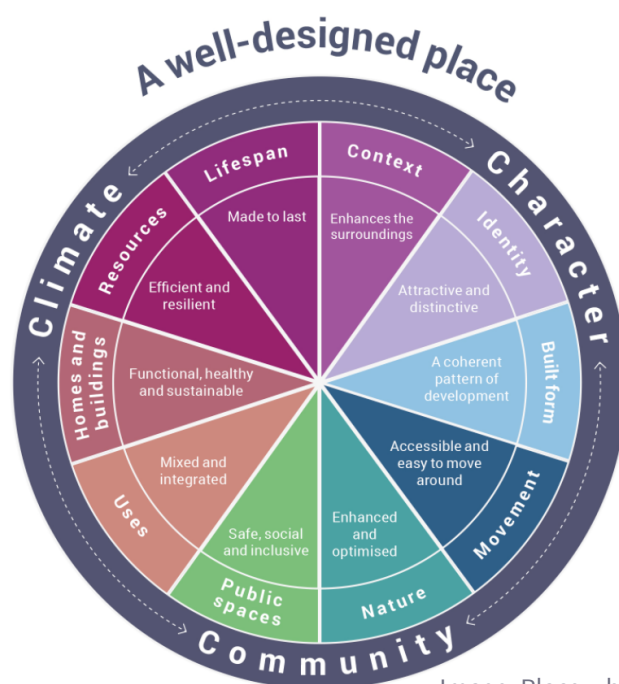


Image: Place wheel, Homes England

Across both online engagement, nine face-to-face consultation events within the area and other promotional activity, the project team gained a clear understanding of the community's priorities for the area. With 1,800 people contributing online alone, the project team was also able to establish a baseline for how representative the response group was of the community's demographic.

58% of those participating were of working age and 22% retired, with 8% of respondents being from BAME communities. Using this information, the project will be able to target under represented groups in future rounds of engagement.



Conclusion

The forthcoming reforms to planning in England represent a major opportunity for those shaping the future of places. Whilst the ongoing pandemic has provided new challenges for local and national government to face, it has also underlined many that remain. We also await the long term impact on the UK economy of lockdown, and the movement and consumer patterns that have changed because of it.

At the core of the proposed planning reforms, and the many debates that have taken place within the planning community for decades are a series of key questions. How does the UK grow equitably? How do we ensure those impacted by change have the ability to shape it? How does the narrow task of land-use planning accommodate the hopes and aspirations of the people and communities that those decisions impact?

We agree that the status quo cannot answer these questions, but also suggest that elements of the current reforms as they stand risk implementing solutions that could inadvertently further undermine trust and confidence. By focusing too much of the conversation about change in the built environment onto the creation of a local plan, the Government risks missing the chance to use that plan's implementation as a way of bringing even more people into that discussion and empowering them to shape it.

Recommendation 1

Development of interoperability standards so that:

- Local planning authorities can easily work together to ensure that engagement is not limited to their boundaries, when neighbourhoods and infrastructure cross boundaries
- The benefits of digital engagement in visual, map-based planning can be more easily and broadly accessible.

As our research shows, people love their communities and are desperate to have their say over how they change and grow for the better. Often, this enthusiasm is blunted when they do come to interact with the system as it stands. The public view of the planning process is negative, with too many believing that decisions being taken by those in power are done behind closed doors, or as a fait accompli. This lack of trust is exacerbated by the sense that there is a lack of transparency in the knowledge and information necessary to better understand how decisions are reached. Complex and impenetrable language excluded all but the time and resource rich minority who are able to invest in what can often be an exclusive conversation.

Since its founding, these are the very same challenges that Commonplace has been seeking to address. Throughout our time working to improve the existing planning system, using digital technology to rapidly increase the number of people engaging in decision making, we have demonstrated that there are clear alternatives that embrace both mass participation in planning alongside the sustainable growth and change of the built environment.

Recommendation 2

Development of exemplar engagement guidance

To demonstrate the benefits of developing and nurturing trusted conversations with the public over time, so that strategic conversations don't have to be conducted from a standing start, insights are more informed and useful, and collaboration starts to replace combat.

In our work we have been able to evidence how those with an appetite to engage in shaping their neighbourhoods can do so, facing up to the challenge of change with the tools through which the necessary compromises can be achieved. If engaged early, and often, we have demonstrated that communities are far more willing to have a positive conversation about the impact of change, as well as the benefits drawn from the improvements that come from it.

Recommendation 3

Strong and clear expectations in the planning legislation that:

- Public engagement should be open and transparent to everyone.
- There is an expected engagement timetable with very clear feedback loops and opportunities for regular and open updates.
- Public engagement should happen throughout the lifecycle of plan-making and development management. This could be achieved by a Statement of Community Involvement (or similar document) being submitted in the planning application for any proposal in a Growth, Renewal or Protect zone.
- A 'Statement of Community Need', which expresses the collective needs of a community and explains how these needs will be met through local outcomes, should be added to the Statement of Community Involvement as a standard planning document.

When communities can come together, and have a transparent conversation at scale, in which they can see and understand the views of their friends and neighbours, better decisions can be reached. These conversations should not only be limited to online social media. But as Commonplace has demonstrated, by embracing new digital forms of communication, that conversation can take place at a scale the size of which, the drafters of the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act could never have imagined.

Recommendation 4

A digital first approach that significantly widens participation but should not replace traditional forms of engagement

Access to online information and consultation vastly increases the pool of participants but our data shows that digital is most effective when used to enhance rather than replace traditional methods such as face-to-face meetings, paper surveys and phone calls. People need to be able to participate in the manner that suits them best.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our thanks to Public First and in particular Natascha Engel, our partner in producing this report, for their methods and valuable insights.

We also wish to express our gratitude to the team at Commonplace who have worked to deliver this report and offered vital feedback and input: Our CEO Mike Saunders, our Chair Pam Alexander OBE, Fred Gilliford, Gianluca Gindro, Nouvella Kusi, Peter Mason, Amy Outterside, Fee Schmidt-Soltau.

This report draws from the years of data and experience generated from exemplary work by our pioneering customers, who have confidently demonstrated that ongoing, transparent digital mass engagement is both possible and effective.



“The built environment industry has been behind the curve when it comes to meaningful engagement and genuine public participation in the planning process. This research and Commonplace’s work is making a real difference to the people that new development will affect the most. Commonplace plays a critical role in our projects at LDN, their ability to continually adapt and improve makes them excellent partners”

Max Farrell, LDN Collective, Founder

This important report shows that involving people in the planning process makes sense: it makes our places better. We entirely agree that involvement in planning needs to be “a process not an event” – and we’re working to make it happen in here in London.

Claire Harding, Centre for London, Research Director

“No one can argue with the aspirations to rebuild trust and democratise planning. The Government’s aims are spot on. But as this report brilliantly captures, the proposed actions don’t yet marry with those ambitions. It depends on meaningful involvement of communities over time. That’s something Grosvenor is trying to achieve through Positive Space and which this report champions very eloquently.”

Kate Nottidge, Grosvenor, Head of Community Engagement

“Gaining a sense of control is fundamental to people’s quality of life and giving them the voice they need to make the most of their homes and neighbourhoods. These key findings all point to the need for the public to be involved at the earliest possible stage in planning, then engaging throughout, both digitally and face-to-face.

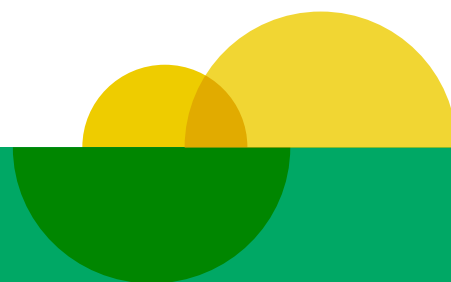
Matthew Morgan, Quality of Life Foundation, Director

“As the report says, the single greatest barrier to engagement is a lack of trust, using digital tools can help us move towards an accessible, collaborative, and democratic planning system. If we continue to get engagement wrong and lock communities out of the conversation, we can forget about solving the housing crisis.”

Ian Harvey, Civic Voice, Executive Director

“We need to become increasingly creative and flexible in how we provide opportunities for people to actively engage in the planning process, through in-person interaction when conditions allow, and increasingly through accessible online tools and information-sharing platforms like Commonplace.”

Paul King, Lendlease, MD Sustainability & Social Impact



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