



FROM BLIGHT TO BEAUTY: REIMAGINING BROWNFIELD DEVELOPMENT

A data-led report by Commonplace



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INTRODUCTION

Brownfield sites are a crucial topic in the realm of urban development and environmental preservation and have been gaining quite a lot of buzz in the press recently. As our cities continue to expand, the demand for land increases, leading to the utilisation of previously developed areas known as brownfield sites. In the United Kingdom, these sites play a significant role in shaping the urban landscape and addressing environmental concerns.

With over 300,000 new homes needed in the UK every year, there's pressure to find new places to build. These spaces seem ripe for the job, especially as over 1.2 million homes could be built on 23,000 identified sites of previously developed land. However, while brownfield sites hold immense potential for development, the process of transforming them into valuable assets is not without its challenges. So what can be done? Well, that's what this guide aims to help with.



COMMONPLACE DATA

Commonplace is a community engagement platform that has been used on over 2000 projects across the whole of the UK, engaging more than 6M 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 practices that will reduce project risks and uncertainty, and improve outcomes.

We've looked 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.

THE IMPORTANCE OF BROWNFIELD SITES

There has been a strong interest in brownfield sites as development locations for some time. The government's Levelling Up white paper in 2021 underlined the acceleration of this trend with funding and resources, such as the webified database of brownfield sites that was created in 2021.

In order to provide enough housing in England for everyone who needs it, we must be creative within our finite land. By making use of suitable brownfield sites, the homes we need can be built in the places we need them, while our beautiful countryside is allowed to thrive. Brownfield sites are also often close to where people already work and live, with infrastructure such as public transport, schools and shops already in place –

Campaign to Protect Rural England, State of Brownfield Report, 2019



COMMONPLACE DATA

We've looked 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.

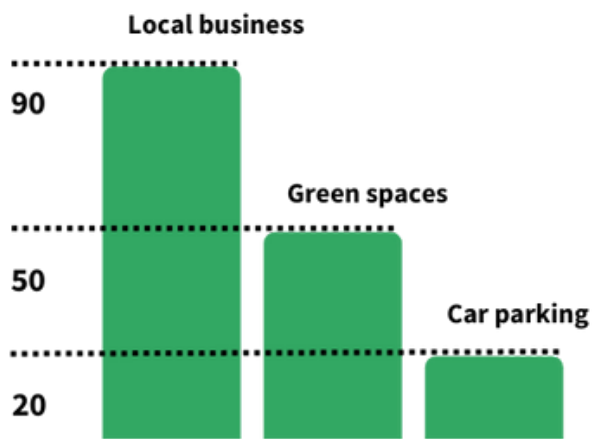


Overall, parking, green space and local business are the three most talked about topics in our research. Of these, car parking elicits the most negative feedback, and green spaces and local business are the most positive.

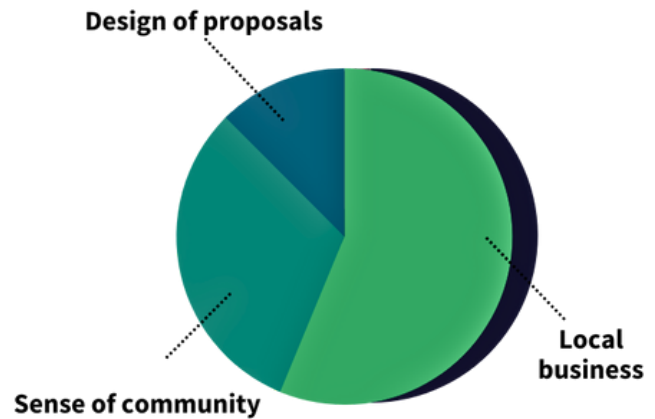
Key finding



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.



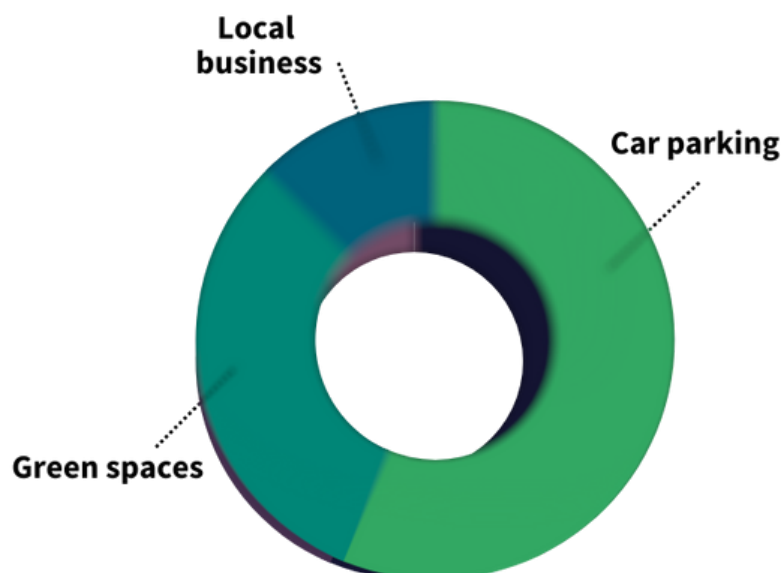
Respondents aged 15 - 34



Respondents aged 35-44

The age of respondents 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 the most positive and negative comments: Younger people talk more about green space; older people talk more about parking.

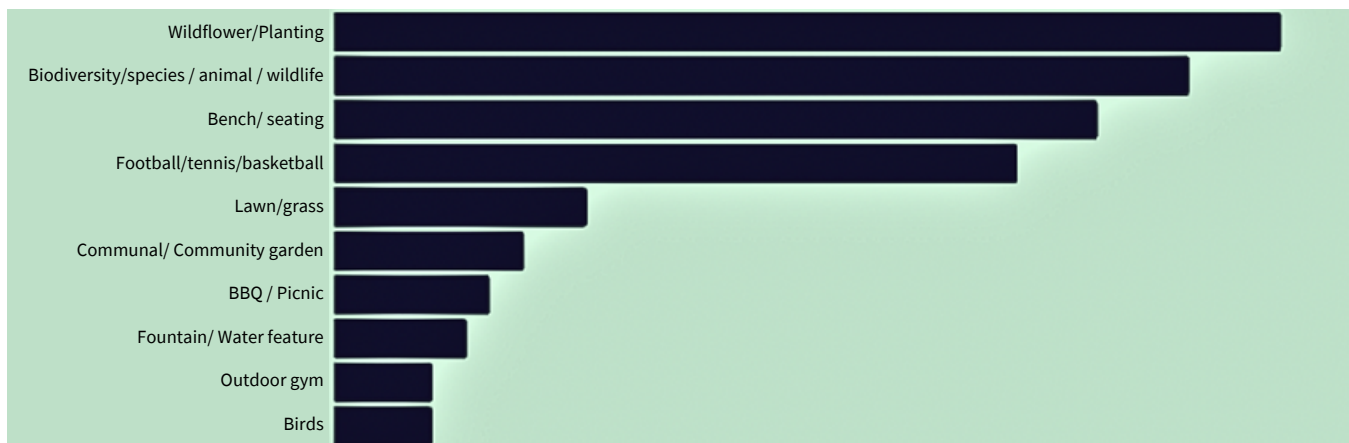
By targeting younger people and explaining green space priorities you'll get more positive responses. Digital tools like Commonplace, which are mobile-first and use social media, are an excellent way to target younger people: we get a larger proportion of younger respondents than expected from the local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



Respondents aged 45+

WHAT ARE THE MAIN THEMES?

Green Spaces



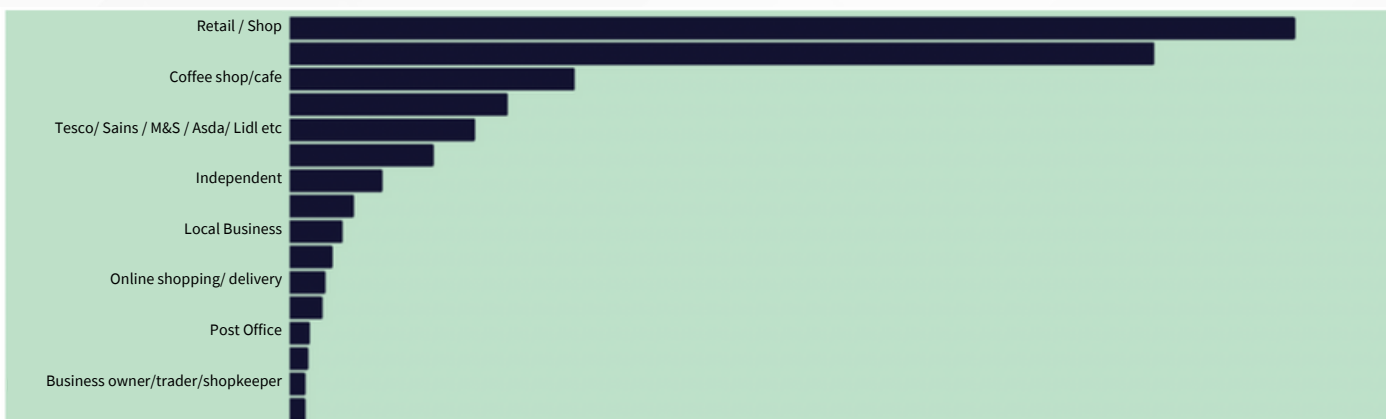
- There is a very strong interest and positive sentiment in the potential to create new green spaces as part of brownfield development. The most talked about aspects were a desire to increase nature and biodiversity because people believe this will increase the quality of life for people using the new 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 offers need to be more compelling. This chimed strongly with our findings from our work on ParkPower*. 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 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.

Key finding



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.

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. To ensure their thoughts are being heard, use early-stage engagement to understand the relative importance of retail, lifestyle, leisure provision and jobs.
- 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.

○ ***** [You can read our guide for engaging young people here](#)**

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.
- During the initial 'proactive listening' phase, gather comprehensive information on holistic mobility needs, encompassing car parking, public transport, walking, cycling, and e-bike/e-scooter charging. Utilise digital tools like Commonplace's heat-map for optimal results.
- 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.
- However, younger people find the topic less important due to lower car ownership. The age group of 45-54 expresses the most negativity about car parking, mainly concerning the perceived lack of available parking spaces for residents. The primary focus is on having sufficient or more dedicated parking areas. An interesting discussion topic revolves around multi-storey or underground parking, as it could provide more green space, a subject of interest across all age groups.

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, and usability is good) then respondents are more forgiving on issues of building height or density. There's less negativity.)

A 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.



BENEFITS OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

How can the community help?



Promote your development as a community-led project to help increase your reputation within the community.



Use first-hand data to shape planning applications.



Get a greater understanding of what the community in your area actually want and need. This helps to avoid backlash later in the building process, saving time and money.



Get as much of the community involved as possible in the brownfield development. With a digital-led scheme, you can reach a wider audience and see which demographics are lacking in your engagement. This helps shape a space that everyone can enjoy.



ADVICE ON SETTING UP YOUR OWN ENGAGEMENT

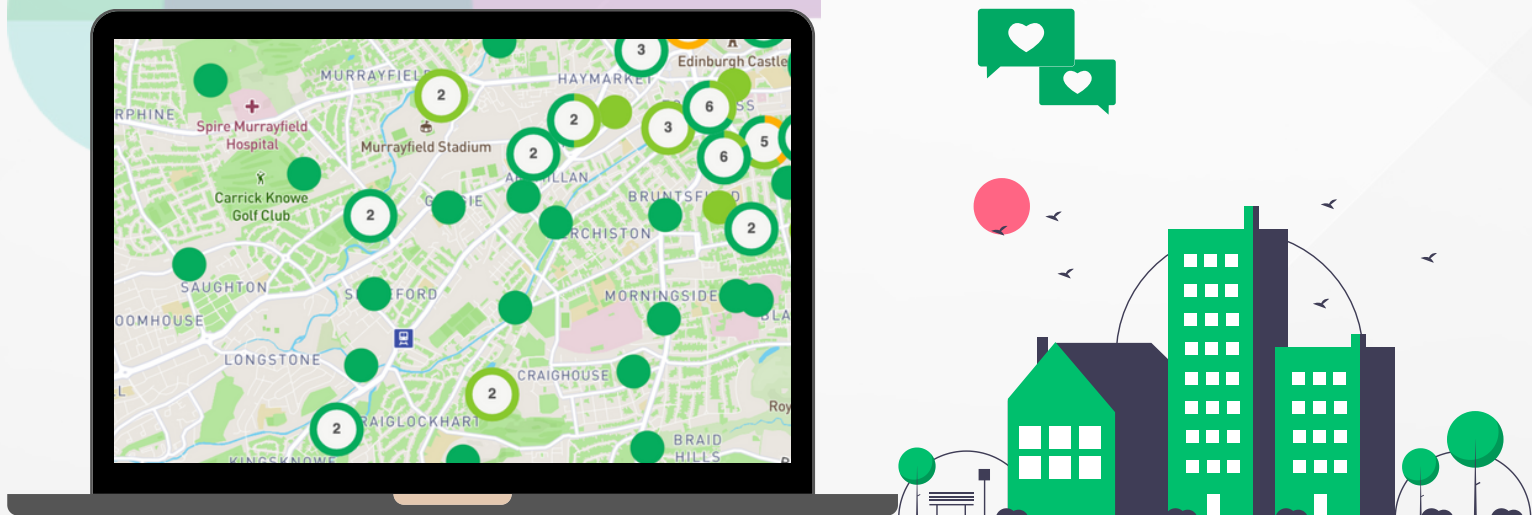
When designing an engagement strategy for the development of a brownfield site there are some simple approaches to increase the constructive nature of the discussion. They are universal and will be equally valuable to developers, councils or housing providers. They fall into three categories:

1. Start early: Create a clear idea of community priorities before commissioning the design. We suggest creating a 'Statement of Community Need'. Digital tools are fantastic at doing this quickly and at a 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.

2. 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.

3. 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.

4. The need for housing is accepted: It's the quality of the place to live that is of interest. People want to get under the skin of the topics that will make them feel like it's not just a place to live, but their place to live.

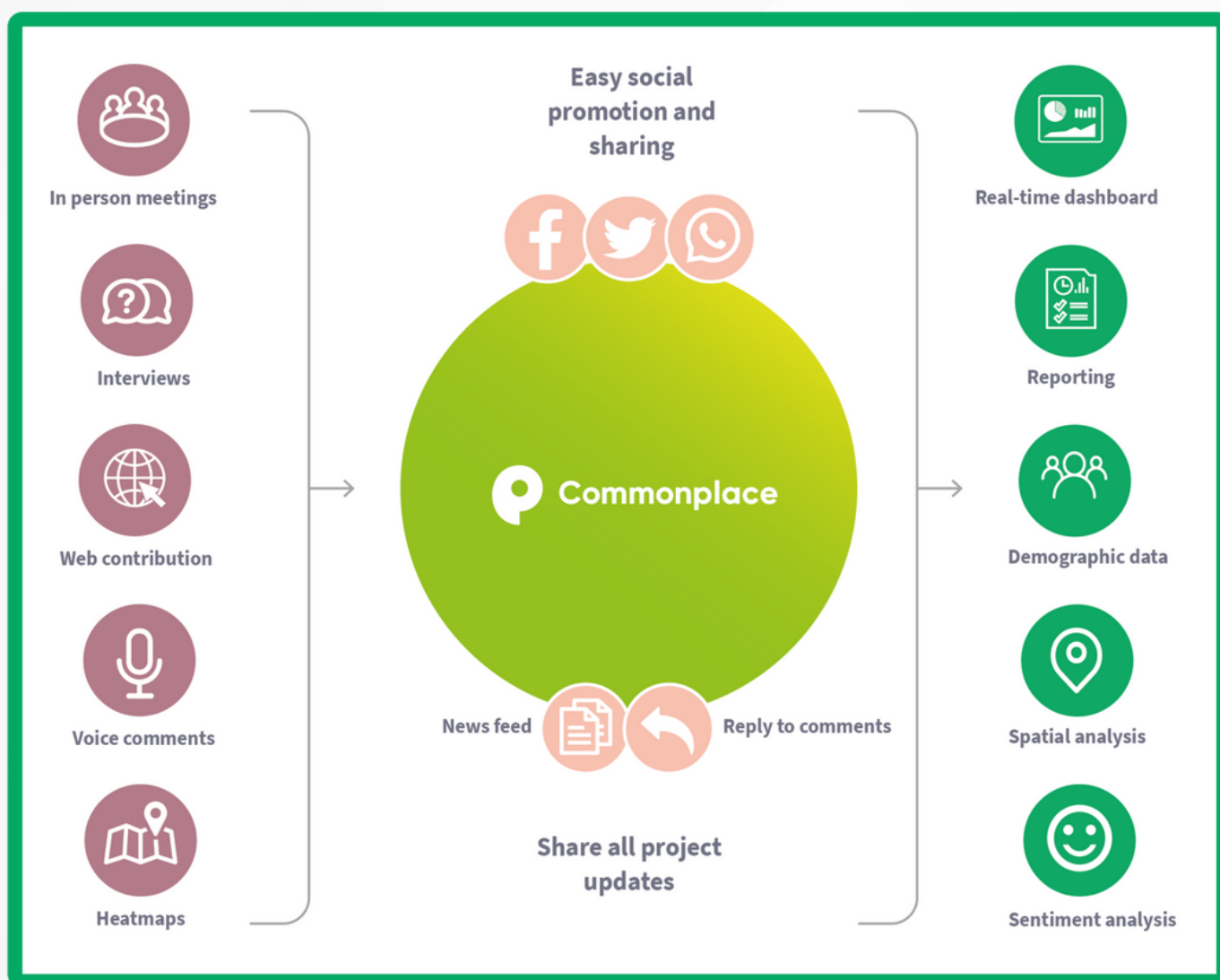


ABOUT COMMONPLACE

Commonplace supplies websites for local community engagement that are used by local authorities, communities, private developers and other organisations to inform the public about plans and also gather feedback.

Commonplace data is distinct in that there is a huge number of respondents who are self-selecting. This is because Commonplace is fundamentally an engagement tool, aiming for wide community participation.

It provides rich insight, but it is incumbent on policymakers to access other data if certain demographic groups are under-represented. The Commonplace dashboard provides real-time data that facilitates this additional activity.



Appendix

*Park Power:Parkpower: <https://parkpower.commonplace.is/overview>

** Young people's report: <https://www.commonplace.is/youngpeoplereport>

*** Engaging young people: <https://www.commonplace.is/blog/engaging-young-people>



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