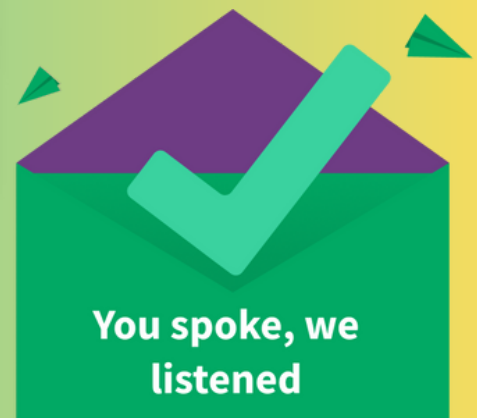
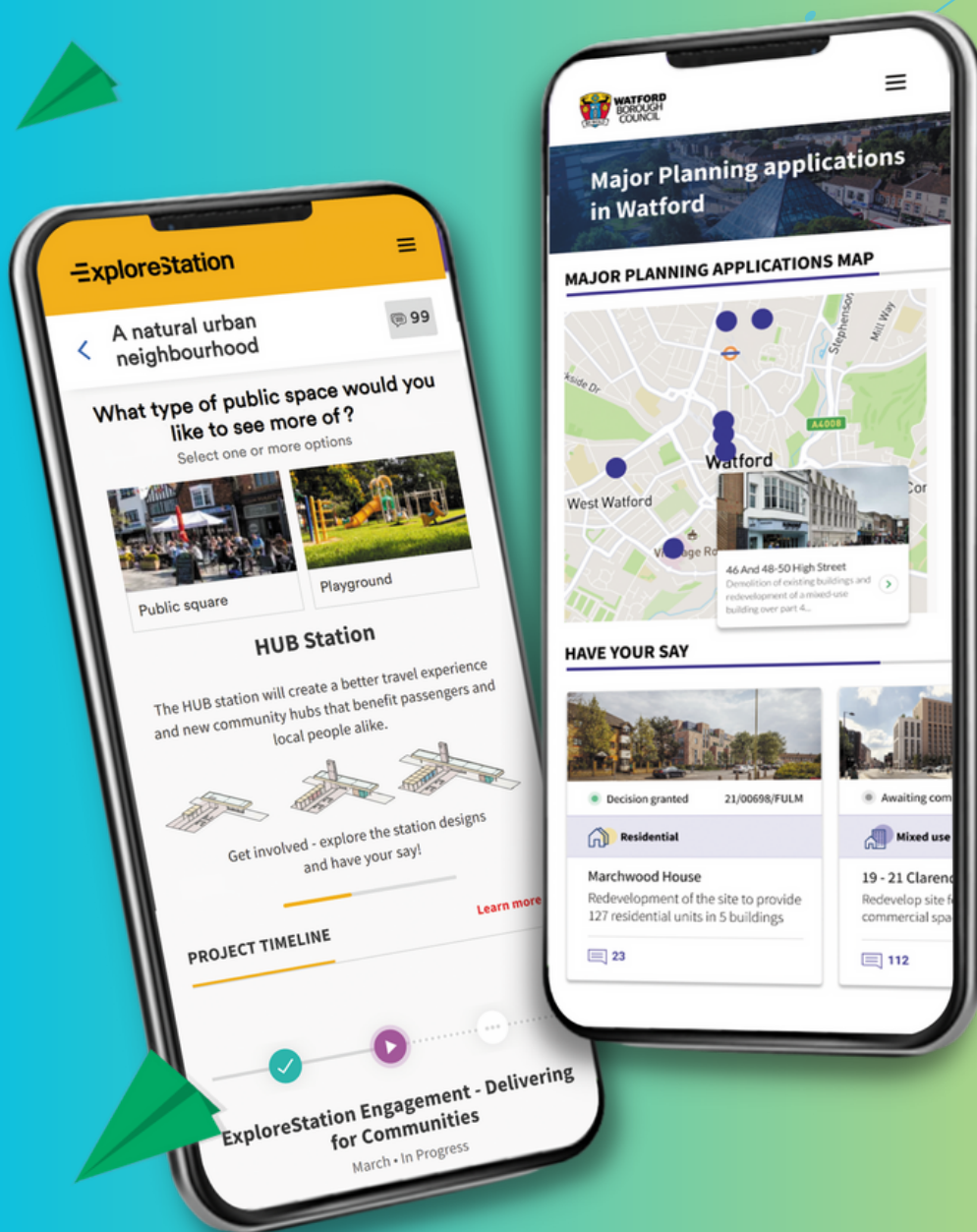
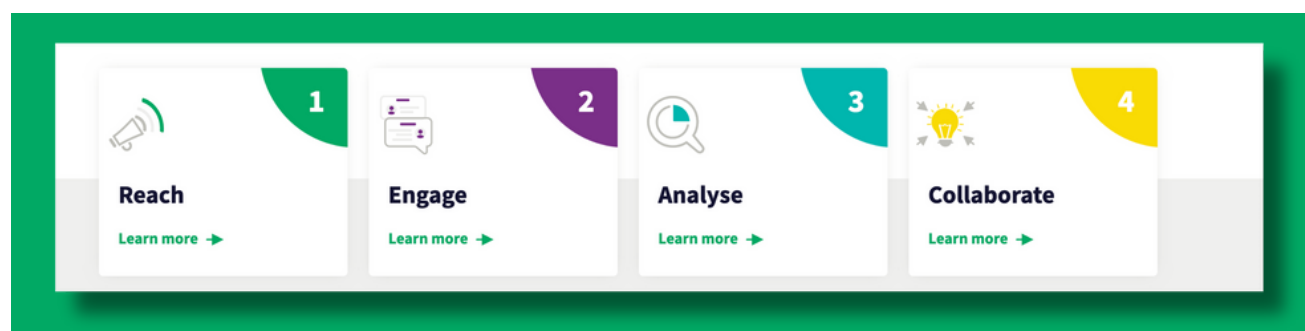




You spoke, we listened

DIGITAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT 101

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INTRODUCTION

Let's be honest- there's a reason that so-called 'traditional' local engagements have low rates of interest. When was the last time you saw a diverse spread of people at a public planning meeting? The reasons are that many people are time-poor (so can't spare the time, especially when meetings often happen in the middle of the day); the hassle of travelling and giving their opinion; and just the fact that there's little awareness that such meetings even happen.

Local people have the greatest knowledge about their area, so you want as many as possible to give their views on changes happening around them, whether that's a Local Plan; a new housing development; infrastructure updates; safety or environmental schemes.

This is what this guide is here to help with.

An effective community engagement strategy will send a clear message that you care about local views. This Engagement 101 guide covers the most important methods to gain meaningful responses from a digital consultation as well as how to maximise the value of the data you collect. In reviewing over 2,500 Commonplace projects, there is compelling evidence that continual and meaningful engagement really matters for all stakeholders because:

- **It reduces polarisation that can alienate local people from being a part of planning decisions**
- **It results in quicker and better decisions since many of the problems can be resolved earlier in the process**
- **It fosters long-term trusted relationships between residents, planning authorities and developers.**

More and better quality data from the local community transforms your engagement from a box-check to an opportunity to make a positive, valuable change. People who live, work and play in any area have the most useful knowledge about it, so fostering long, ongoing conversations can frequently surface new ideas.

USE A DIGITAL-FIRST COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT STRATEGY

So, where do you even begin when approaching a community engagement? Adopting our first tip will help ensure that you achieve the largest number of responses and the most proportional representation of the people you're trying to reach.

All of our evidence points towards a digital-first strategy delivering the greatest reach and responses.

Having hosted over 2,500 engagements with more than 7 million unique visitors, we have seen first-hand how continuous, digital-first engagement makes communities:

- **Better informed**
- **More ready to adapt to and accept change**
- **Discuss its mitigations or explain objections to change.**

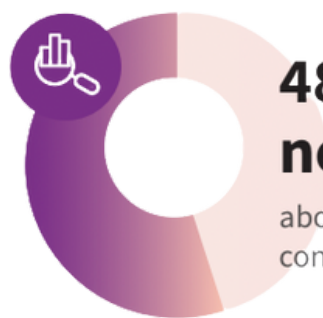
Our definition of 'engagement' is a meaningful two-way conversation that achieves visible, positive and more collaborative change. However, by that definition, 'public engagement' is presently low. In a survey we ran, only 27% of the public had ever taken part in a planning decision.*



76% want to participate in planning

Benefits of digital-first

- An already-involved community will provide a great starting point for more strategic projects, like a local plan.
- Reduce cost by saving time that would be wasted through failed or reworked projects



48% have never heard
about a local planning consultation

An online engagement platform (like Commonplace) combines your surveys, map data, email and social media programs 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:** 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 judgment. 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. 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.

LET'S CHECK OUT SOME DIGITAL-FIRST TOOLS AND TIPS FOR YOUR NEXT PROJECT.



ENGAGEMENT TOOLS THE COMMUNITY WON'T WANT TO MISS

Successful community engagement will always be continuous, not a single event as it takes time to build trust with the community. Try these tools to keep that conversation going from start to finish.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MAPPING

We'll shout about how useful Heatmaps are until we're blue in the face. They are one of the simplest yet most interesting ways to leave comments on specific spaces while painting a shared understanding of a community's needs.



Drop a pin, leave a comment, and see all the others left by the rest of the community. Easy! By adding informational layers like points of interest, an overlaid Master Plan, or even just custom shapes that highlight specific areas users can more easily understand the context of the project.

Some of our partners have collected tens of thousands of comments on a single map project and all are visible to the rest of the public. By adding this layer of transparency, it creates a greater sense of trust between an authority and its 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.

SUPERPOWERING YOUR SURVEYS

Surveys are great for capturing community data but are hardly the most exciting thing in the world. So, how can you encourage more people to fill them out? You need to get creative with your questions and experiment with different types. For example:

Smilies: Get a simple view of how people are feeling.

The screenshot shows a survey interface for 'Transport and Travel' with 54 responses. The main question is 'Overall, how positive or negative do you feel about all these visions for future transport and travel?'. Below the question is a scale of five smiley faces: Very Negative (frowny), Negative (neutral), Neutral (neutral), Positive (happy), and Very Positive (very happy). Below the scale is a text input field asking 'Do you have any other thoughts or ideas about what the travel or transport will be like in 2040?'. At the bottom, there is a 'Back' button and a 'Next' button. A smaller version of the same survey is shown on a smartphone to the right.

Label: These question types give your respondents a pre-set list of options to choose from. They just click on the ones they like the most. Perfect for co-designing spaces.

The screenshot shows a survey interface for 'Your hopes for this area' with 0 responses. The main question is 'What do you value most about this area?'. Below the question is a grid of six images with labels: 'Transport links' (a red double-decker bus), 'Public spaces' (a park with a fountain), 'The community' (a group of people), 'Creative industry' (a person working on a laptop), and 'Cultural events' (a group of people at an event). Below the grid is a 'Select one option' label. At the bottom, there is a 'Back' button and a 'Next' button.

Free text: Sometimes people want to write whatever they want, so you should give them the opportunity to!

The screenshot shows a survey interface with an aerial view of a park. Below the image is a text input field asking 'Please explain why you've selected this location'. The input field has a placeholder text 'I have chosen this location because...'. At the bottom, there is a 'Back' button and a 'Next' button.



Hot tip: *It's always best to make questions optional. After all, a half-filled-out survey is better than someone giving up and submitting nothing. Put your most important questions at the top and keep an eye on the ones that aren't being filled out. You can always readjust your survey partway through your consultation.*

Priority: Let your respondents rank options in order of preference

Please rank the issues below in order of the impact they have on your enjoyment of a green space

Sort in order of importance

Litter	1 2 3
Anti-social behaviour	1 2 3
Dog mess	1 2 3
Cycling on footpaths	1 2 3

If you've taken a photo that you feel represents the type of park you'd like to see, please upload it below

Upload files (max 3)

Please only upload content that you have permission to use.

File size limit: 40 MB

Drop files to upload or Browse files

Supported files: .jpg .png .pdf

Photo/PDF upload: They say a picture is worth 1000 words and your community probably have a lot to share

Voice notes: Some things just have to be said. With a voice question, people can record their responses and have them transcribed

Please provide any other feedback you have on the proposed 3D model here (click blue button for voice feedback):

Record a voice note, we'll transcribe it.

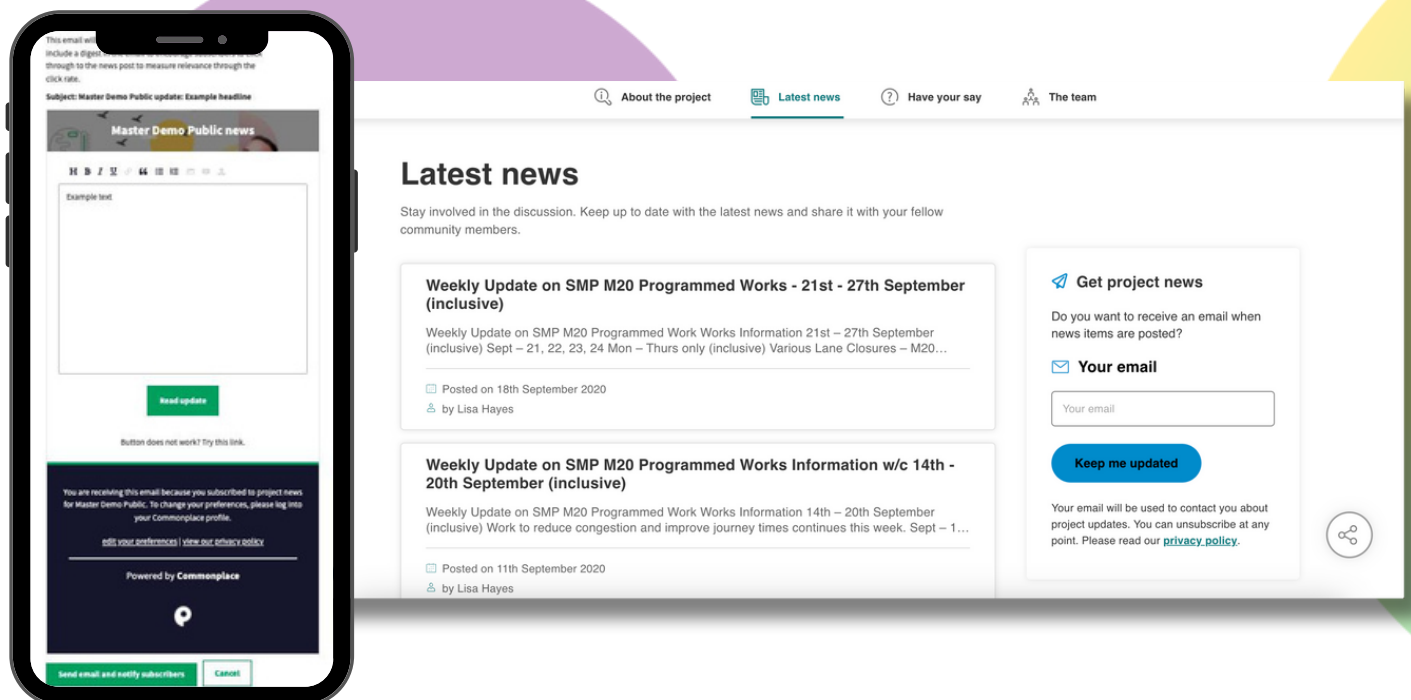
What did you find most/least useful? What could be added, taken away or changed?

1 2 3

KEEPING THE COMMUNITY UPDATED

As we mentioned, engagement should be continuous - that means keeping everyone in the loop as to how projects are developing and, perhaps more importantly, how their comments have shaped the outcome.

- **Email:** If you have a list of opt-in subscribers, you can contact them directly through email. Send a steady stream of updates to show that progress is being made. 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.
- **News Feed:** No news is too small or posts 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 a News Feed, you can easily write and publish updates directly to your community hub. This gives 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.



OFFLINE TIPS AND TOOLS

A digital strategy will never ignore the benefits of physical and in-person engagement. 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 it later or streaming it live so the rest of the community can easily see what was discussed.



THE RIGHT APPROACH FOR YOUR PARTICULAR PROJECT

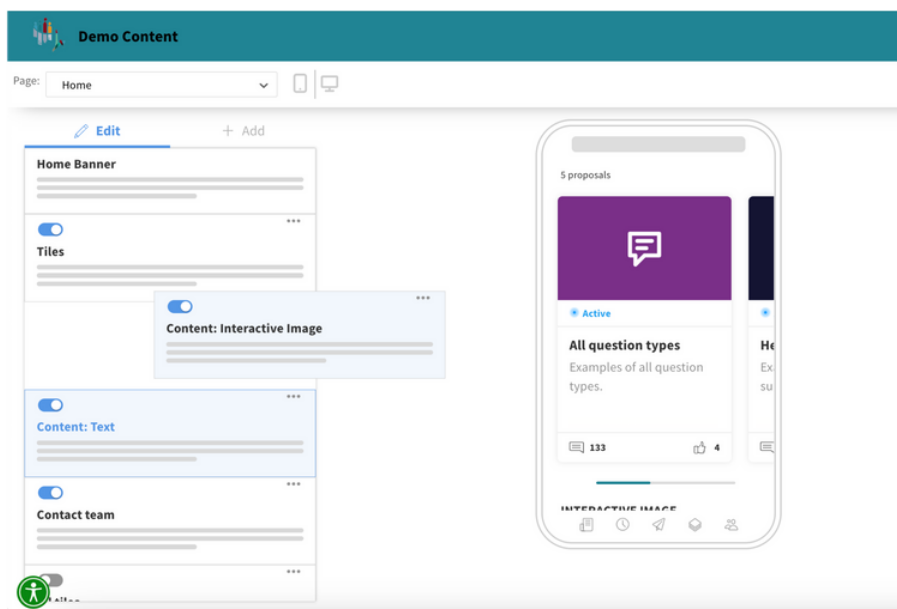
One of the challenges of engagement is that there isn't an out-of-the-box approach that works for every type of project. If you're engaging with people about a local plan it will be very different from a low-traffic neighbourhood, an estate regeneration, a neighbourhood plan or a commercial development.

So what kind of project are you planning on running? Trust us, we've (almost) seen them all! And have advice on getting the most out of them.

To maximise participation, get the right type of feedback, and reduce your risks, it's beneficial to build on the success of others: incorporate the best ideas from successful projects 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 a low-traffic neighbourhood 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 from making common mistakes, and provide you with integrated best practices, tips, tricks and performance enhancements that are specific to your project.



POTENTIAL BARRIERS AND OVERCOMING THEM

People 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. Despite what historically low engagement numbers may say, people are hungry to make change.

The reason this is not always translated into engagement numbers is that whether from fear, confusion or general lack of awareness, there are several barriers you need to overcome before launching your engagement.

- 📍 **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 must demonstrate why people should engage: what is in it for them? Trust is usually built over time and so a longer engagement usually leads to more constructive engagement and more strategically planned projects.

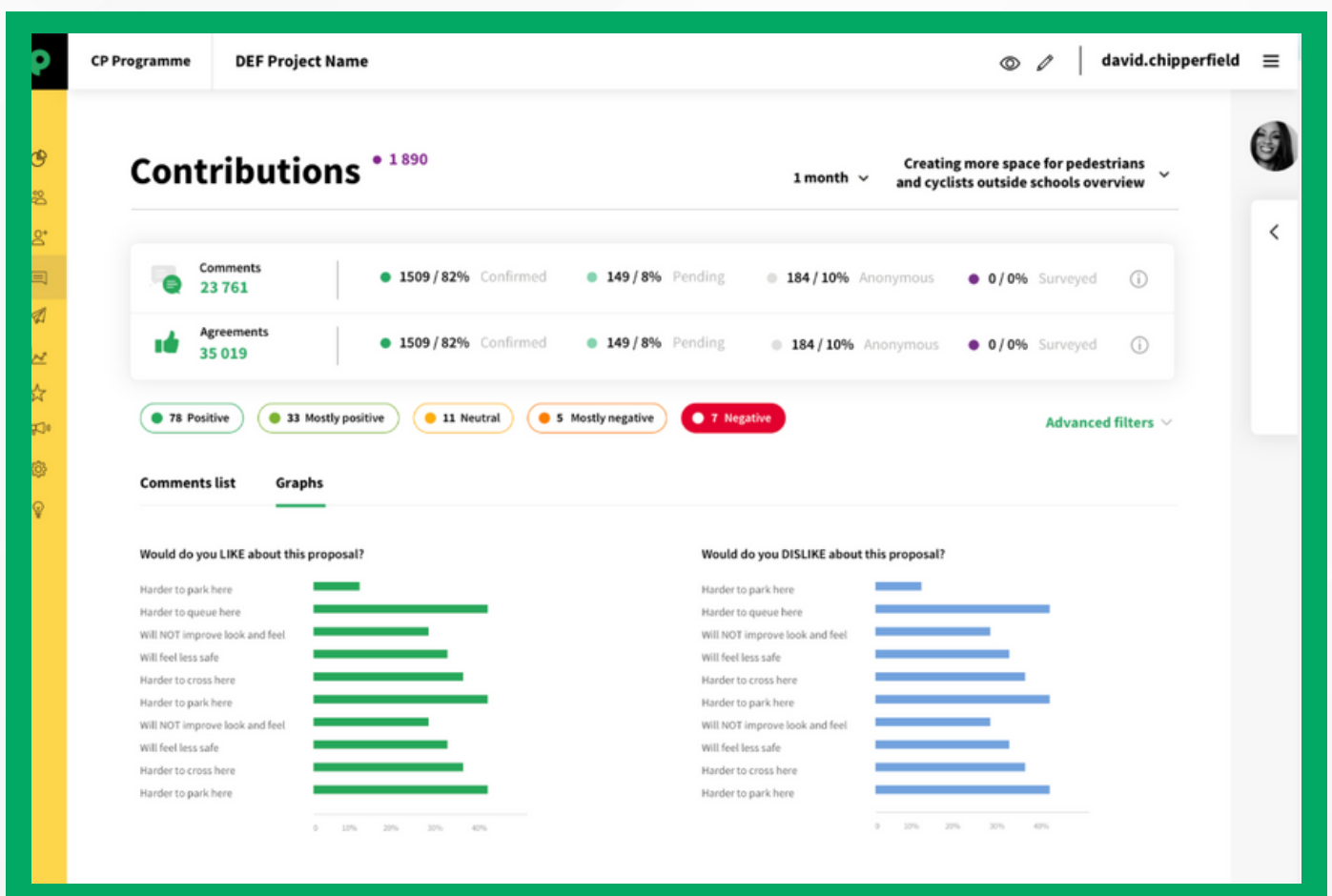
[Find out more in our full Overcoming Barriers guide](#)



ANALYSING YOUR DATA

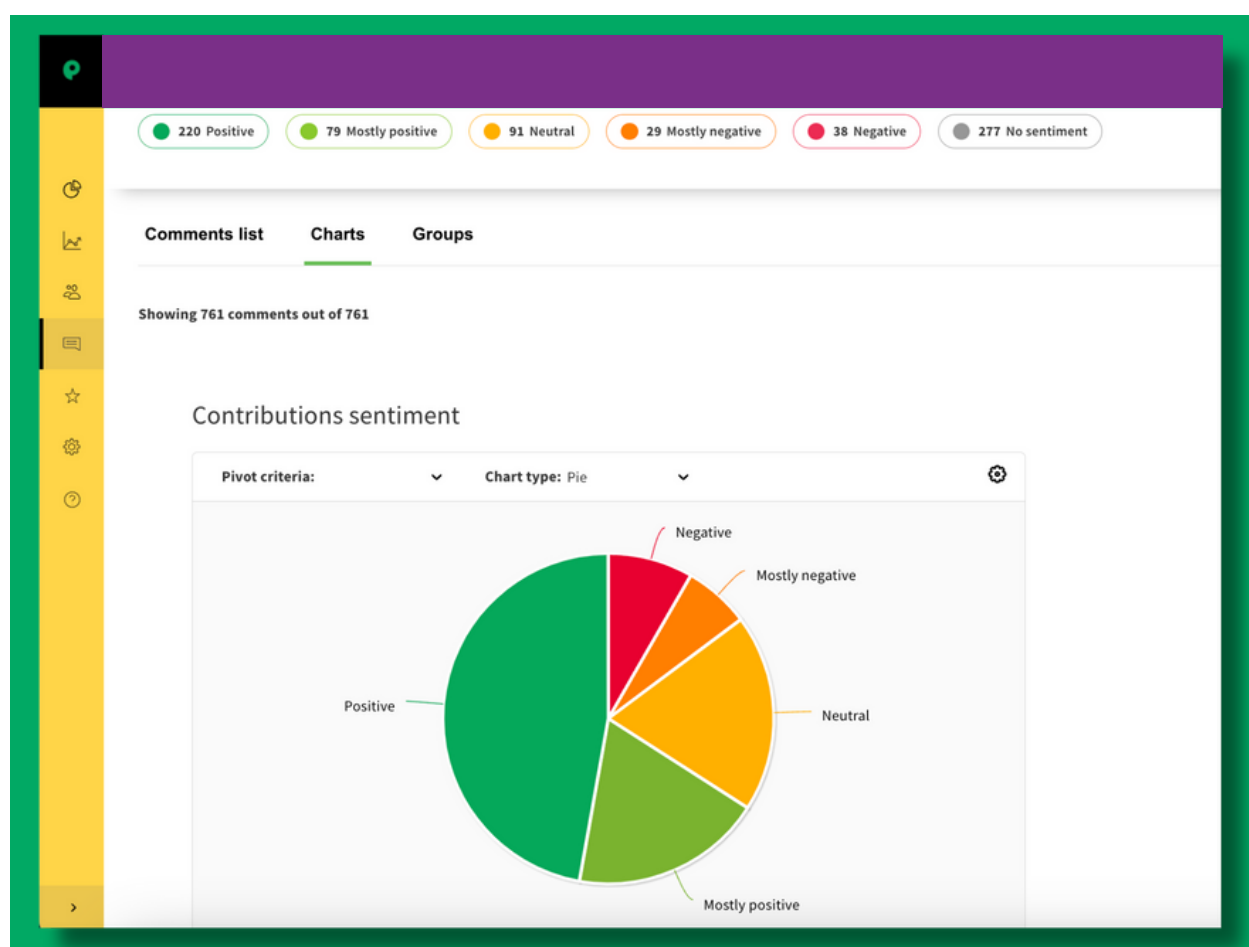
One of the greatest benefits of a digital engagement platform is straightforward, meaningful and timely access to all of the information that you collect. You will no longer need to wrestle with Microsoft Excel to create sensible insights or to produce the chart that you want for your report. Nor will 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 should be built into the analysis engine of your digital engagement platform. On Commonplace, you get much more as well: custom reports and filters for different project types; access to AI to analyse long-form text comments, and a set of nudges and suggestions to make your project more successful.

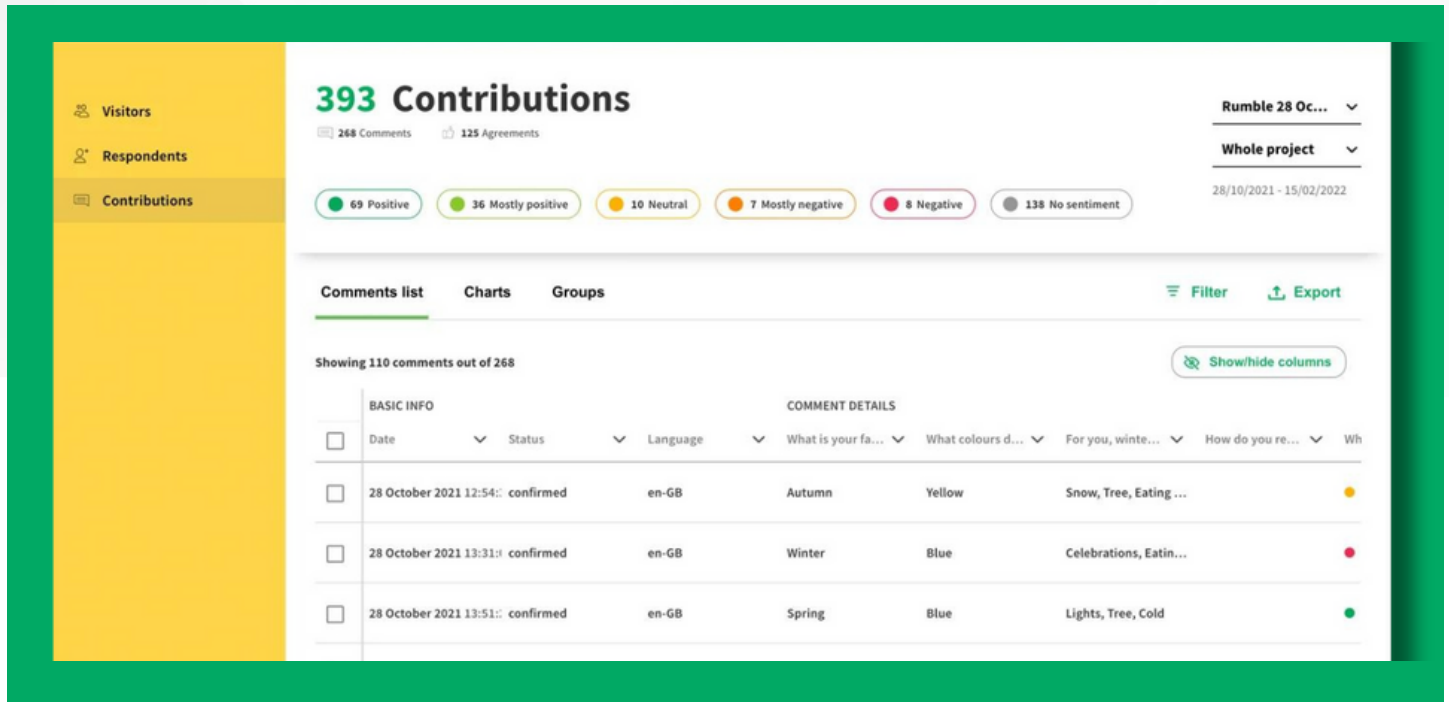


Having the right data and its correct interpretation at your fingertips, you can do all of this as you progress through a project rather than right at the end, which can be extremely valuable. Here are a few reasons why:

- **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 and traffic:** You can monitor the exact amount of traffic heading to your project and also see how sentiments develop. 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. You can set up and tag specific campaigns to see which messaging/ themes resonate the strongest with your community. The 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 AI to understand themes:** We know the word AI can sound scary and produce Skynet-like visions, but it is one of the most useful tools for sorting data. Thanks to natural language processing (NLP), we can easily pull out common themes and sentiments from a large number of comments and really dig into what has shaped different opinions.

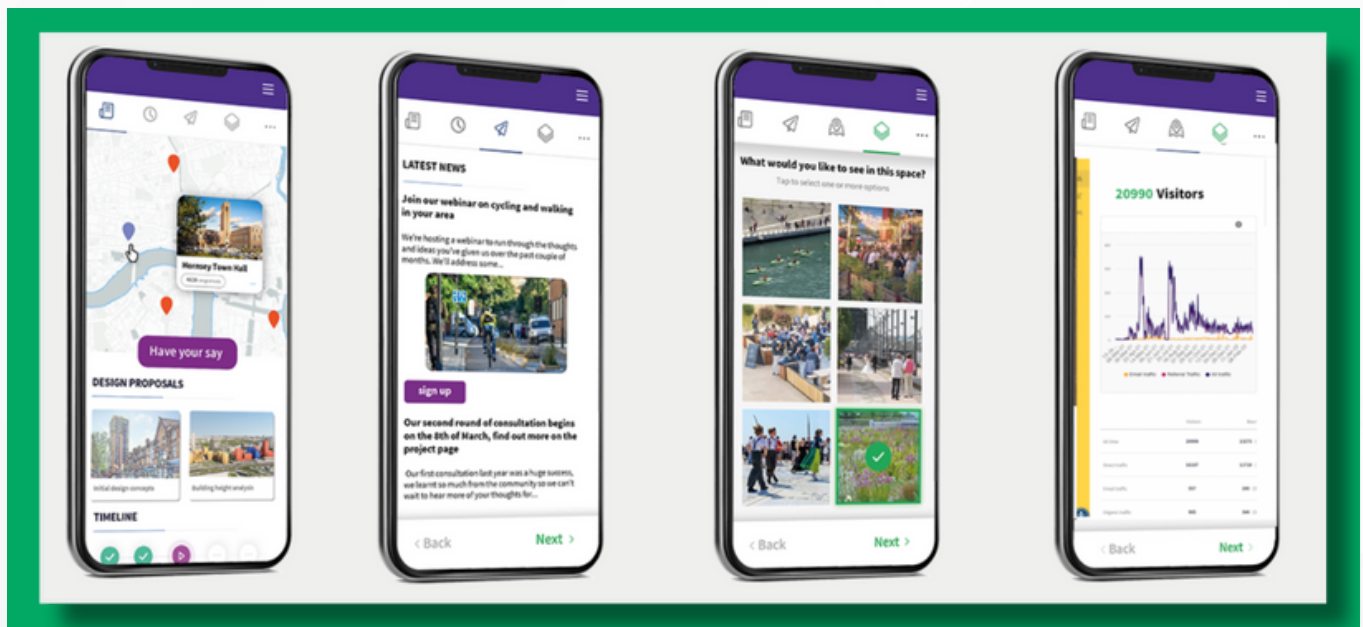
We need more **greenery - trees** **GREEN SPACES** are fantastic for the **environment** **POLLUTION**, for **cutting crime** **SAFETY** and for **improving air** **POLLUTION** quality .

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-led and giving local people the power to present their own ideas and make positive changes to the places they live, work and play.

A FEW QUICK GUIDES

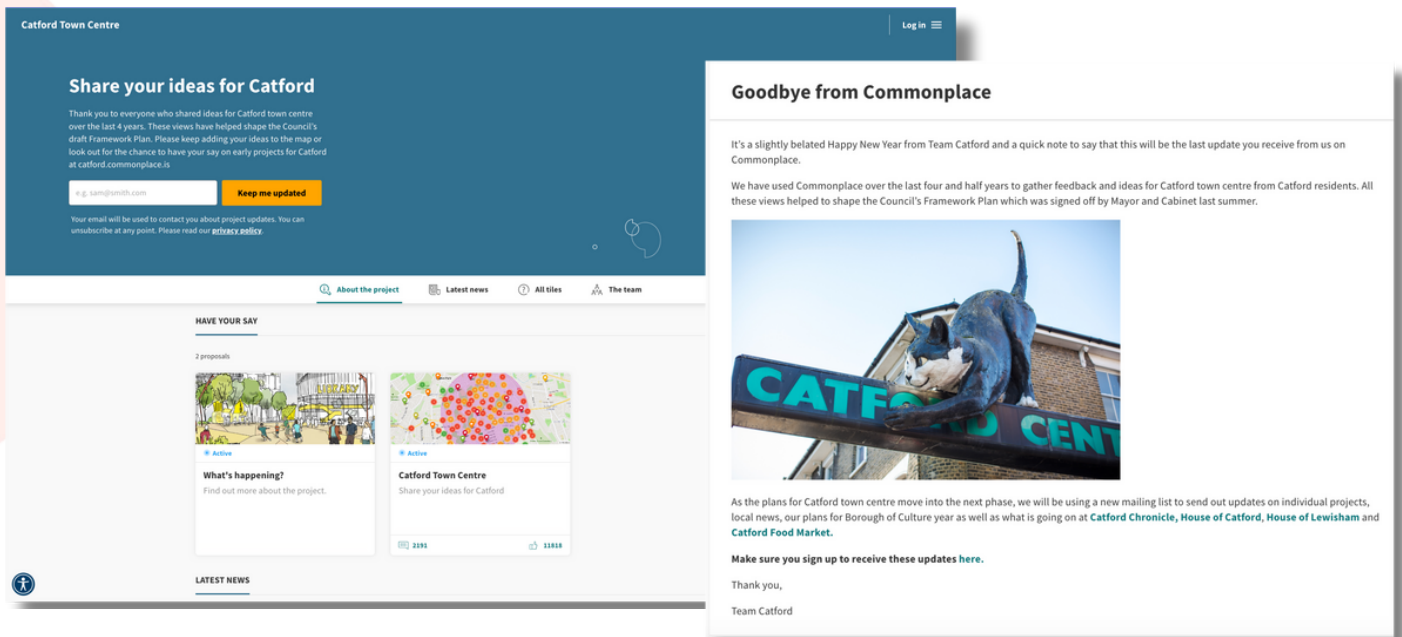
And if you need some extra tips on a specific project? We've got you covered.

- [How to get young people engaged?](#)
- [Using Commonplace for every stage of development \(a 5-part series\)](#)
- [Data to get your active travel project off to the best start](#)
- [Use community engagement to save money](#)
- [How to effectively engage rural communities](#)



ENGAGEMENT EXAMPLES

CREATING A COMMUNITY-LED CATFORD: DOING SOMETHING DIFFERENT



Project goal: Sharing ideas for Catford Town Centre

Visitors total: 57,000+

Contributions: 14500+

Unique respondents: 1500+

Commonplace was selected by the London Borough of Lewisham to deliver insight into what residents and visitors to Catford think about the area. Launched in 2017 and wrapped up in early 2022, the insights gathered were then used to make plans, including informing the Catford Masterplan.

The challenge set was to *do something different*. To discover the Catford that local people loved and the future they wanted. This engagement wasn't about policy documents or development proposals- but purely for the people who live, work and travel through Catford to explain what they did and didn't like.

They gathered views from a much wider group of people than before as well, including from those who didn't have the time to attend planning meetings. Having a digital-led strategy allowed the team to reach a much younger audience. In fact, the largest demographics were those aged 25-34 and 35-44.

The data captured gave them a strong basis to start developing their Master Plan with the points shaped by real views from the real residents of Catford.

SHAPING THE FUTURE OF CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK WITH COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

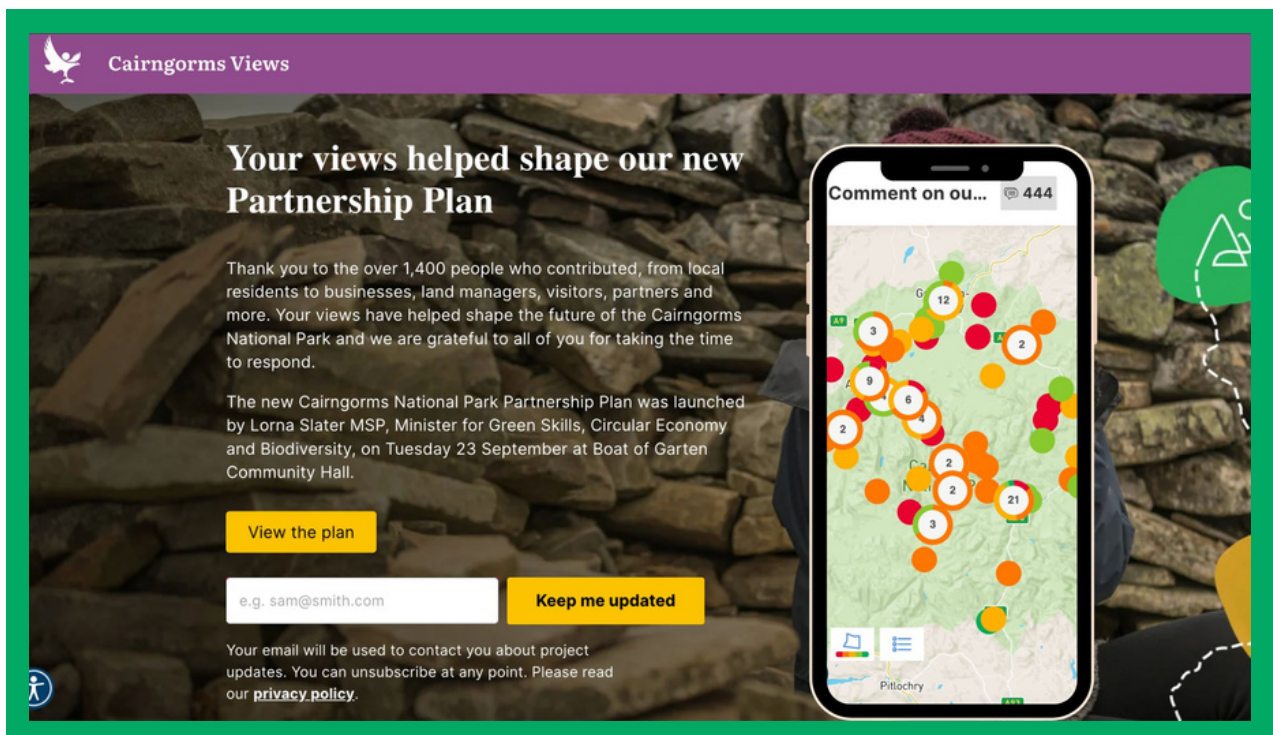
Project goal: Gather community views and create a new park plan

Visitors total: 20,000+

Contributions: 2600+ (Over five times the engagement of the previous Park Plan consultation in 2017)

Unique respondents: 1100+

The Cairngorms National Park Authority sought out the views of those who live, visit and work in the National Park as local insight is crucial for the development and protection of the area. As the UK's largest national park, covering 6% of Scotland's land mass and home to over 18,000 people, the Park Authority wanted an engagement that could reach as many people as possible. It covered everything from the impact of the pandemic to Scotland's climate change commitments to new housing projects that will have a great impact on the area over the next five years.



The goal of the 2022 consultation was to use a hybrid approach to engagement - digital and in-person - to reach more people who would not normally contribute. They first launched an interactive Heatmap and created a draft plan from the feedback. Following that, the formal consultation began: separate proposals were created for each theme of the plan (Nature, People and Place). The community could easily leave feedback on any or all of these themes, and this feedback was used to inform the next stage.

Due to the rural nature of the Cairngorms, a blended approach of offline and online engagement was the best way to keep as much of the community informed as possible. Although the pandemic made the digital sphere quite prominent, it did not stop physical engagement strategies from being utilised throughout the consultation. A mailing was organised for every household in the National Park area to spread awareness alongside the Commonplace, with a QR code designed to help advertise the consultation locally. This was on top of the online channels such as the previously mentioned News Feed, email and their ongoing social media presence which shared the specifics of what the community wanted from the plan.

The result? They identified and secured 100 local partners as a result of this engagement. Thanks to the contributions, a National Park Partnership Plan was launched by Lorna Slater MSP, Minister for Green Skills, Circular Economy and Biodiversity, in August 2022.

Cairngorms National Park Partnership Plan: Place

You said...

- Prioritise affordable housing and controls on second homes and short-term lets.
- Improve public transport, path and cycle networks across the National Park.
- Commit to upgrading visitor infrastructure, including accessible toilets.

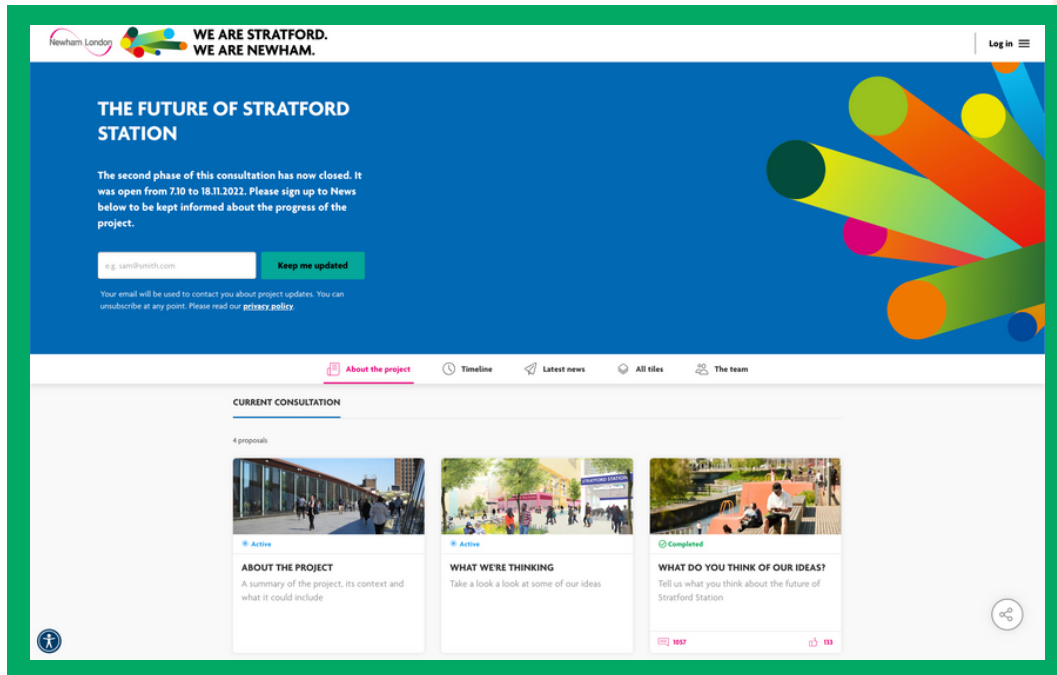
We listened...

- Specific actions on second homes and short-term lets have been added, and affordable housing has been brought to the front of the section.
- The plan prioritises improving public transport and active travel routes, particularly through our Heritage Horizons: Cairngorms 2030 project.
- An action has been added around accessible toilets, alongside a commitment to creating and maintaining high quality visitor infrastructure.

People and nature thriving together

The Cairngorms National Park is changing. Last year, we asked you to help shape our new Partnership Plan and we're grateful to the nearly 1,500 of you who responded to the consultation. Whilst a process like this always requires compromise, I hope the information on the next few pages reflects the key priorities you identified.

LLDC : SHAPING THE FUTURE OF STRATFORD STATION



Project goal: Create a business case to improve Stratford Station

Visitors total (so far): 18,500+

Contributions: 2100+

Unique respondents: 1500+

A coalition of different businesses: The London Legacy Development Corporation (LLDC), Network Rail, Newham Council and Transport for London (TFL) have recently submitted their business case to the government about redeveloping one of the UK's busiest train stations: Stratford Station. From the extension of the Jubilee line to the addition of the DLR and the Elizabeth line, the number of passengers has soared exponentially to a number that the station was never designed to handle.

In 2019, the coalition came together to build a business case for the redevelopment of the station as, according to models provided by Network Rail, by the mid-2030s it will no longer be safe for use.

Thanks to a thorough community engagement strategy, including a multi-staged paid social media campaign, LLDC and the London Borough of Newham were able to gather the varied thoughts and opinions of the people who live, work and travel through the station and present what it is they wanted from the Stratford Station of the future.

So, how did over 18,000 people find the engagement website? On top of a full marketing plan, LLDC used a paid social media plan to target the widest breadth of people possible in the Newham area.

Commonplace created targetted ads for Facebook and Instagram with the plan broken down into three phases:

1. A number of ads were launched to target the whole Newham area. They were monitored and analysed by Commonplace who then chose the most effective templates to continue using. This was monitored by the cost per contribution, click-through rate and impressions.
2. The most effective ad was then used for the second half of the consultation. Through analysis, Commonplace looked deeper into the audience demographics and which groups were actively contributing to the consultation.
3. Commonplace then produced infographics to show the public the information that had already been collected. Both Commonplace and LLDC then looked into demographic data again, specifically which demographics we were not reaching. This was benchmarked against ONS data for the London Borough of Newham. This then altered the interest groups that we were targeting on Facebook and Instagram.

This brought in a number of new contributions to the project as well as giving a much better reflection of the broader community's views thanks to hitting a few previously missing demographics (especially young women aged 18-24).

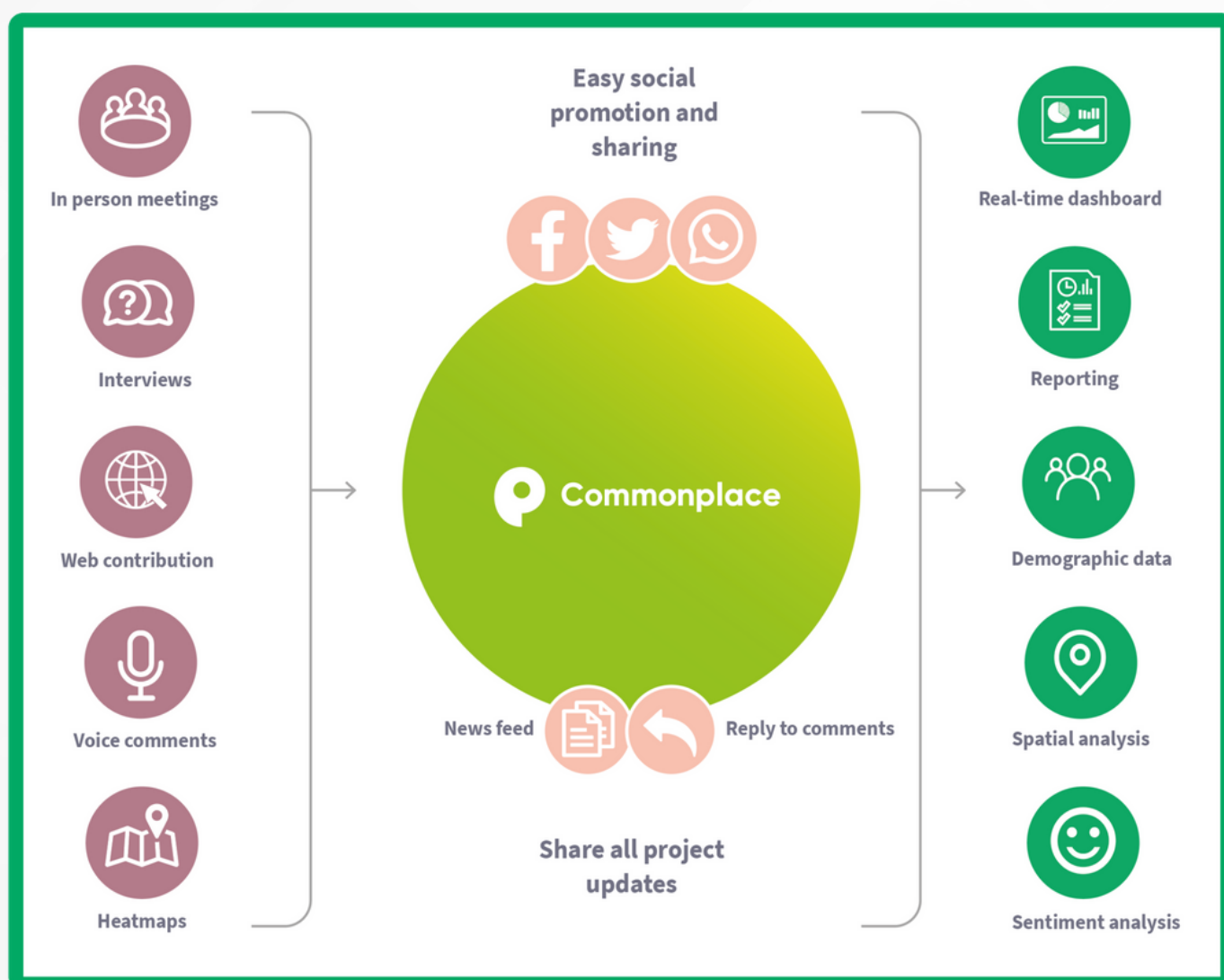


ABOUT COMMONPLACE

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

Commonplace offers multiple specialist solutions in each of the following categories:

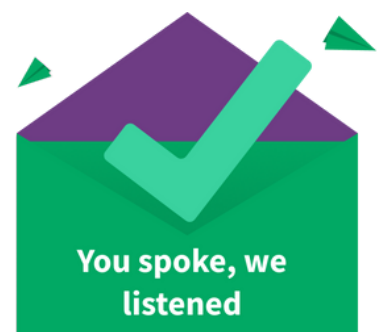
- **Plan-making: local plans;** CIL and Section 106; master-planning
- **Housing associations:** estate community heatmap; pre-planning engagement; master plans; post-occupancy evaluation
- **Transport planning:** transport strategy; active travel engagement; major and minor transport scheme planning
- **Residential development:** development area community heatmap; pre-planning engagement; master plans; post-occupancy evaluation
- **Regeneration:** neighbourhood community heatmap; pre-planning engagement; master plans; post-occupancy evaluation
- **Climate and energy:** climate adaptation heatmap; climate emergency citizen assembly; energy masterplan; energy installation pre-planning engagement





Powering Positive Participation

Corporation



You spoke, we listened