7 TIPS
for engaging young people

A quick Commonplace guide!

Commonplace

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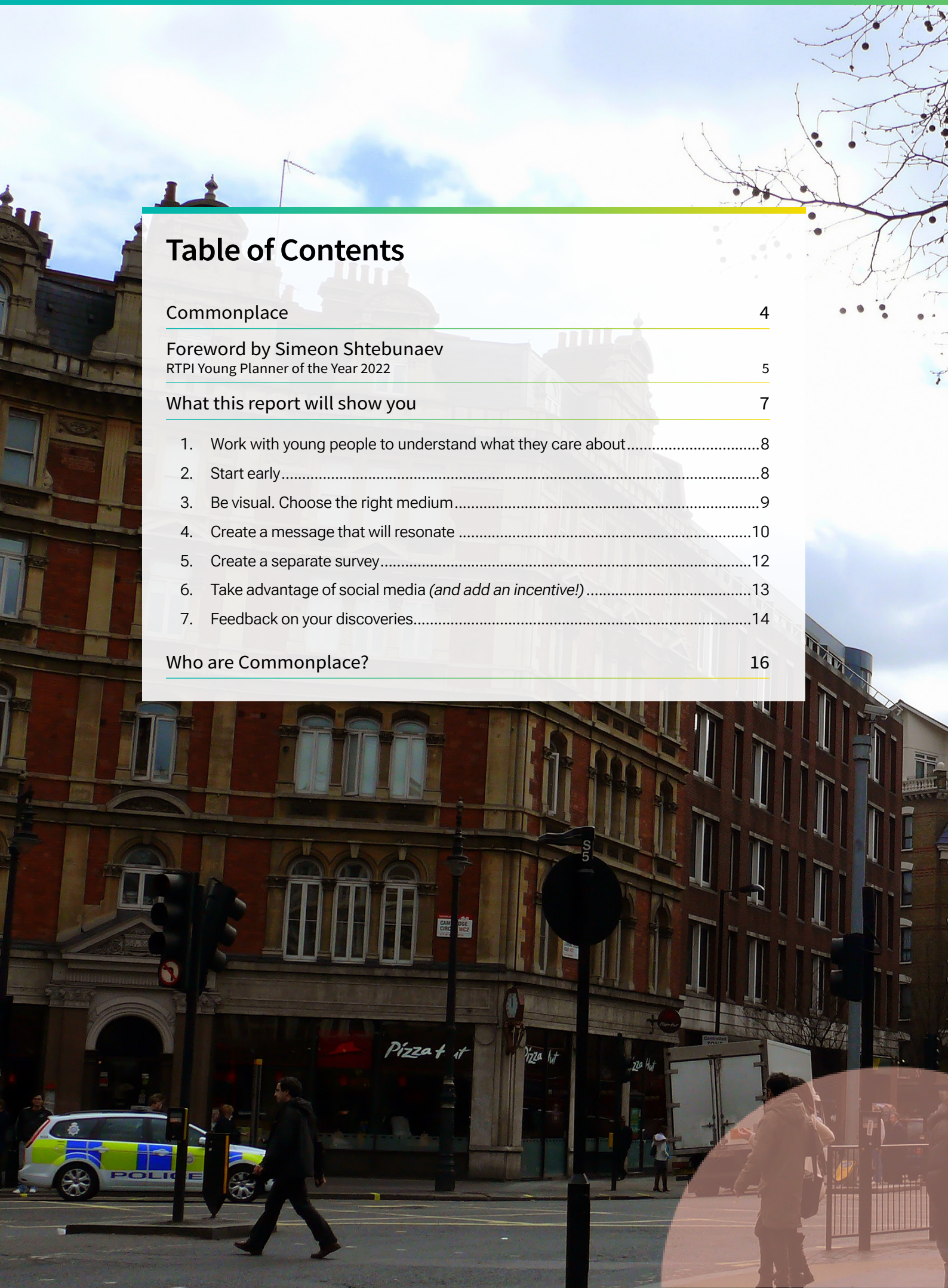

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Commonplace

Who we are:

- **Comprehensive public engagement platform for the built environment**
- **Used by developers, local authorities, infrastructure, communities, transport**
- **At scale - 2,500+ projects; 7 million unique UK website visitors**
    - **75% of all Commonplace respondents are under 45**

What we bring:

- Interactions about change in the data at different levels - from single project to metropolitan.
- Specialist advice and tools for reaching all community demographics (including those seen as 'hard to reach')
    - Customers have seen up to a 54% increase in youth engagement on their projects

Foreword by Simeon Shtebunaev

RTPI Young Planner of the Year 2022

"How do I talk to young people?" is a question I receive almost bi-monthly from practitioners interested in engaging with youth. They often struggle with the adult-centric view which permeates our society and prevents us from seeing children and young people as equals. The answer I always give is: "You first need to listen!"

We often hear that children and young people are hard to reach, difficult to engage and a demographic shrouded in mystery. But we do not stop and consider that young people are busy – they are busy discovering the world, fitting in, revising for tests, looking for jobs etc. If we are serious about respecting, engaging and listening to their views, we need to meet them where they are. The digital world for better or worse is one of those spaces where youth hang out and offers a wide potential for engagement. We cannot afford to ignore it and Commonplace provides a clear list of easy-to-digest tips about engaging with young people online in this report.

Established participatory models such as the Hart Youth Ladder of Participation[1] are often misinterpreted beyond their original critical purpose, now serving as static guides pinned on the boards at youth clubs. However, whereas they point to the power dynamics between decision-makers and youth, they do not specify how these power dynamics can be overcome. We often are complacent that if we have the intention to engage young people, then we are already on the right path – which often invalidates the importance of understanding how to collect and what to do with the data from young people once gathered.

We rarely interrogate the tools we use to reach young people and examine their suitability, and rarely go back to examine if the participation of young people indeed wielded the results they asked for. In the essay "**10 Reasons Giving Young Adults Voice & power over what gets built: advocating for Youth Participation in planning, regeneration, and Neighbourhood Management**." Written in 2020 for Grosvenor UK[2] I outlined the question "Why?" we need to engage with youth. This report by Commonplace moves that conversation further into the What and How?

1 https://www.unicef-irc.org/publications/100-childrens-participation-from-tokenism-to-citizenship.html

2 https://www.grosvenor.com/getattachment/008a2250-3315-46fd-b512-a0de8bd60b9c/YET-essay-final.pdf

Digital and hybrid engagement with communities is only here to stay. The success of digital platforms such as Commonplace has demonstrated the value of this approach. This report distils years of experience and resonates with my own work in digital and physical spaces with young people – you need to take the time to listen and feedback, you need to respect the lived experience but also be able to support the journey in developing of expertise and knowledge which young people are on. We cannot afford not to engage young people anymore in the development and stewardship of the places they live in.

About the Author: Simeon Shtebunaev is an interdisciplinary researcher in the built environment. He is founder of Urban Imaginarium and researcher at Social Life. Their PhD project at Birmingham City University explores how young people engage in the planning of future 'smart' cities. He was a principal investigator on the AHRC funded project "Are you game for climate action?" developing the retrofit board game Climania with young people, winner of RTPI Community Engagement Research Award. He is a trustee of the RTPI.

What this report will show you

Talk to anyone who has been to a community consultation and they will describe a room of people over the age of 55. Where are the younger people? If you read some of the studies of this age group, you would be forgiven for concluding they are just working, shopping, gaming and interacting online, rather than interacting with their local area.

This however could not be further from the case! Younger people are, in fact, insightful, analytical, practical and full of energy for positive local change yet their voices are often left out of these decisions.

Our study of 1,350 comments from people under the age of 35[3] showed that such stereotypes of local apathy and disinterest amongst younger people are untrue. Younger people:

- Were most vocal about which shops are needed to make a high street work. They recognised the social and economic value that the right mix of shops brings to a vibrant high street.
- Recognise and value the quality of life that a great neighbourhood can offer. From road safety to the ease of moving around on foot or bike, to greenery and social areas.
- Have strong views but are open-minded to conversation. They want to find positive solutions to the problems of the world.

So, why are you missing them in your current community engagements?

Many believe that switching to a digital-first strategy will automatically attract young 'digital native' people. But that is not the case. Young people we have interviewed most commonly say that when they do not engage it is because they feel it is just a tick-box exercise. And what's worse, they also feel that they are not being listened to.

In this quick guide, we have put together decades of engagement experience to give you 7 tips on how you can attract younger people in large numbers to your next project.

3 Commonplace built environment Youth Report: https://www.commonplace.is/youngpeoplereport

Let's start with the scary stuff. If truth be told, engaging younger people (35 and below) takes hard work and committing resources. By using the Commonplace platform, which is designed and optimised for engagement, alongside these 7 guidelines, you will maximise responses from younger people.:

1. Work with young people to understand what they care about

People of different ages are interested in different things, so make sure you include content that keeps their interest. For example, Climate Change is something that younger generations have grown up with genuine awareness and passion for, whereas parking and road layout changes might not be so high on their agenda.

To help you generate these topics, we recommend reviewing any existing surveys and information you have already collected to see where young people are interested and to see points that have already been brought up.

Extra Tip:
To encourage more young people to engage, peer-to-peer interviews are a great way to test and adjust the content of your survey. For example during a project with Lendlease in Silvertown, 16-17-year-olds were trained on how to survey others to optimise content and get them involved in the design process.

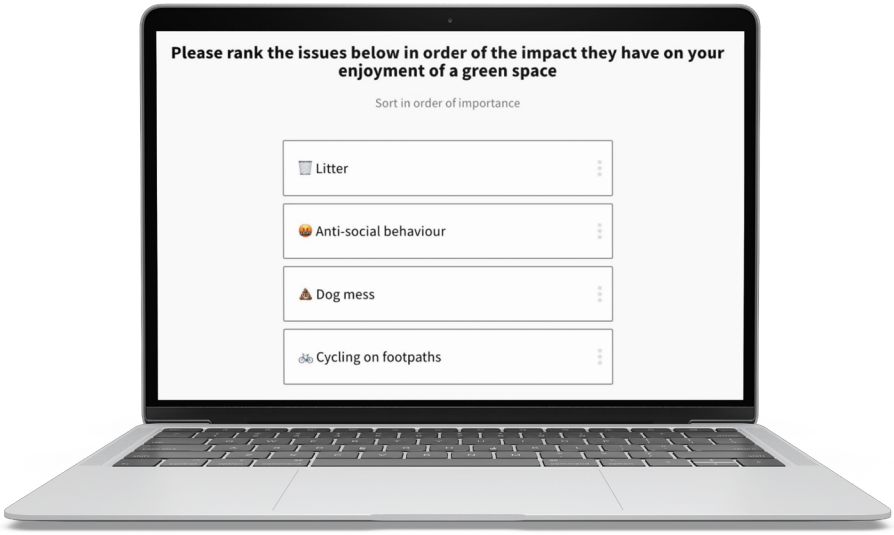
2. Start early

The earlier you start, the easier you will find this kind of youth engagement as a step to develop the content for the full engagement process. It will help you build an audience who are interested in the topic- a key step for strong engagement down the line.

It will also reduce the skew in older opinion as those aged 45 and above statistically make up the majority of comments in more 'typical' in-person engagements.

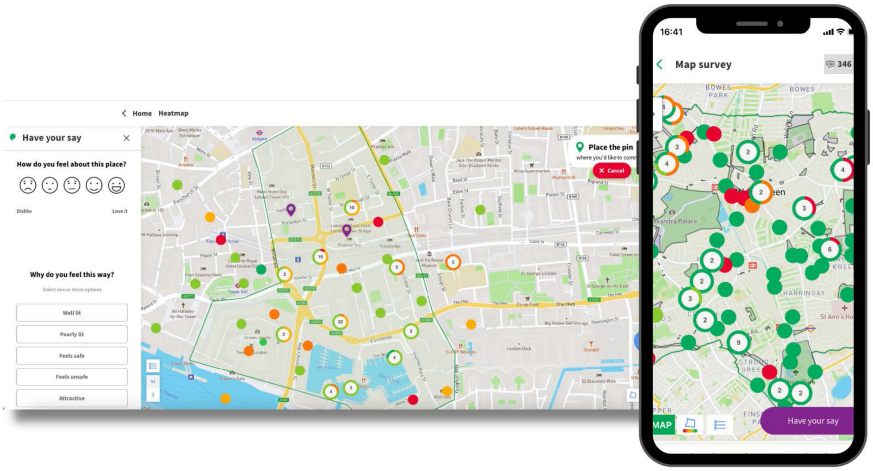
3. Be visual. Choose the right medium

Design is key here. Think about what would make younger people want to engage with an online survey.



In our experience, the best way to do this is to make it visual and fresh: (or use one of our 40 different types of visual question types to keep the experience interactive). Don't worry, we know that's a lot and we're here to help you choose the ones that are perfect for your engagement. Consider the following:

- Could you use an image poll in place of a list of options?



- Could you use a 'comment on an image' question to prompt feedback on a new road layout?
- Would a matrix question help keep your survey short and sweet?

It's also important to think about how younger people fill out surveys - on their phones. So make sure that everything is optimised to be mobile first.

Tip:
We recommend no more than 10 questions - less if often more to avoid people dropping off halfway through.

Videos are also a fantastic way to engage younger people. Up to 70% of all online information is consumed via video, so use this to your advantage! You could get one of your younger stakeholders to record a 30-second video introducing the engagement exercise and bring their peers into the conversation.

4. Create a message that will resonate

A crucial piece of advice: you must see younger people as a **separate stakeholder group** that will need their own resources and approach to communication.

The best way to get them on board is to allow them to influence the outcome. You can do this by engaging your existing young contacts on how to ask questions that will resonate with their peers. You could even provide an incentive where needed, for example, *winning a £50 voucher for sharing your views.*

How often have you gotten three sentences into a document and immediately switched off? Let's face it, a long consultation full of jargon isn't going to inspire younger people to stop and give their opinion. Ask yourself, can you tailor the message? We've found that direct content and questions work better for younger audiences. For example, don't say *'Have your say',* but instead be direct; *'18-25 year olds - We Need You!'.* You need to make people feel like they are a big part of what will happen and that they see your commitment to making sure their opinion is included.

Additionally, organising face-to-face events at locations frequented by younger people can amplify your impact. By being present in these environments, you can establish a physical connection and build trust with this demographic, ultimately leading to stronger community bonds.

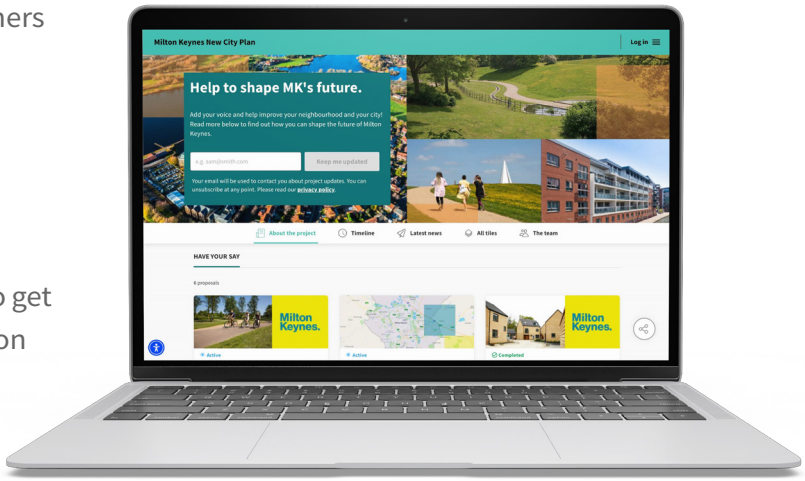
WHAT OUR CUSTOMERS HAVE ACHIEVED: MILTON KEYNES CITY COUNCIL

Let's take a quick look at how one of our customers has engaged younger people:

Milton Keynes New City Plan

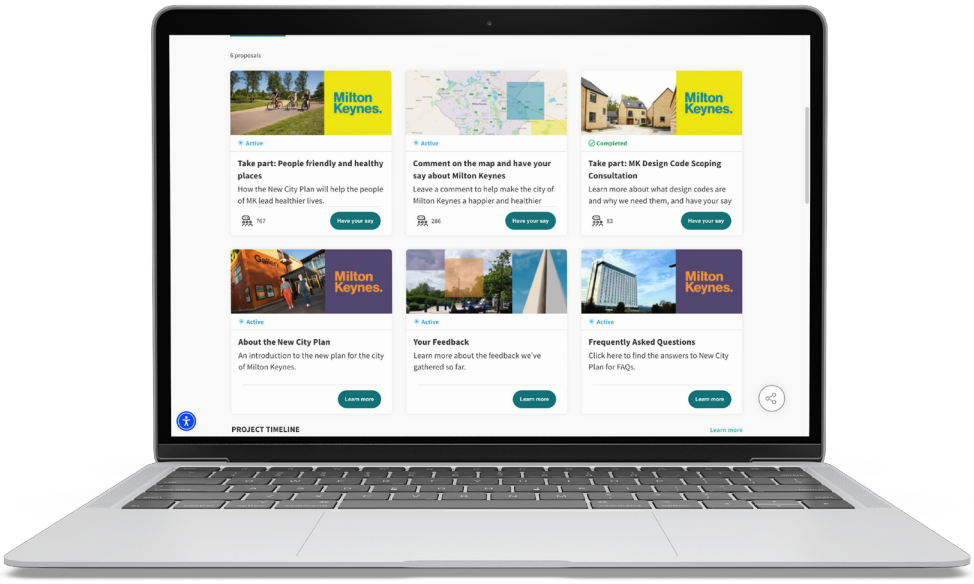
Milton Keynes New City Plan:

This is an early-stage local plan engagement. To get the opinions of young people (ages 15-24), Milton Keynes City Council have implemented several methods:



"We had the desire to engage young people and recognised their views typically weren't well represented in local plan surveys, so we made use of young people we already were connected with." - Nouvella Kusi: Planning Policy Officer, Milton Keynes City Council

- The Council's planning department runs a scheme called 'Explore' in which students spend a week at the council to learn more about planning. They consulted these 'explore students' on the survey questions to see whether they were accessible
- They also made use of their Youth Council - a group of young people aged 11-18 years. As an already engaged group of young people, they were used as 'local plan ambassadors' to encourage others.
- They also ran an incentive-led campaign (a competition with two small prizes up for grabs) encouraging each person in the council to get as many people as possible to visit the website, complete the survey and subscribe to news updates.
    - During the competition, the engagement website received 2094 visitors, with **54%** coming from the youth council.

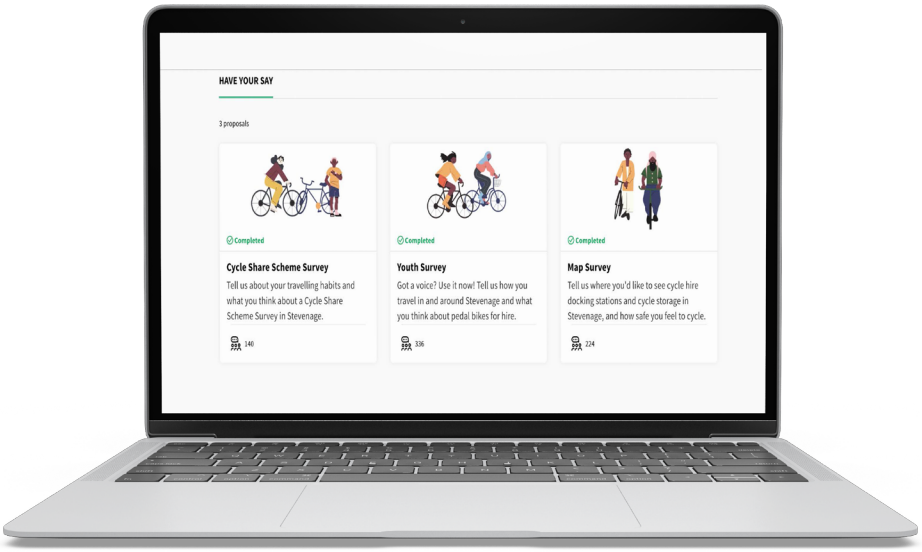


Tip:
The top four council members encouraged 159 people to respond (42%). This demonstrates it doesn't require a large number of 'ambassadors' to have an impact.

5. Create a separate survey

Now that you've got a plan to find young people, it's time to talk about messaging. To be successful, you must make space for young people to shape your consultation. For example: create them a unique space on the engagement site and a separate survey, tailoring your language accordingly. A separate survey tile on the Commonplace site will allow you to craft a message and language that's specific to them, as well as ask different questions. Later, you can show which parts of your consultation have been specifically shaped by the voices of younger people.

They also need to know about the activity and feel driven to get involved. It follows that the recipe for success is based on better promotion of information and the clarity of that information. (For example, Milton Keynes and their competition!)



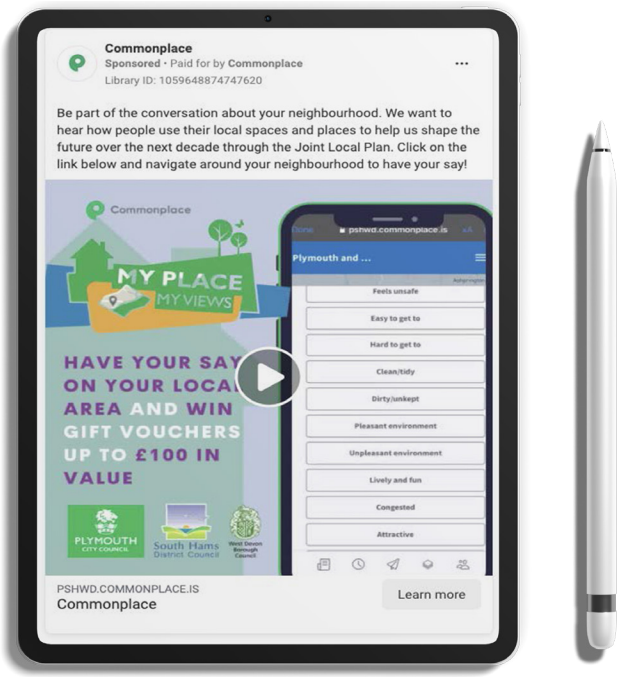
The key to effectively engaging young people is to view them as a unique target audience with their own needs, values, rules and rewards. Remember, it's also important to communicate and educate without patronising.

Tip:

For the questions you ask on this separate survey, it will help to offer examples to help prompt responses. When it comes to demographic questions, try to keep them short and explain in the subtext why you are asking them, as sometimes they can be a barrier for younger people.

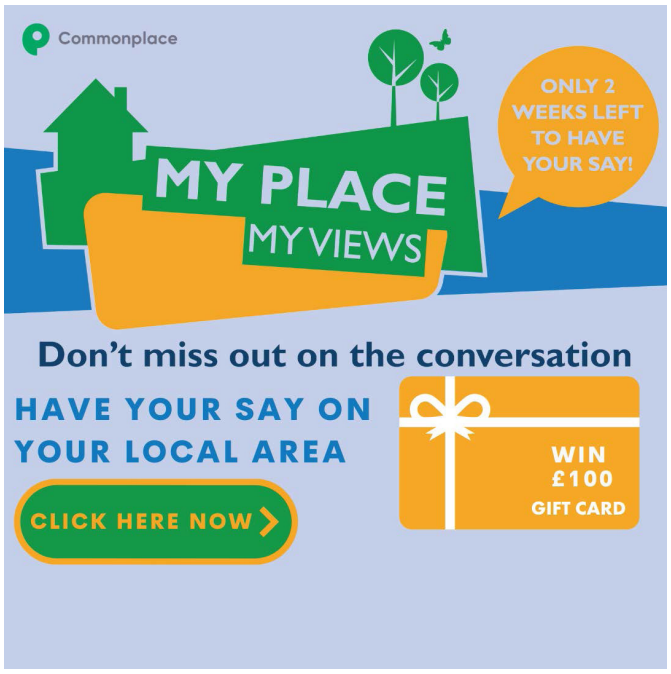
6. Take advantage of social media *(and add an incentive!)*

We find a higher rate of responses from younger people when they are incentivised. It is often a good way to hook them in because it creates a direct correlation that says “My opinion is worth something”. A few vouchers here and there that can be spent in the local economy will incentivise young people, as well as give a better reason to provide a robust answer.



Using a paid social media promotion can directly target younger people within your community with unique messages and quotes. Great for getting responses from people living in specific areas. It will strongly resonate with them and help boost your engagement levels within this demographic. To see how it can work, check out this case study with Doncaster City Council where social media promotion helped them reach unprecedented numbers in just 16 days.

And if you’re not sure how to set that up yourself, there are plenty of services (including Commonplace) that can get you started…

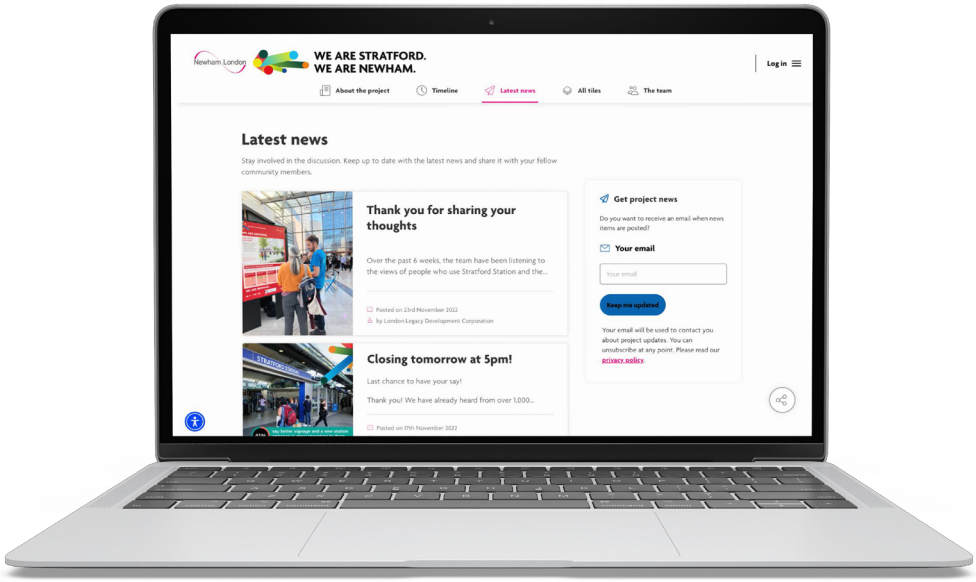


7. Feedback on your discoveries

Important as ever is making sure that you create a **feedback loop in your engagement plan**. This means letting each stakeholder group know that their contributions have been heard and are actively making a difference. One of our first points in this guide was that younger people consistently feel that they are not being listened to - and this is the direct solution.

There are several simple (and relatively low-effort) ways to do this including:

- Using a News Feed
- Consistent update emails to feedback on results
- Periodic reports of sentiment and comments left: This also helps with the transparency of the product.



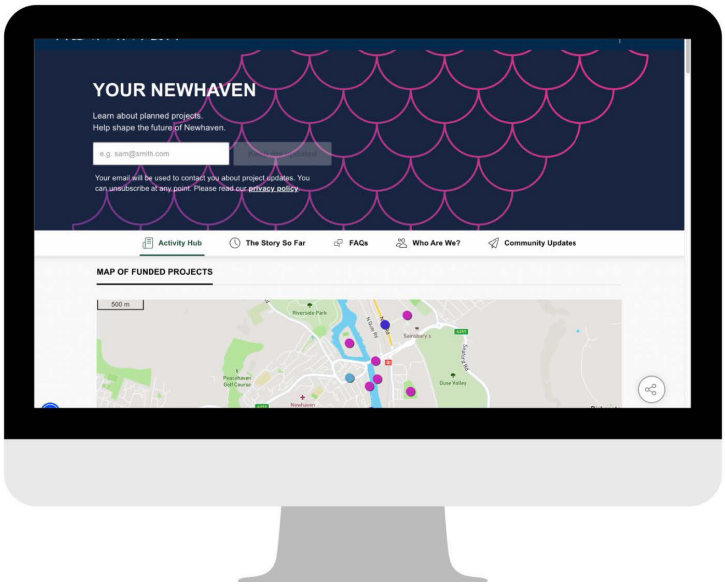
We recommend writing a news post at least once a month and signposting people to other places where they can get involved whilst they await the results of the consultation. If it's engaging enough, news can also be further circulated through their own channels as well, like social media or even their own website.

CUSTOMER EXAMPLES

Read all that and looking for some more inspiration? Check out some more examples of our customers getting young people involved in their engagements.

- Your Newhaven: For this engagement, the team created a short survey and spelt out the time it would take to complete, emphasising how short it would be. There was also a chance to win £50 for doing so! This added an additional 212 contributions
- Stevenage Cycle Hire: For this shared mobility scheme, Stevenage deliberately used brighter, friendlier-looking assets to encourage participation. They also opted for an 'image option' question type for most survey questions to keep the survey fun and highly visual.

- Let's Talk North Yorkshire: North Yorkshire are tackling climate change and bringing younger people into the conversation. They are carefully capturing feedback from kids and young adults of all ages and emphasising the steps needed to be taken for each age group.



This survey is designed for people aged under 25, but there are some restrictions around who can fill it in-this is to do with sharing personal details:

- ***If you are under 13,*** *we'd love to hear from you, but we'll need to send you a paper survey to fill in - please ask a teacher or your guardian to contact letstalk@northyorks.gov.uk*
- ***If you are aged 13-16*** *- please fill in the survey, but please ask your guardian before you share your email address with Commonplace or any of your personal details you can still fill in the survey without giving Commonplace your details.*
- ***If you are 16 or over,*** *you can fill in the survey and give Commonplace your email address and details, or if you would prefer not to, you can still fill in the survey and leave them blank.*

- London South East Colleges and Local London: For the first time, Commonplace has helped engage on a very hot topic - Green Skills. Working closely with LSEC, we are helping them to engage college-aged students across the SE of London on the subject of green skills. They are using the platform to engage multiple groups simultaneously using tiles to separate the various groups. This is a big initiative to solve retrofitting and is helping to promote jobs in sustainability. They have used video to engage students, parents and local employers in the community, to bring them up to speed on project initiatives..

Who are Commonplace?

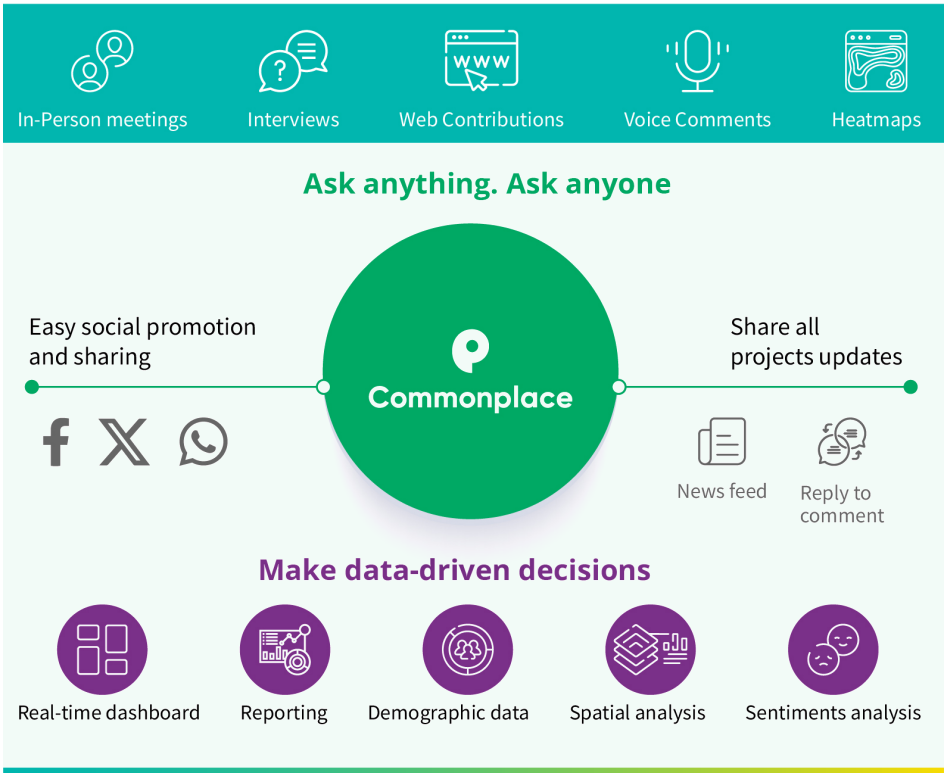
Commonplace supplies websites for local community engagement that are used by local authorities, communities, private developers and other organisations to inform the public about plans and also gather feedback. **We are both a platform and a service:** with tools to gather the most meaningful data possible while also being available to support and guide all customers throughout their project's lifecycle.

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.

We have AI- integration and also offer ongoing customer success support once projects are launched. Our dedicated team will be there with best practice advice and weekly check-ins to make sure that the information gathered is the best possible for any given project.

We're also a certified B Corp!



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