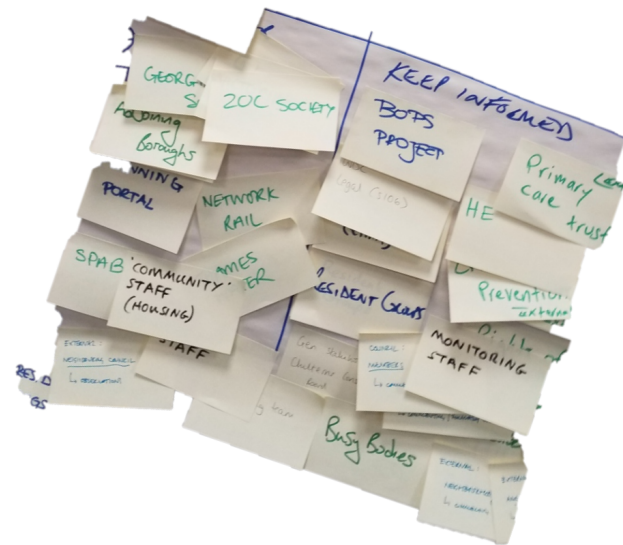# 5 User research

Our Approach to Learning

Early sessions included Stakeholder mapping workshops. This helped
us understand our different types of stakeholder and our priorities for engagement.

Our early workshops showed us that there was more to learn than we realized – and that
some of our assumptions may not necessarily have been accurate. We also realized whilst
we may have thought we were the experts working in a planning environment – we didn't
necessarily know what users really needed or wanted.

This led us to realize we needed to engage a professional User
Researcher to give added insight.

Testing Assumptions

Our early sessions with our User Researcher started with journey mapping with officers going through the existing process as well as the early iteration of the solution.

Officers were the only ones with a thorough understanding of the information required, so their early feedback was essential. They could find the holes in the service.

We conducted one-to-one interviews and group workshops with planning and technical officers across five authorities. We also asked members of the core project team to review and mark-up the outputs.

Priority Mapping

The partners also mapped priorities and other considerations.

These gave us direction in our user research as well as ensured we sense checked the rationale for what we were developing.

For example, we realized that user trust in our system was going to be critical for uptake.

We also identified the need to avoid building existing bad practice into the new system.

Testing with users

In Alpha, we:

–   Surveyed 96 research volunteers on their planning application past experiences

–   Conducted 13 usability test sessions with 3 distinct user groups. This comprised 6 agents, 5 applicants and 2 technical officers.

–   Iterated and tested 3 versions of the RIPA prototype from paper to digital

–   Produced 263 lines of consolidated usability test findings
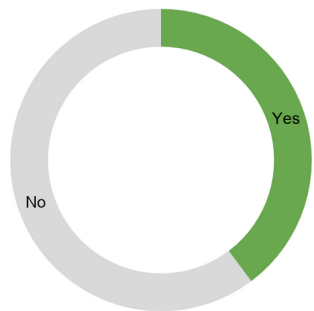
Testing with users – how we did it

We used a screening approach to select users from our volunteers to ensure a wide range of experience and type. Our User Researcher led the interviews, taking users through the prototypes, whilst observers took notes of how the user interacted with the prototype and what they said.

After the user interviews were completed, the User Researcher collated the recorded information by different screens and then analysed each one.
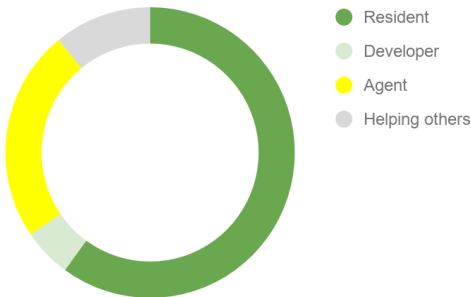
User testing survey

Have you submitted an application in the last 3 years?

Yes
No

If yes, in what capacity did you submit?

- Resident
- Developer
- Agent
- Helping others

Types of application submitted

Householder applications	20
Minor applications	18
Pre-application	17
Listed building consent	10
Certificate of Lawfulness	9
Major applications	9
Prior approval	8
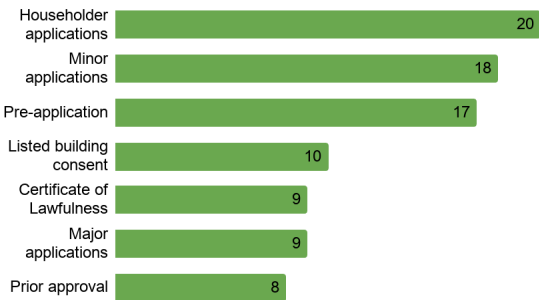
How do you usually submit planning applications?

- Planning portal
- Email
- Post
- Don't know
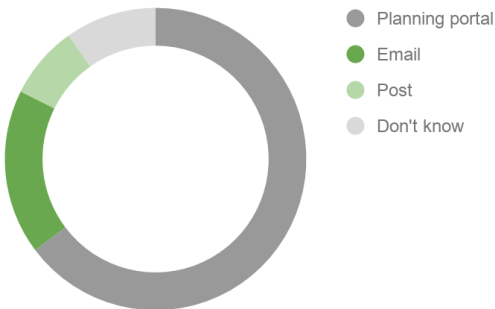
Do you have any additional accessibility needs?

Mobility impaired	2
Vision impaired	2
Learning / cognitive impaired	1
None	87

Based on 96 responses

User persona: applicant

Hassan, a homeowner

"I haven't done this before, so I want to see what's required."

About	Key insights
– Has never, or rarely, submitted an application before – Low to mid digital skills – Has limited time – Doesn't understand or speak planning 'jargon'	– Would like to see what the fees will be and what documents will be required as early on as possible. – Would like to see how far through the process they are.

User persona: agent

Alex, an architect

"I usually know why I'm being asked for a particular piece of information, so I will find it frustrating if it asks for something I don't think is relevant"

About	Key insights
– Several years experience of preparing & submitting planning applications on behalf of clients. – Mid to high digital skills. – Submits ~5 applications per year	– Would still like to upload all drawings in one go at the end. – Wants the flexibility to upload additional information beyond the basic requirements in order to make the case

User research

Paul, a planner

"I want to be able to do more valuable planning work and less admin."

About	Key insights
– Highly knowledgeable about the planning process – Low to mid digital skills – Workload is target driven – Fluent in planning 'jargon'!	– Would like to be able to identify and monitor applications which are invalid and use that to help identify a solution – Would like to accurately validate applications so that they can reduce the number of angry resident calls

Vi, a validations officer

"Something that makes submitting an application easier for customers could also make my job easier"

About	Key insights
– Is the gatekeeper to the planning process – Low to mid digital skills – Needs good planning knowledge to do the job well	– Applications from inexperienced customers often have the most errors – Fewer invalid applications submitted should mean fewer difficult calls with agents.

User research

User stories

As an applicant I want to be told what will be required so I can see how much the process will cost

As an applicant I want to spend the least possible amount of time submitting an application so I can get on with my life

As an applicant I want to avoid my application being sent back so I can avoid frustrating delays

As an applicant I want to complete the whole process in one place so I don't have to hunt around multiple websites, doing research

As an applicant I want the rules of the service to be transparent so I can trust it

As an applicant I want to be able to leave and come back to my application so I can complete it over multiple sessions

As an applicant I want to be able to share the application with my agent so they can do some of the work for me

As an applicant I want to be able to see anything my agent has filled in on my behalf so I can check that it's correct

As an applicant I want to be able to do some or all of the work myself so I'm not paying my agent to do something I could do

As an applicant I want to use the same login I use for other council services so I don't have to remember multiple passwords

As an applicant I want technical terms to be explained so I feel empowered to make informed decisions

As an applicant I want to be kept up to date about the progress of my application so I know when I can expect a decision
not in scope

As an agent I want to manage multiple applications at once so I can see all my live applications for all my clients

As an agent I want to be able to share the application with my client so they can pay the fee

As an agent I want the process and requirements to be as standardised as possible across all councils so I don't have to re-learn the process every time

As an agent I want my client to be notified when an application has been successfully submitted so I can invoice them

As an agent I want to be able to download my application after I have submitted it so I can keep a copy

User research

What users liked about the prototypes

"The design looks much simpler than Planning Portal"

"There's always tension in the planning application process – this makes it much more user friendly."

"This seems more streamlined, unlike Planning Portal where you (have to) fill out the application physically first. This takes you through step by step."

"It doesn't require technical knowledge to use it."

"Everything is where you'd expect it to be"

"(the form) is very intuitive"

"The steps navigation is very helpful"

'It's great that it tells you the constraints – because some people may not know to look them up'

"It looks very simple and easy to use."

"It doesn't require technical knowledge to use it."

'Seeing an overview showing the completion progress is useful'

Explore the detailed user research findings <u>here</u>
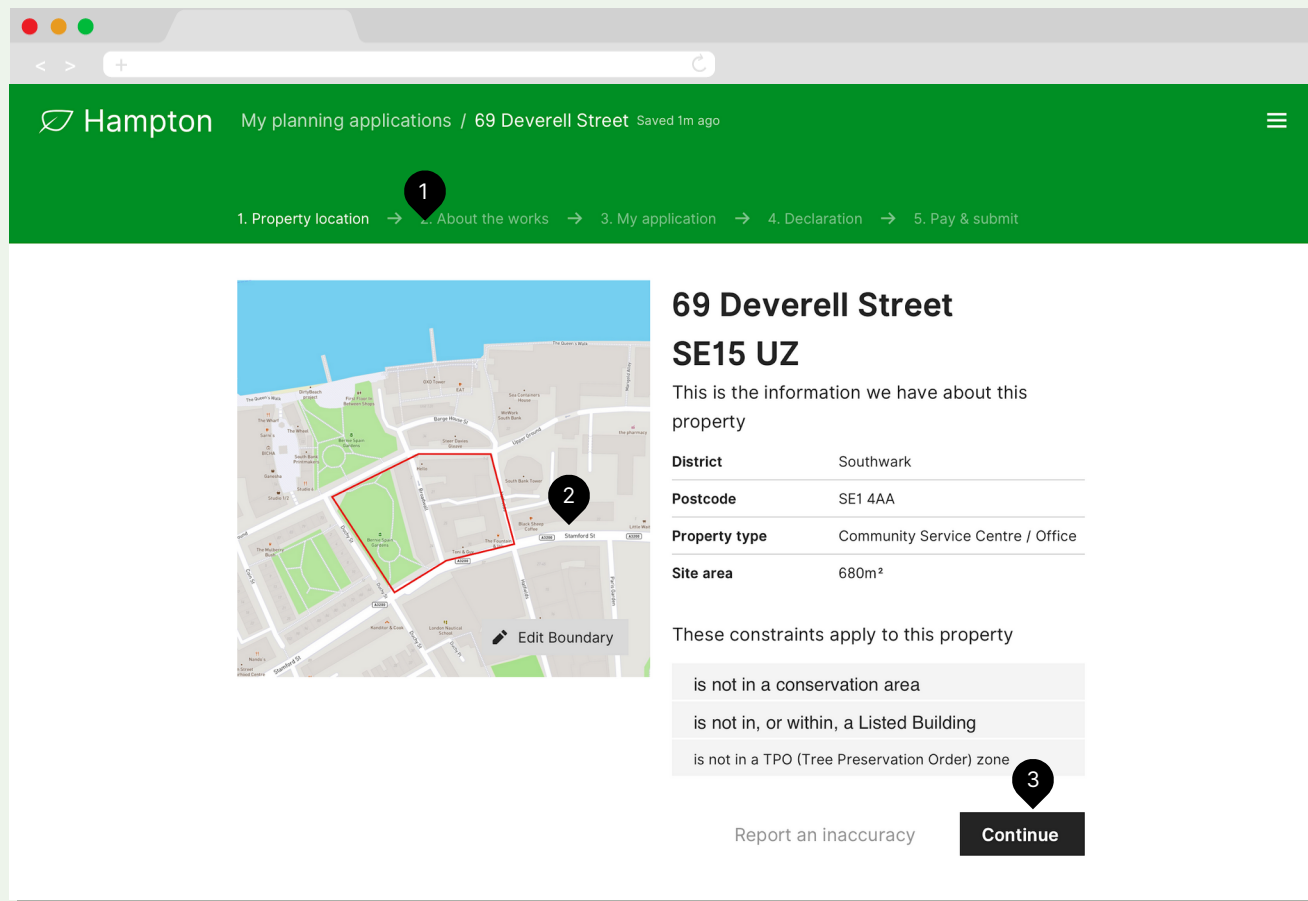
User Insights

1 Visibility
Users found the navigation steps difficult to read, and weren't sure whether it was clickable or not.

2 Visibility
Users wanted the map to be as big as possible

3 Early information
Users wanted an extra step outlining what the fee and document requirements are likely be up front. Whether this is possible or not will require further exploration.

User insights

1 Naming
Users found the term 'in progress' confusing, leaving room for confusion as to whether it has been submitted or not.
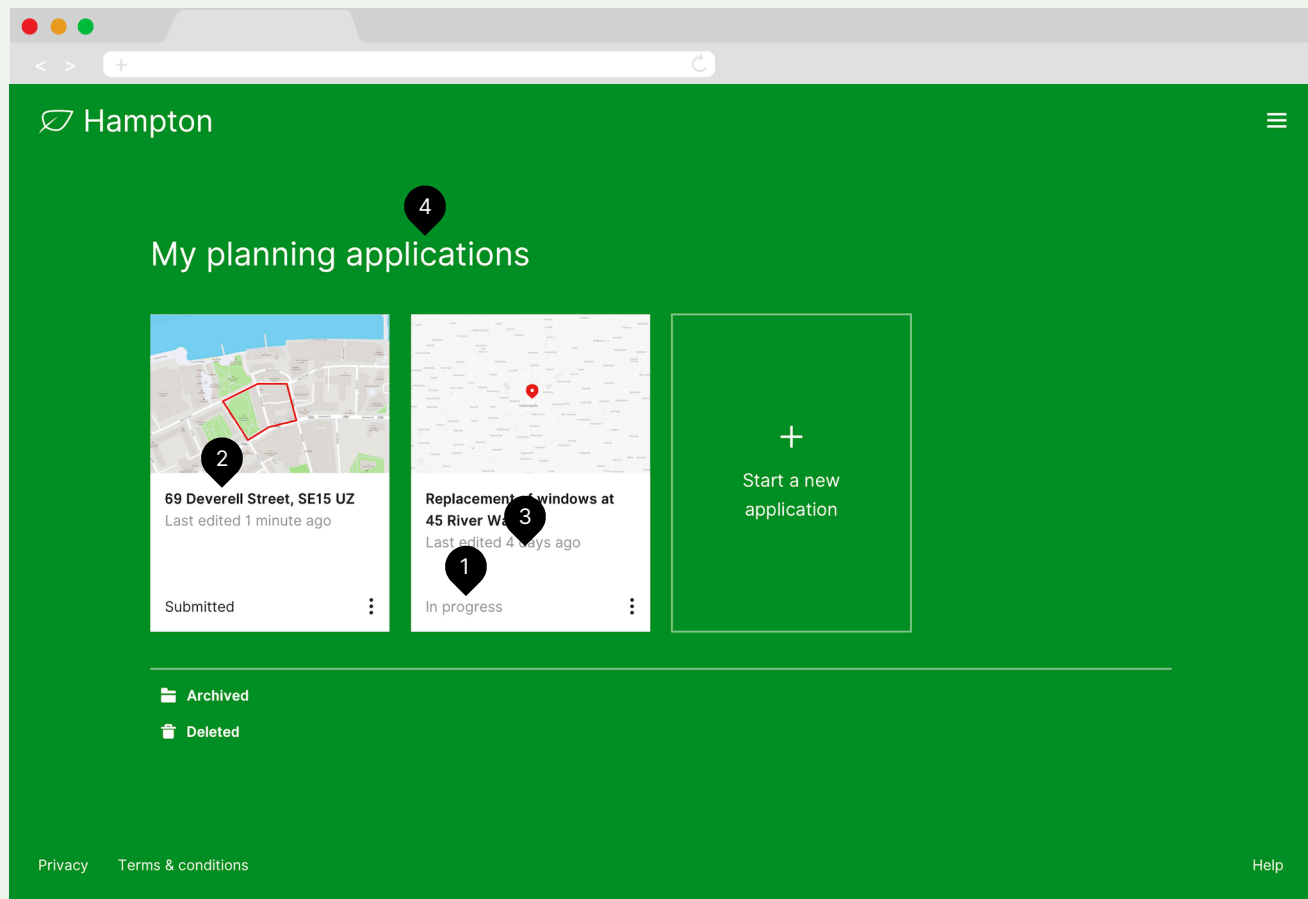
2 Sorting
Some users wanted to organise their applications by works, others by address

3 Search by reference
Agents wanted to see and find by the application reference.

4 Follow
Users would like to be able to follow the progress of their application here

User insights

1 Saving changes
Users weren't sure whether they need to save their changes, or whether changes were being saved automatically, so we added a 'last saved' indicator.

2 Progress
Users liked the progress bar but weren't sure what range of content it covers.

3 Affordance
Some users weren't immediately aware whether the Section titles were links, or just a list.

① Hampton   My planning applications / **69 Deverell Street** Saved 1m ago   ☰

1. Property location → 2. About the works → **3. My application** → 4. Declaration → 5. Pay & submit

My application
Please complete all sections

50% complete

About the property	Complete
Ownership	Complete
App details	Complete
Agent details	Complete
Materials & appearance	In progress
Heritage	In progress
Access, transport & parking	In progress
Daylight & sunlight	Not started

Continue

User insights

1 Content order
Previously there were questions here about eligibility for exemptions – but users couldn't see the connection, so we moved those questions to the main form.

2 Auditability
Users wanted to be able to see how the fee was calculated before proceeding to payment.

3 Workflow
Agents wanted to be able to invite their clients to do only the payment step.

4 Payment
Some users wanted to be able to pay by BACs transfer or using Paypal or another payment method.

User insights

1 Review
Users wanted the opportunity to review the application before paying and submitting, and to be able to view the full application anytime afterwards.

2 Naming
Users wanted to be explicitly reassured that their application has been submitted.
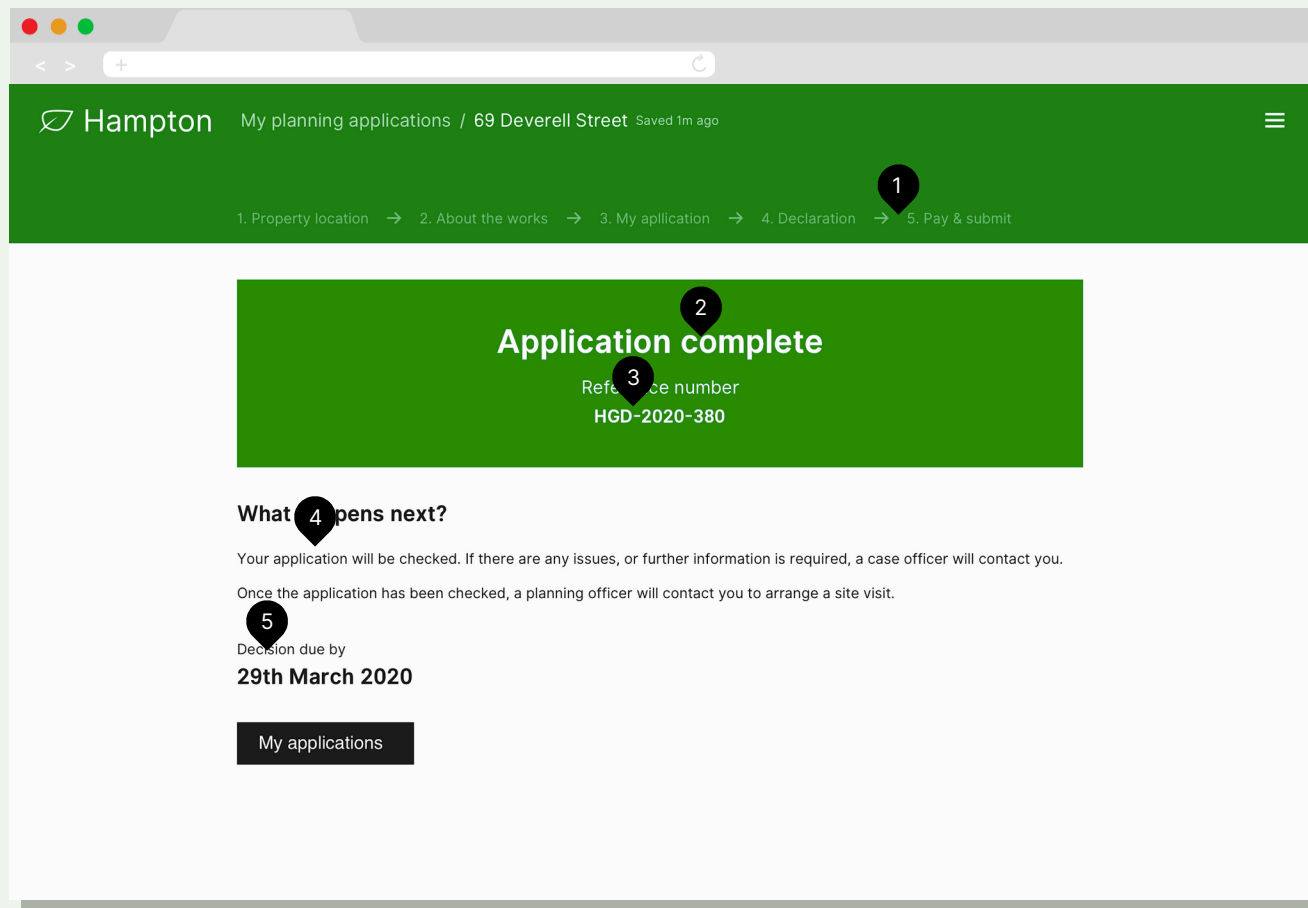
3 Copy
Agents wanted to be able to easily copy the application reference.

4 Notifications
Users wanted to know that a confirmation had been sent by email.

5 Expectations
Users wanted information about the timeline (although it probably won't be a decision date yet).

What we learned

Progress bar
If possible, the progress bar and service steps navigation should be combined, made more visible and repositioned. This will also allow the navigation bar to be smaller.

Review
A 'review before submitting' step should be added with a prompt to invite an applicant.

Download application
After submitting, users should be able to return to view and download their application anytime.

Upload stage
Uploading drawings and reports may come as an additional stage.

'Started' not 'In progress'
Use the term 'started' or similar instead of 'in progress' for applications and sections of an application.

Ask about expectations
Despite the limitations of paper prototypes, asking users about their expectations allowed us to gain insights far beyond what we had expected.

Additional documents upload
Even where asking for data instead of documents, give users the option to upload additional documents if they wish.

Site boundaries
Rather than inferring site boundary from property boundary it may be better to make all users draw site boundary and confirm that it includes all works.

Unlisted addresses
Create a clear route for properties with no address, or for which the address is not listed.

'Free go' rules
Include each council's 'free go' rules to the section on linked applications and factor into the fee calculation.

Preview stage
If possible, a step could be explored giving users a preview of likely fee and document requirements before they fill-out the application.

Test early, test often
Most importantly, we learnt that at every step of the way user research is crucial – however much you may think you know what would be best!

GDPR interpretation obstacles
Process of getting volunteers was hampered by a very strict GDPR interpretation in some councils.