Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

PropTech Engagement Fund Round 1 - Final Report

June 2022

Dorset Council

1) Project Aim

1a) Ambition and Desired Outcomes

Our aim was to pilot an approach to easily find and track planning applications, in order to understand how we can give users more choice in the area of interest they monitor, as well as choice in the updates they receive and the format they receive them in. The intention was to find out whether:

- increasing communication options increases the diversity of groups who engage
- the particular communication methods chosen are cost-effective
- people find self-defined areas of interest useful
- targeted, limited technical improvements can provide measurable improvements

In practical terms this meant developing two components to be added to our online planning register:

- a map-based search where people could select or draw areas they were interested in
- a way to sign up for alerts for specific types of new application or update to an application, and to choose the way of being alerted (SMS, email, large-print letter etc)

1b) Focus of Consultation (what did you consult on?)

The consultation would be in the course of a member of the public submitting a comment on a planning application.

2) Project Summary (what did you deliver?)

2a) Summary (link to project website/ image / examples)

We have struggled to deliver anything yet that can be tested directly with users and rolled out generally. Once we had confirmed the contract and started doing research with the public, and the front-end designs informed by this, it became clear that this was not going to

be possible without so much alteration to the current register that other elements might stop working (such as the existing search) – i.e. that we could not build the components as 'standalone' webforms after all.

Therefore in order to build and test the systems we are currently working on the underlying infrastructure and core components of a new stable register these would be part of.

There are prototypes for the components, and we have carried out some limited user testing with these. The intention is still to run the testing scenarios as planned so learning can be integrated and shared.

2b) Opportunities - what did the pilot allow you to do and how much was existing vs new types of engagement?

The project helped us bring forward thinking and ideation for user issues we wanted to tackle. It is hard to come to a definitive conclusion about engagement without having been able to run a large-scale trial of the actual technology, but so far it looks like the outcomes will be better quality engagement for groups who engage highly already. We still intend to assess whether trying the online notices broadens or alters the people who comment on applications. If it does not, we need to reassess the problem and keep trying to improve things.

The user research we have done has highlighted problems which can be dealt with in other ways than just changing the online register to respond to comments. For example one key point has come through about the variety of ways of using the register (and associated features) so that we need to provide solutions that work for all of these – not just make changes to 'fix' something for the group currently experiencing difficulties.

This has helped us shape the broader thinking for our online register development; we are currently working out how to structure an agile/iterative approach while also getting the basics built as soon as possible so we can move forward with the components

2c) Funding review - comparison of amount bid vs actual cost i.e. was more funding needed than you expected and for what elements?

We have needed more resource from our internal teams (digital and IT) than expected; in our case this is not a direct financial cost but it has had a resource impact.

3) Community Engagement Summary

3a) Outreach Methods (how you conducted outreach, timeframes and tools used)

Once the workable components are in place we will survey and interview users. Everyone who is given the choice of using the elements will be shown a quick survey at the end to ask

basic questions (were you able to do what you needed to do?) and asked if they are willing to be part of more detailed research. If yes, we'll collect contact information and arrange more in depth questioning through surveys and/or user research conversations.

The plan is to target specific groups to trial and then use the components. Recent contact using known interest groups has been successful for similar work and the research phase of this project e.g. response rate of over 50% of our town and parish councils when a user research survey was sent as part of a planning-specific contact to the Dorset Association of Town and Parish Councils mailing list.   Outreach via all our social media and online channels will be incorporated, with bespoke approaches for these (tone, style etc).

4) Pilot Outcomes (what happened as a result of the pilot?)

4a) Engagement

No data yet.

4b) Comparison of Baseline data

Cannot compare yet – our baseline data is a mixture of survey results, complaints and user research conversations. We will repeat the same exercises to compare the results

4c) Summary of community feedback

No data yet.

4d) What changes (if any) have come about as a result of this project and opportunities to deliver further/ongoing digital engagement?

So far the changes have been on how we see our future development work – both with the supplier and planning our own wider

The other key point so far is the complexity – but necessity – of having multiple ways to do things to suit the variety of user needs. This makes development more complicated but is necessary.

4e) Cost effectiveness - are there ways that conducting digital engagement allowed you to save time or resource compared to traditional methods of engagement?

No data so far on this

5) Development/Implementation

5a) How you developed/implemented/mobilised the product with your suppliers

Our initial plan was to develop add-on components for the map-based search (which could be an alternative to the existing search), and for the signing up to updates for the case. This would have been new development work but based on an existing specification DEF had for a similar notification product.

However it turned out that there were technical limitations to using this approach as we could not easily 'plug in' the components without potential impacts on existing services. This became clear once we started to define what APIs and connectors would be needed for the alerts. For the search we have a prototype built on Dorset Council's standard web platform including a map which shows layers from our spatial database, but this cannot currently be connected up to the existing register search.

5b) Lessons learned

i) Challenges you had to overcome eg people/skill shortages/ knowledge gaps

Optimism bias. Plus some of the existing register's stability issues have become more acute because of changes to the council's wider web platform which were needed to make that more stable and accessible. While we could have anticipated the risk of this a bit more than we did, it is also the case that because that project was also trying to move as quickly as possible on a large scale to get big benefits the potential problems were not necessarily obvious in advance.

ii) Additional guidance and support that would have helped

iii) Any surprises you faced, or other reflections?

One of the strengths of working closely and successfully with our supplier on our wider project was also the weakness of this particular piece of work: it was hard to prioritise this development over other (long and short-term) issues, because all the same people were implicated. Having a team of this sort available is a huge asset from a knowledge point of view, but makes it more difficult to make this particular piece of development a priority alongside other tasks.

A clear learning point we are trying to tackle now – and will take into our future work with this supplier – is trying to get the balance right on having a structured, achievable development plan with the ability to respond to changing pressures.

iv) Ongoing engagement requirements/ambitions for this project

We will be continuing the development of the components as planned and the learning will continue to inform our ongoing wider register rebuild and ongoing planning transformation project.

6) Procurement

6a) Procurement approach and outcomes

We procured extra services from our existing supplier, DEF, through the CSS Framework

6b) Lessons learned

i) Challenges you had to overcome

It took a long time to get a contract in place for the work, and this took up a long time in our original development plan.

ii) Additional guidance and support that would have helped

We took up the offers of conversations with experts offered by the DLUHC team but these did not resolve our issues because it was more about our in-house team. However they were a useful confirmation of that, to be sure we were not missing an approach that would have worked.

iii) Any suggestions to improve procurement in the future, surprises you faced, or other reflections

Our supplier has previously been on G-Cloud but did not find it productive, however this is the route most of our digital/IT contracts now use and so our procurement team and others are confident with it.

More broadly, one of the reasons we were keen on the in-house/existing supplier development route was that what we wanted did not seem to be available in other forms, certainly not as standalone procurable components.

6c) Working with suppliers - any reflections what went well or what you would handle differently next time with your suppliers?

The procurement/contractual/payments side with our supplier is fine; this is one of the aspects where our ongoing good relationship pays off hugely. DEF were willing to work as much as they could around the council's requirements to help us find a workable way to award the contract.

7) Conclusions & Policy Reflections

7a) Potential policy and/or process improvements

i) Were there any existing policies that limited your ability to maximise digital engagement outcomes?

No

ii) Are there policies you would like to see changed in the future?

Interoperability/standards – we might have had more options for how to take our idea forward if it was easier to put components from different suppliers together – i.e. if there were more data standards in place for PropTech/planning tech. We could then have had more confidence in using a different new supplier to add functionality to our existing system.

iii) Where do you think further engagement guidance is required (this could include guidance for both local authorities and the wider proptech / consultancy sector)

Contact methods – we do have users who report that they are concerned about the switch to digital and worry that the changes potentially harm the validity of the planning process. There are complexities around things like publishing digital records which we spend time solving on a council-by-council basis, trying to work out what is good practice alongside what the legislation or guidance says we must do. We also have groups of citizens we know are more digitally excluded. The Council is trying to tackle all these points in various ways, including e.g. Community Digital Champions. However having clear guidelines and advice on digital backed up by research and best practice as part of all the planning policy changes would also be welcome. (We know these issues are part of what this and other projects are aiming for, but still wanted to make the point that this is valuable to us as a council and planning team.)

iv) Where and how do you think DLUHC could support LPAs in further adoption of digital citizen engagement tools, best practices and/or wider digital transformation?

Sharing information and experience is valuable – both for specific case studies but also seeing the range of what other people focus on or excel at.

As above – clear guidance in any legislation or policy on what the digital impacts, opportunities and restrictions are.

7b) What longer-term changes (if any) do you expect to make as a result of the outcomes of this pilot?

Noted above/throughout – it has fundamentally reshaped how we approach our wider register/online platform redesign work.