



Department for Levelling Up,  
Housing & Communities

## PropTech Engagement Fund Round 1

### Final Report

April 2022



<b>Local Planning Authority</b>	Chesterfield Borough Council
<b>Date</b>	19/04/2022
<b>Theme</b>	<b>Theme 1:</b> Plan-making Process: Regulation 18

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## **1.0 Project Aims and Objectives**

Chesterfield Borough Council sought to carry out a digitised, user-friendly and interactive 'Call for Sites' consultation to inform its Land Availability Assessment as part of evidence for the Regulation 18 stage of the Local Plan Review. The idea was to significantly expand engagement on site assessment to a wider community and broaden the scope to include land uses beyond residential and economic (e.g., community uses and biodiversity opportunity sites for Biodiversity Net Gain).

### **1.1 Objectives**

- To use a digital web-platform to engage a broader range of Chesterfield's community in an expanded call for sites as part of Local Plan Review.
- To understand how the use of a web platform can be used to support a more efficient and automated Land Availability Assessment and call for sites process that benefits from a wider range of contributions at an early stage of Local Plan Review.

### **1.2 Project Outline**

The Call for Sites consultation has been designed to enable people and organisations to make the council aware of land which might have the potential to be developed or used in a different way to its existing use.

The consultation presented two ways in which people could tell the council about a site in the borough with potential; a Site Suggestion route and a Site Submission route. The Site Suggestion option permitted a wider range of people (other than landowners, developers or their agents) to make the council aware of sites that may have development potential or potential for other uses. This is particularly useful as the National Planning Practice Guidance encourages Local Planning Authorities to engage as wide an audience as possible in the Call for Sites process.

The more formal Site Submission option was aimed at landowners and developers (or their agents) and necessitated the completion of a more detailed site submission form. A call for site submissions was last undertaken in 2016 and involved participants filling in a form created in Microsoft Word and returning it to the Council via email or post. Urban Intelligence were chosen as the supplier for this work through an open tender procurement process.

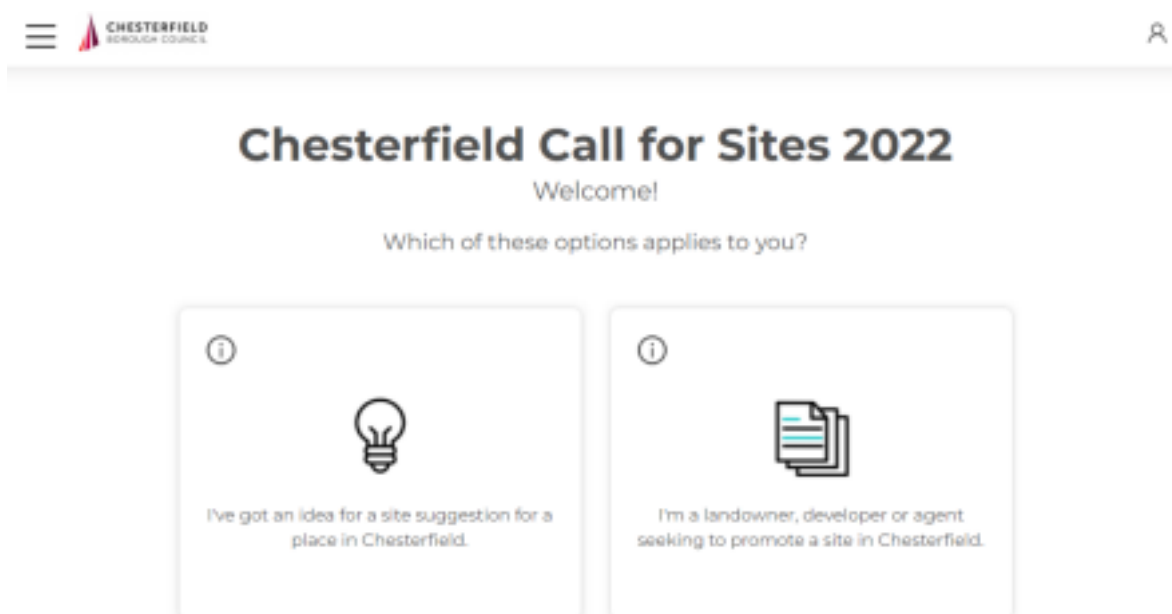
## **2.0 Project Summary**

### **2.1 Call for Sites Consultation**

Participants were initially directed to a [Call for Sites webpage](#) on the council's website which explained the background to the consultation, included a number of responses to frequently asked questions and provided a button to navigate to the consultation website.

The consultation website itself provided users with a landing page which detailed the methods of participation and enabled users to select how they wanted to engage with the Call for Sites, via the 'simplified' Site Suggestion route or a more formal Site Submission route aimed at landowners or their agents.

Following the engagement exercise the project team undertook some analysis to evaluate the success of the activity and undertook a programme of data fixing to ensure that any submitted sites could be run through Urban Intelligence's Placemaker software. A number of screenshots are provided in Figures 2.1-2.5 below as the engagement opportunities are explained.

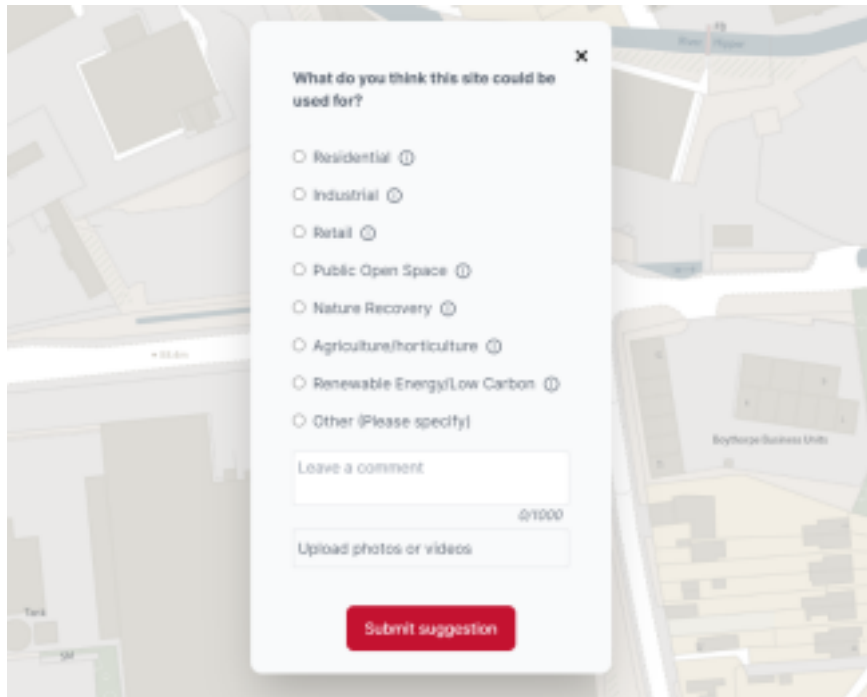


**Figure 2.1: Call for Sites Landing Page**

## 2.2 Engagement Opportunities

The project allowed the council to trial a number of new opportunities for engagement. These included:

**Informal Site Suggestions** – the inclusion of a less formal route to participating in the Call for Sites will make the initial stages of plan making more applicable to a wider audience. The Call for Sites usually engages those who own or who wish to develop a site for housing. Reducing the barriers to participating through a simplified submission route will allow the council to consider the views of a much larger audience at this stage.



**Figure 2.2: Site Suggestion Options**

**An Interactive Web Map** – the use of a web map meant that participants were able to search for an appropriate location and participate easily without having to source plans and submit additional documents. The web map presented local planning policy layers and land registry polygons so that it was much easier for users to identify a site and to sense check it against any existing allocated uses. Previously the council's Local Plan Policy layers were only available through the use of a 27MB PDF, sized at A0.



**Figure 2.3: Polygon Selection Tool**

**A web form** – typically, Call for Sites forms are very lengthy and complex to fill in. The use of a web form made it simple for users to fill in and adapted to their responses. Form validation meant that no important information was missing from a submission.

**Development Details**

When could development start on site? ▲ This field is required.

Up to 5 years (from date of plan adoption)  
 6 - 10 Years  
 11 - 15 Years  
 16+ Years  
 Don't know

Will there be any phasing of the site? ▲ This field is required.

Yes  No  Don't know

Does the site have access to an adopted highway? ▲ This field is required.

Yes  No  Don't know

Are you aware of any significant abnormal site-specific development costs or constraints? ▲ This field is required.

**Figure 2.4: Site Submission Web Form**

**An Account management system** – the deployment of an account management system made it easy for users to return to the call for sites website with any additional submissions. They could also view their past submissions and review the reference number. The automated nature of the system cut out any waiting for participants which is usually seen with the manual allocation of reference numbers and document management. Going forward, the use of an account management system will make it much easier for the council to present participants with feedback on the Call for Sites and to tell them about how their contributions have been used in the Local Plan preparation process.



**Figure 2.5: Account Management Features**

In addition to new methods of engagement the project provided the council with some features and information that will help to improve the level of customer service and could therefore influence how likely participants would be to engage in local planning matters in the future. These include:

**User Feedback** – the project allowed the council and Urban Intelligence to respond to issues with the software and submission quickly and directly. It has allowed the team to fix logged issues and has also resulted in functionality improvements. As well as gathering feedback on the software, the consultation has also provided an opportunity to speak to people and to get user feedback on the Call for Sites process in general.

**User Analytics** – the use of a digital system has provided an opportunity to gain insights into who the call for sites has engaged and the extent to which it has been successful. The new approach allows for a far more efficient analysis of who is responding, how, from where and on what. This feedback can be used to target the promotion of the digital software and it is hoped that successful application in this case will result in a greater willingness to improve systems and widen the reach of other consultations.

**Stepping into the Unknown** – The project has provided an opportunity to take the NPPG advice literally in terms of trying to broaden the call for sites stage of plan making/review and make it easier for others than the ‘usual suspects’ to contribute. What the response was going to be and whether or not expectations could be managed well and ‘what to do’ with responses (without disillusioning people), is in the process of being resolved and the unknown is becoming known. As such a lot will be learnt at a very early stage of plan making/review. Typically, the stage at which this ‘kind’ of engagement and information collection happens is normally later in the plan making process. It will also mean the council will need to respond to site suggestions and answer questions from the public on a broader basis with the opportunity to help more people understand the plan making process earlier and hopefully they will then carry on being engaged. Often there are accusations of not involving people early enough after the realisation of a plan allocation close by, months after a plan’s adoption, the trigger being when planning applications have been submitted and publicised.

## 2.3 Funding Review

The full amount of allocated funding was spent on the project. Whilst the license to use Urban Intelligence’s Placemaker software will go beyond the project timeline, it is understood that the **development of the Call for Sites engagement and site assessment functionality itself accounted for 80% of the total project costs.** The remaining costs are for work that is important to achieving the aims of the automated site assessment element of the project but were not prioritised due to the tight timescales for getting the engagement carried out.

The costs for developing innovative new functionality were surprising to planning officers given their lack of experience with software development.

## 3.0 Community Engagement Summary

### 3.1 Engagement Approach

Community engagement was sought through a Call for Sites website which guided users through a series of pages to submit their ideas for how land within the borough of Chesterfield could be used. The types of land use that could be suggested were not limited and this was made apparent on the website and through social media posts.

The Call for Sites was open for submissions between Monday 21 March and Monday 2 May 2022 and publicised through the following methods:

- Eight variations of social media posts (posted via Facebook and Twitter), which were re-posted to increase visibility. LinkedIn was also used.
- An article in the [Derbyshire Times](#) (local newspaper).
- A [‘Destination Chesterfield’](#) web article.
- An article in [‘The Planner’](#)
- Postal letter to Local Plan consultees (659 letters).
- Emails to Local Plan consultees (688 emails).
- Internal emails to senior leadership team and service managers.

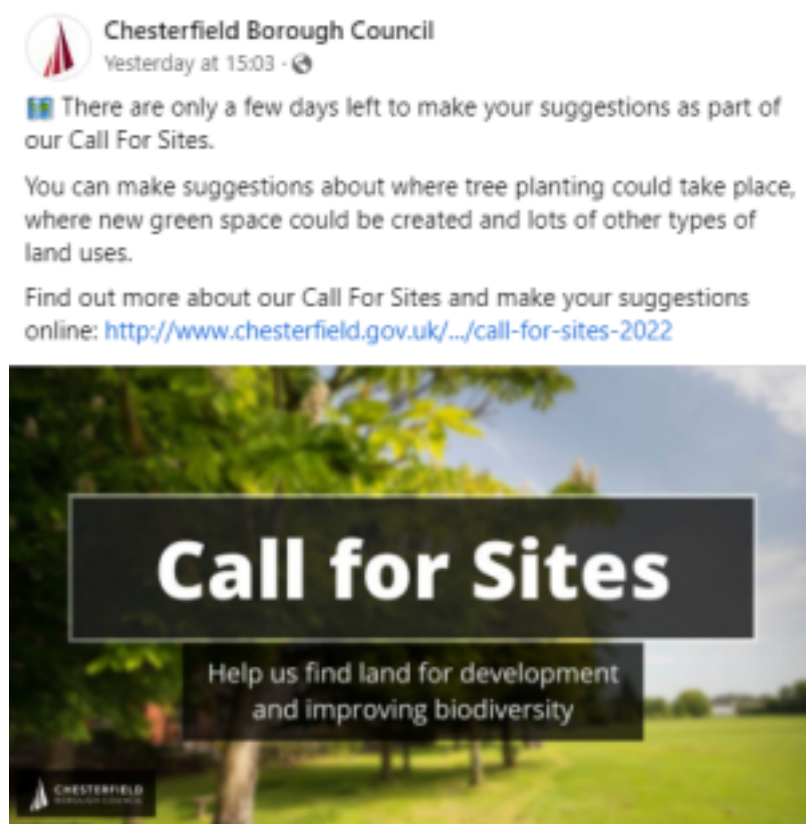
- Internal newsletter to Councillors.
- [Webpage which included FAQs and contact details.](#)
- A YouTube video explaining how to use the software.

The council's communications team and corporate policy teams were involved in the preparation of an engagement plan in the two months leading up to the exercise and in the execution of the plan.

The project team modified the approach to messaging mid-way through the consultation as it became apparent from social media comments that some members of the public thought the Call for Sites was purely focused on residential development sites. Amendments to the imaging and text used in advertising the consultation were made to ensure that the messaging reflected the exact nature of the consultation.

The engagement reach on facebook and twitter for the majority of posts was above average.

Example Social Media Post:



## 4.0 Pilot Outcomes

### 4.1 Engagement with the Call for Sites

A total of 1347 people were notified directly about the consultation through letter or email and the social media posts on the council's Facebook page had an average reach of 2,256 (where reach refers to the number of individuals who have seen the post). One post had a reach of 11,576.

Engagement data from the council's analytics package tells us the Call for Sites landing page had 221 views in total and Facebook posts had an average engagement rate of 5.71%. The engagement rate tells us the percentage of people that have made any form of engagement with the post after viewing it, including clicking the image, clicking the link,



sharing, reacting and commenting.

This publicity translated into 70 unique accounts being set up on the Call for Sites system and digital 117 submissions (both site suggestions and formal submissions). Twenty three users created an account and did not submit any sites as part of the consultation which could be the result of usability issues or curiosity from those outside of the geographic range of the consultation. A follow up email is being sent to see why these users didn't submit and to offer assistance.

#### **4.2 Comparison with Baseline Data**

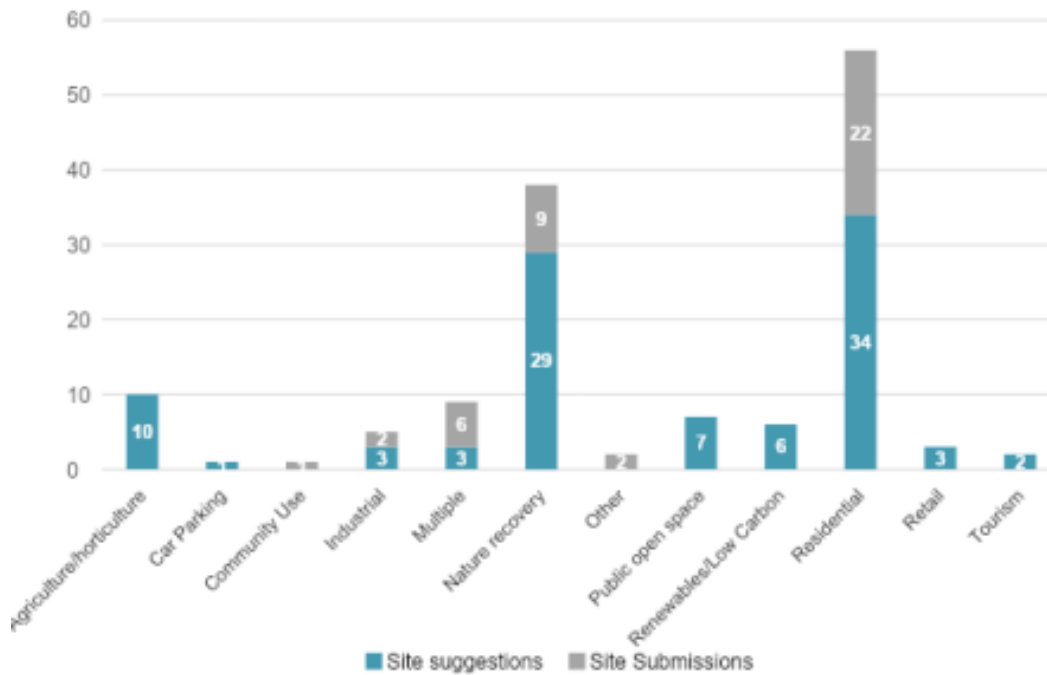
The council was able to compare engagement data from the Call for Sites with a similar exercise which was undertaken in 2016 which received 80 site submissions from 37 unique participants. The 2022 consultation received 95 site suggestions from 25 participants and 22 site submissions from 22 participants. A further 23 sites were received from 11 participants who chose to submit a site suggestion or submission by email or by post. It is important to note that the previous consultation did not seek site suggestions but purely focused on formal site submissions. It was also undertaken at a time when the borough was not able to demonstrate a five year housing supply, whereas the current context is that of a plan adopted two years ago and many sites now 'online' with permissions or commencements. The 2022 data also includes submissions from one user who submitted 50 site suggestions via the consultation portal.

In 2016 only 1% of submissions were received from members of the public (with the majority from landowners and their agents). The inclusion of the site suggestion engagement route signifies that 64% of sites have been submitted by members of the public in 2022 (when all submissions are included). This shows that the reach of the consultation has been significantly broadened through the use of a digital site suggestions function.

Previously, 85% of submissions were received by email and 15% by post. Of the emailed submissions 27% were received in PDF format which meant that information could not always be easily copied into the council's submission database. In comparison in 2022, 84% of 2022's submissions were received through the consultation portal with the remainder sent via email or post. User feedback suggests that the persistence of email submissions may partly be a result of the need for site agents to agree a site submission with their client through a PDF / word document.

In the 2016 Call for Sites 80% of the submissions related to residential sites whereas the recent exercise in 2022 received a much broader range of submissions. Only 40% of submissions related to residential sites in the 2022 Call for Sites with 27% of submissions relating to areas for nature recovery. Graph 1 shows the full range of submissions received through each engagement method.

**Graph 1: Call for Sites 2022 – Site Suggestions and Submissions by Proposed Use**



There was a concern that an online form that permitted comments on a specific site could lead to users submitting information that was inappropriate to the consultation theme (such as a complaint about a built-out development or an unrealistic alternate use for a building), however no such submissions or suggestions were received during the consultation.

In terms of the geographical spread of respondents the data showed a wider spread in 2022 than 2016. However, this may be due to post codes of agents skewing the results in 2022. Although, the wider spread within Chesterfield seemed to reflect the engagement of members of the public as opposed to just land owners.

### 4.3 User Feedback

Feedback was initially sought through a focus group in which officers presented a walkthrough of the wireframe copy of the consultation process.

Participants explained that clear explanations and information boxes were critical to user understanding and emphasised the importance of setting expectations for what the consultation set out to achieve.

Users also highlighted the need to provide for the digitally excluded and to provide a workable option for mobile users. Following the focus group, the project team were able to add information boxes where relevant and adapt the coding to ensure that the consultation was functional (albeit not optimised) for mobile users. A paper option was prepared for participants who were not able to or comfortable with submitting online.

Some participants found it difficult to engage with the website and requested a paper copy of the forms. Despite this, the majority of submissions were received through use of the website itself and the initial feedback from users was positive. Whilst the user experience was improved for many through the use of site selection tools and account management options, a minority of users did not find the Call for Sites easy to engage with. The pale colours of the map and difficulty of using a laptop track pad to draw a polygon were cited as issues which led to multiple attempts to submit a site. Whilst most people are familiar with web maps not everyone will find the surrounding interface and drawing tools easy to use.

One issue raised through both the focus group and post-submission survey was the need to raise awareness of the Call for Sites process in order to see a greater level of public

involvement. There was a feeling that members of the public would know very little about the Local Plan development process and that improved advertisement would be required to ensure that members of the public were fully engaged in the process.

An online questionnaire tool (Snap Survey) was used to obtain user feedback but only six people responded in this way. A further email with detailed feedback was received from an agent. The survey results indicated that the digital platform and publicity may have resulted in more first-time users (likely the result of the new Site Suggestions route). The majority of replies indicated that the system was easy to use, but some detailed and specific suggestions for improvements were made. One participant used the survey as an opportunity to lobby the council not to build on greenfield sites. No equivalent survey was undertaken for the 2016 Call for Sites so there is no baseline data for comparison, however the survey is something that if used in the future would help inform the adaptation of methods of engagement.

#### **4.4 Cost Effectiveness**

It is estimated that the submissions from the 2016 Call for Sites would have taken approximately 50 hours to digitise (given the need to create a site polygon within GIS software and transfer all of the form contents into a database). A number of hours (probably 6hrs) have also been saved by implementing an account management system which can notify participants of their reference number. There is also likely to be a significant saving of time in assessing sites with potentially 2hrs per site being saved.

The use of a digital consultation system meant that the council was able to save a significant amount of time on data entry and in acknowledging responses. A lot of officer time was required to get the Call for Sites up and running but now the functionality of the software has been developed the council hopes that it can easily be adapted to make future consultations much more efficient and cost effective.

The 2016 Call for Sites required 6 hours of officer time to input manually the useful data onto a spreadsheet and then create pivot tables and charts. The digital software has allowed the data to be turned into an engagement report in less than an hour.

### **5.0 Development/Implementation**

#### **5.1 Methods of Working**

A multi-disciplinary team was set up within the council to develop the tender for the project and liaise with Urban Intelligence following their appointment. The team was primarily comprised of Planning Policy officers but also included the council's ICT Improvement Manager and a member of the council's procurement team. The team work collaboratively with Urban Intelligence throughout the preparation of the consultation, using a flexible and iterative approach which helped to achieve a usable and well tested product. The priority was to develop a user-friendly method of engaging with the Call for Sites and then to focus on the presentation and analysis of data following the consultation itself.

The iterative approach to software development meant that learning happened 'on the job', with decisions made to either pursue or not pursue aspects based on a shared understanding of risk and agreement on prioritisation.

A number of digital tools were used to implement the Call for Sites consultation with suppliers:

- **Microsoft Teams** - the council team used a Microsoft Teams chat and SharePoint to

collaborate with Urban Intelligence on day-to-day matters including the exchange documents and task updates, with a weekly video call set up to discuss the workstream and allocate tasks. A SharePoint was also used to facilitate the exchange of data required for the Call for Sites with other external organisations.

- **Miro** - the Call for Sites system was designed using Miro which is a visual collaboration platform offering a virtual whiteboard which makes it easy to collaborate on projects. Miro allowed the project team to create a wireframe version of the Call for Sites consultation which provided an illustration of how users would be able to interact with the website and the functionalities available.
- **Council Focus Group** – following completion of the initial wireframing, council officers set up an online focus group in order to elicit feedback on the usability of the software. The council facilitated a discussion around aspects that worked well and the improvements needed in order for people to want to engage with the consultation. The wireframe version of the Call for Sites was then modified to address some of the issues raised.
- **Canny** – a web based user feedback tool ‘Canny’, was used to collect and organise feedback on both the wireframe and initial test build of the Call for Sites website. The tool allows users to log issues and vote on their priority which provided Urban Intelligence with a roadmap for improving the functionality and usability of the site.

### Figure 5.1 Canny Feedback Tool

Following feedback from a user the council was able to upload a recommendation which could then be actioned by the software development team. The use of voting buttons allowed the team to prioritise issues which were critical to functionality.

## 5.2 Challenges Experienced

**Inexperience with Software Development** – No one in the planning team was familiar with software development and the associated IT and security requirements. Without the integrated support of the Council’s ICT Improvement Manager the council team would have struggled to support the implementation of the project. Having this support throughout the project lifespan and an IT presence at every catch up meeting meant that the project ran smoothly and all parties were aware of ICT infrastructure requirements.

**Tight Timescales** - The deployment of the system was delayed by the need to re-design elements of the page for mobile use. This in turn delayed testing work which had to be completed over the course of two days to ensure that the consultation could be completed before the project deadline. Additional time between the test deployment and consultation start date would have been beneficial as there were a number of issues which were only extracted through use of the system. The project timeline was particularly vulnerable to delays given the tight timescales of the funding and ambitious nature of the project. It is likely that planners would benefit from case studies of how to implement digital systems and checklists of likely IT considerations and timelines.

**Data Quality** – The Call for Sites project has involved the preparation of a number of

GIS datasets so that they could be displayed on the consultation web map. A number of datasets within the council are lacking appropriate metadata and are not considered to be up to date. A much greater focus is needed on maintaining accurate and up to date GIS record so that the council is able to benefit from digital solutions that can provide time and cost savings. The council would benefit from additional resource in carrying this out.

**Technical Issues** - Despite a rigorous testing process being undertaken prior to the consultation going live there were a number of issues with the functionality of the consultation web forms. Several participants got in touch with the council via telephone and email to log problems with the site which ranged from an inability to progress to the next stage of the web form to not being able to access the website at all. These issues were particularly pronounced near to the end of the consultation period when more participants were trying to submit.

The suppliers were able to fix most of the problems within a day and the council liaised with users until a suitable resolution was found. Where an issue centred around usability (such as the inability to see how many characters remained on the site suggestion comment box) UI were able to adapt the coding very quickly to ensure that user feedback was integrated into the design. Many participants required support during the last week of the consultation and it would be beneficial if the officer time taken to liaise with the suppliers on technical matters could be replaced through a self-serve help system.

**Legacy Software** - Legacy software proved to be a noticeable stumbling block to the project and prevented the full specification being implemented, the main issue being not having access to the planning register data via a live API link and a lengthy process to gain a static export in lieu of the live link. Another stumbling block was the time needed to develop a mobile phone friendly version of engagement software.

**Usability Issues**- The project team have found that despite implementing a system that is easy to use, some residents found the language used within the Call for Sites digital form to be overly complex. Whilst this is a problem that would also likely be present with more traditional consultation approaches, it is evident that further work needs to be undertaken on how planning teams can use software to better communicate planning concepts and definitions so that all users feel fully able to contribute.

Research and best practice guidance would be useful in assisting planners to bring forward consultations that engage a wide range of participants. The use of web-based forms that display only one page at a time and so cannot be as easily manipulated or reviewed as a word document, was found to be a barrier to some users, especially agents who need to show clients a draft and may take weeks to fully complete a submission. The ability to save as you go and easily review a submission appears critical to web based consultations otherwise people are likely to default to a word document and email.

### **5.3 Further Work**

A key benefit of Urban Intelligence's offering is the strong focus on site analytics. Urban Intelligence can provide access to 'Placemaker' software which is able to run submitted land parcels through a bespoke suitability and accessibility algorithm. This saves a great deal of officer time and provides an enhanced level of customer service. Following the end of the consultation the council is able to run the submitted sites through Urban Intelligence's Placemaker software and speed up the plan preparation process.

Although there have been a number of technical issues in getting the consultation up and running the team believes that UI have developed a strong foundation that can be adapted to a number of engagement scenarios. The ability for users to comment on a land parcel could be applied to any consultation of a spatial nature, such as a masterplan or a Regulation 22 Local Plan consultation.

The council and Urban Intelligence are intending to carry on adapting the system based on the lessons learnt from the project. Urban Intelligence have set up a 'user group' of Local Authorities, whereby improvements to the software can be made and shared and if implemented all users will benefit from the improved functionality.

The Planning Policy team will also share their findings on the implementation of digital consultation methods with other internal teams and with the County Council. The intention being to demonstrate the multiple internal and external benefits of bringing together separate datasets using GIS for the council's different areas of work. For example, the creation of a GIS with dashboard for assessing planning applications/pre-application enquiries/land disposal reviews, for displaying an interactive local plan to the public, or for publicly promoting regeneration sites with permissions or allocations.

## **6.0 Procurement**

### **6.1 Procurement Approach**

Planning Policy officers, ICT and the council's Senior Procurement Officer collaborated on the procurement utilising advice from DLUHC. The team agreed to use a specification and opted for an open tender process. A tender was then drafted with guidance from procurement and with the benefit of having seen a tender used by another council who had used a digital approach for a similar engagement project. The council had previously undertaken research into existing market products and had also discussed the Call for Sites and land availability assessment processes and methodologies with neighbouring LPAs. The tender process was completed between October-November 2021 and the key dates are highlighted below:

- Drafting requirements: 18<sup>th</sup> October
- Tender live: 8<sup>th</sup> November
- Tender Deadline 22<sup>nd</sup> November
- Evaluation of compliant bids: 26<sup>th</sup> November
- Information Assurance Risk Assessment Signed Off: 14<sup>th</sup> December
- Decision letters sent: 16<sup>th</sup> December
- Standstill on tender ended: 30<sup>th</sup> December
- Kick off meeting with UI: 7<sup>th</sup> January 2022
- Data processing agreement finalised: 26<sup>th</sup> January 2022
- Contract with Terms and Conditions signed: 18<sup>th</sup> February 2022

### **6.2 Reflections on Procurement**

The tight timescales for completing the project meant that the specification was drafted within the space of a fortnight, but it has served a critical purpose as a checklist for the software, outputs, and outcomes. The specification was considered to be detailed but retained the flexibility needed to ensure that the software was user friendly and optimised for purpose.

The open tender route was relatively slow and attracted only two expressions of interest. However, the work involved in drafting a specification was really useful in opening up an internal discussion about the role of digital technology within planning and increased the understanding of current digital capability (or lack of) and how that could be improved. It also was critical to have a multidisciplinary approach to the specification and also the scoring of submissions to ensure that all factors were considered appropriately.

The real surprise was a lack of existing templates for the ICT specific side of a specification (which ICT did a great job of drawing up rapidly), and how far down the priority list planning was in terms of council wide digital transformation. The lack of any kind of corporate GIS strategy was also surprising given that it is an area which is critical to many aspects of council work.

A checklist for writing a specification, and also an overview of what type of system would work well for different aspects of the planning process would have been useful, based on different scenarios of existing council ICT capability. It is also evident that there are few products on the existing market that can fulfill the role of supporting planning teams in carrying out engagement work on a Local Plan from start to finish and that are linked to site assessment and analysis.

### **6.3 Reflections on Working with Suppliers**

The suppliers chosen through the procurement process fulfilled the core elements of the specification and suggested a number of suitable workarounds whenever challenges were faced. On reflection the development of a schematic diagram of the overall user journey through the online consultation system at an earlier stage would have helped to prioritise tasks for the suppliers. The high level of commitment to the project provided by the suppliers and their adaptability to changing circumstances has been useful in achieving the project outcomes.

Another key factor in the success of the project was the council's and Urban Intelligence's willingness to run with a bespoke system and trust that UI would respond quickly to user feedback and issues in order to encourage trust in the council and in new technology.

Unfortunately, it was not possible to develop a dashboard of submissions and analysis functions within the time constraints. This would have allowed officers to produce reports in a 'self-serve' manner and monitor submissions without having to ask the supplier for updates. Providing more time for system testing and development than the few weeks available would have meant greater success for external users and internally. Otherwise, the iterative and flexible approach worked well.

## **7.0 Conclusions & Policy Reflections**

### **7.1 Reflections on Project**

Overall, the project has demonstrated that online consultation platforms present a versatile and efficient alternative to carrying out consultations using standalone forms. It is much easier to present materials in an engaging way online and the use of 'how to participate' Youtube videos and information pop-ups helped to guide participants through the process.

Whilst the council was not able to reach as many groups and participants as hoped it is

clear that the inclusion of a site suggestions element at the Regulation 18 stage has broadened participation. It is hoped that the Local Plan preparation process will benefit from wider involvement at an early stage and it is hoped that this level and type of engagement will be continued and improved through the next steps of Local Plan review.

The council hopes to work with Urban Intelligence throughout the plan making process in order to foster a greater level of engagement with the planning making process than seen previously. There will be on-going collaboration on developing the engagement and analysis functionality beyond the trial period and it is envisaged that these changes will be shared with other authorities through Urban Intelligence's user group, aiming for things to evolve and all to benefit.

The policy team also hopes to advocate the use of digital solutions within the council and the work has provided a valuable opportunity to do this including within the council's Senior Leadership team. Pushing for a digital and GIS strategy (both council wide and for the Planning Service) is now on the Planning Policy team's agenda, with a view to also encouraging the Development Management team to make use of digital solutions.

The existence of a digital transformation strategy for the council and planning service would have been useful and is needed to help understand what is needed and feasible, and where priorities lie. A corporate GIS strategy and resource would also be useful in that respect. The Planning Service was unlikely to be considered for at least another two years in terms of digital transformation. The trial has helped shine a light on the limitations of council GIS, legacy software and has shown the possibilities of taking a different approach.

It would have been beneficial to have had more time to prepare a specification, do market research, product development and testing. A year would have been better than the 5 months given.

## 7.2 Digital Support for LPAs

It is thought that DLUHC could better support LPAs in further adoption of engagement tools through:

- **The provision of case studies** that provide inspiration of how to communicate planning concepts and introduce LPA to the technologies needed to implement engagement functions (including example suppliers).
- Training / education on digital (especially Geographic Information Systems and basic concepts around web / software development).
- Blueprints for planning data – e.g., identification of and a standard format for core site monitoring / site suitability and required metadata – it is thought that this would prevent the need for the development of bespoke systems for each LPA and would allow information to be shared as open data open data through a central platform.
- Documents that help advocate the use of digital solutions – LPAs are aware of the need to digitise but will often struggle to evidence the tangible benefits to management teams (e.g., cost reductions, improved



engagement).

- Additional resources to support the transition to digital – the council would not have been able to undertake this project without funding.
- A checklist to ensure that all the conditions are in place for digital transformation and also more detailed lists for example to ensure that specifications are developed to meet the needs of LPAs and councils more generally.
- Provide incentives for Local Plan and Development Management consultations to have a digital interactive format alongside the more traditional ones.

The use of digital pilots is helpful, however there is a risk given the short timescales that products are not able to deliver as well as they could and that the public and other users experience frustration at glitches found in the early stages of software development. Such issues may discourage users from making use of digital services in the future. There are very few off the shelf products available and so development is necessary and a pooling of resources might allow for such development to happen with smaller innovative businesses without involving live engagement/consultation events. From experience, councils have a difficult enough task developing trust as it is, and so any roll out of a product needs to be as flawless as possible.

The Civil Service use the [‘Service Manual’](#) to design and deliver services and probably a similar adapted manual to suit the limited budgets and resources of a Local Authority would be of benefit.