



Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

PropTech Engagement Fund Round 1

Final Report

January 2023



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1. Project Aims and Objectives

Ambition and desired outcomes

The initial bid set out three objectives:

1. Enhanced software/collaboration on plan making.
2. Urban design focused outputs: rules/codes/parameters based.
3. Implications of reform (cost/resource/time).

The town of Hemel Hempstead in Dacorum is unparished, so resident's involvement and coordinated storytelling has proven to be challenging in the past. The Council is committed to increasing local participation.

Desired outcomes of this pilot included the following:

- o Experiment with our 'engagement offering'.
- o Be more 'effective' by simplifying our processes.
- o Increase resident collaboration.
- o Deliver a more transparent and inclusive process (increasing 'touch points', two-way communication with residents, enabling trust to be built-up and reducing periods of uncertainty/no communication).
- o Open communication channels (online 'exhibition' platforms) and enabling 'feedback loops'.
- o Reduced reliance on long/complex PDFs.
- o Use Community and Quality Review Panels.
- o Present engaging/informative information and use new technologies (machine readable, spatial data).
- o Social media advertising aimed at 'target audience'.
- o Updated webpage coverage/layout.
- o Testing of/investment in digital engagement techniques.
- o Best technologies/apps/software platforms (influencing outputs for users' needs)
- o Awareness of best practice - what is and isn't effective
- o Knowledge of costing/resource/skillsets/software/timescales
- o Effectiveness of procurement frameworks

Focus of consultation and what you consulted on

The focus of the consultation was on a specific part of Hemel Hempstead, to the south of the town and known locally as Two Waters. The study area includes land in Boxmoor, Apsley and more peripheral parts of Kings Langley and Nash Mills parishes to the south east.

The content of the consultation was largely informed by the National Model Design Code, and focused on informing the development of character areas and, ultimately, area types. The core aim of the consultation was to seek feedback from the local community on how they feel currently about their area, what design features they believe makes their area unique, and what they consider to be important for this area in the future.

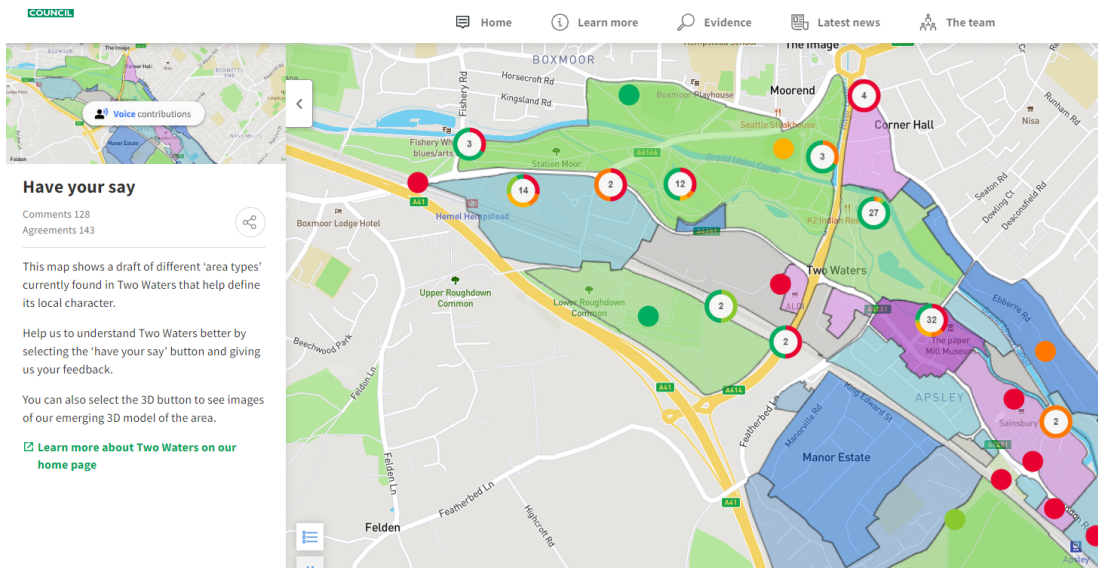
The consultation was also the first time that we have presented the emerging 3D model for Hemel Hempstead and to seek feedback on this ahead of its wider application for Development Management and plan making alike.

2. Project Summary

Summary

The engagement was principally undertaken using Commonplace as the host for a range of information which presented a range of different technologies being trialled. The core engagement page can be found here: <https://twowaters.commonplace.is/>

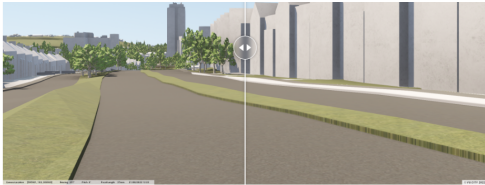
In this, the main “have your say” page (<https://twowaters.commonplace.is/en-GB/map/have-your-say>) gathered 246 comments and a further 265 ‘agreements’. It included a range of questions for people to answer with respect to character and what they consider to be important to the area. It also allows some images of the Hemel Hempstead model to be overlaid on the map, giving viewers new perspectives.



A further tab seeks specific views on the new Hemel Hempstead model that is currently in development by Vu.City. At the time of engagement, only the study area and town centre was available. It presented a range of different experiences on what the model could demonstrate and potentially how it could enhance users' experience of complex planning matters. <https://twowaters.commonplace.is/en-GB/proposals/3d-model-proposal/step1>

The images below show a comparison between the shadowing caused by the Image Tower in February and August.





Here is your opportunity to provide your views on the emerging 3D model. Your feedback will allow us to refine the model in the future

How satisfied are you with the proposed 3D model?

1 2 3 4 5
Dislike it Like it

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?

A further tab made use of ESRI's StoryMaps platform for drawing together evidence in the form of topic pages. It widens the experience of viewers when compared to more traditional forms of evidence, such as those prepared as PDFs. It provides a more interactive experience, tailored to suit the user and device (laptop, tablet, mobile, etc.).

Evidence

Scroll down to view our collection of background evidence.

Finally, one of the new processes that was trialled was a voice to text capture for comments. Developed by Commonplace, the feature was included on most of the engagement pages ('Have your say', the 3D model and evidence tabs). This enabled users to provide feedback using new methods alongside more traditional ones (such as text/typed).

Do you have any other comments

Record a voice note, we'll transcribe it.

Click on the the blue button to have your say

Opportunities

The pilot allowed us to review our existing traditional engagement processes. The vast majority of the pilot involved the use of new technologies and platforms, some of which were being considered for other elements not relating to engagement (such as interactive maps). In areas, the pilot did not deliver on some of the expectations set out in our bid, such as an integrated 3D experience which could enable users to 'show us' rather than to tell us.

Funding review

No additional funding was needed. Prior to the successful bid, the Council already committed to certain elements and technologies, such as a Vu.City's 3D model and the use of ESRI's online platform. These were funded through other channels, including the Design Code Pilot and Local Plan/Sites Pathfinder. With this, funding was directed towards Commonplace and the development of its key features and bespoke pages to deliver this trial. It required input from the other organisations (Vu.City and ESRI) who offered much of their time in-kind so as to be part of the trial.

3. Community Engagement Summary

Outreach Methods

The consultation launched on the 14th April 2022, the original closing date was scheduled for the 31st May, however this was extended until the 30th June.

We did not conduct any non-digital engagement. The consultation was promoted by changing the 'creatives' (images made by Commonplace, used to promote the consultation) and building a timeline with the both the Dacorum communications team and the Commonplace social promotions team for scheduled social media posts. The consultation was also promoted using Dacorum's digital newsletter 'Dacorum Life'.

Lessons Learned

Challenges we had to overcome during the community engagement process include:

- Relatively low response rate using solely digital forms of outreach.
 - In comparison to other exercises undertaken by strategic planning, it's clear that previous consultations generated a significantly higher level of public response. Although these previous consultations were Borough wide, the amount of active engagement and conversations taking place were far different to the Two Waters engagement. For these other consultations a combination of digital and traditional methods were used.

	Platform	Dates	Visitors	Contributions	Respondents
Two Waters Survey	CP	April - June 2022	6,989	986	411
Issues and Options Reg 18	Keystone	November - December 2017	(Not Collected)	22,708	2,376
Emerging Local Plan Reg 18	Keystone	November 2020 - February 2021	Over 50k	16,210	4,109

- A key lesson learnt is that we will need to integrate other methods to reach more people, however many online consultation platforms do not facilitate seamless integration between digital and traditional consultation methods.
- Balance between engagement and meeting statutory requirements
 - We realised during this project that commonplace would not allow us to meet the more rigid requirements of a Regulation 19 consultation. These issues particularly relate to:
 - The format PINS require the representations to be provided to them for the examination - the current report functionality would not allow us to extract the responses in the orders PINS require them to be provided.
 - Making full names of those who made representations publically viewable is not permitted by Commonplace. However it is clear in the

PINS procedural guidance it will not be possible to examine a plan if names of who made representations are not made available. Therefore a key lesson learned is that we will need to explore other alternatives which do comply with the existing regulations, but that still remains interactive and user friendly to maximise engagement rates.

- Clashes with the existing DBC digital policy
 - We would need to ensure that the platform can run using Dacorum's existing ICT infrastructure. Clashed between systems made transferring information and document review/sign off more time consuming.
 - Councils must comply with the Public Sector Equality Duty and web accessibility guidelines. Although it is set out in the regulations that 3rd parties providing content for local authorities must meet the same requirements, the burden largely fell on the Council to retrofit elements of the work which resulted in delays. A lesson learned would be to incorporate accessibility into brief writing prior to procurement to provide clarity to consultants on the specific requirements on Local Authorities.

Additional guidance and support that would have helped.

- Guidance on how to process and report on email and postal responses. The manual inputting process where people are detracted by the complex online platform causes local authorities considerable delay.
 - *It has been noted that DLUHC offer an email and postal response option in their consultations, and it would be interesting to know how this is fed in to the comments analysis process.*
- We have tried to move from long complex documents to a more user friendly site, however feedback suggests that people still struggled to understand the process.
 - If we oversimplify planning consultations too far then our plan will struggle to be found sound at an examination. Planners have to undertake complex assessments and follow technical processes by law, whilst simultaneously being told to make the process easy for everybody to understand.
 - *If there are any examples of good practice plans which are easy to understand, legally compliant and sound that DLUHC can identify, it would benefit many local authorities struggling to find the balance.*
- Guidance on how to make web maps accessible. This is especially relevant when previous planning reform proposals appeared to point towards the use of a single map as opposed to policies for a local plan, however web map accessibility is often poor. This could also apply to the use of interactive digital reports with large tables and graphs, and infographics/images as opposed to plain text.

Anything else? (Including surprises)

It was noted that a large number of people commented underneath the social media adverts as opposed to clicking on the survey. Currently we do not consider social media responses as official representations to consultations. There may need to be future consideration on how to take social media into account going forward.

Despite the change of consultation platform and approach, it seemed the consultation was still dominated by the few willing and able to navigate the process – the voice of those who stand to gain from growth and development was not heard loudly enough, such as young people. The importance of local participation in planning is now the focus of a campaign by

the Local Government Association but this involvement must be accessible to all people.

4. Pilot Outcomes

Engagement

There were 6,989 visitors to the Two Waters website. There were 372 participants who provided their email address, and a further 39 anonymous participants. In total, participants made 986 contributions. Participants tended to be residents within Dacorum Borough (often living in the HP1 and HP3 postcode areas), working full-time, and aged 45-64, of a white ethnicity and without a disability or long-term illness. In total, participants made close to 1,000 contributions.

Summary of community feedback

The consultation focused on 5 separate elements:

- **Have your say:** This was the main survey where visitors could view the map and leave comments, and questions were broken down into 3 parts: sentiment analysis of the existing area, design features and looking to the future - 246 comments with 265 agreements
- **3D model proposal:** where visitors could view the proposed 3D model for Hemel Hempstead and provide feedback - 52 comments with 6 agreements.
- **Evidence:** where visitors could view the background evidence gathered - 9 comments and 10 agreements.
- **Learn more:** where visitors were able to read more about the project - 9 comments with 21 agreements.
- **Website feedback:** We also released a separate survey, where visitors could provide feedback on their website experience - 33 comments.

In summary, being 'close to nature', 'important to the character of the area', 'attractive', having a 'sense of community' and 'feeling safe' emerged as key reasons for a place having a positive sentiment. 84% of positive contributions about open land and natural spaces focused on being close to nature. Clearly, if a place is near nature, attractive and gives the area some character, it is more likely to be well received by the public.

In contrast, negative sentiments were typically influenced by 'I don't like the design' and 'not attractive'. These tended to focus on business, science or retail parks, and industrial areas. Boxmoor and Apsley High Street both received a mixed response from consultation participants, with some concerns that they were unattractive and congested.

Looking to the future, more nature was the number one option which people requested more of in the area. Specified by 116 participants, it clearly emerged as the most popular element. This was followed by improved walking and cycling routes, more open space, more community space, and more bars/restaurants.

An analysis of additional, accompanying comments provided by participants showed that the most frequent related to preserving the area, resolving traffic issues and limiting the scale and height of high-rise developments.

The proposed 3D model for the area attracted a mixed response, and scored 3.13 out of an optimum rating out of 5 – with a frequent suggestion that it needed to include more detail. Few participants, 9, felt that issues had been missed within the scope of the consultation, and even fewer, just 3, provided feedback on the actual evidence base presented.

Website Feedback from Participants

Moving on to the feedback we received about the website itself, a small proportion of respondents (35) who took part in the consultation gave feedback on the web experience. The majority of these respondents (68%) had experience of participating in a previous planning consultation. However, it was encouraging to see that almost a third were new contributors.

Using a scale of 1-5, where 1 was 'very difficult' and 5 was 'very easy', respondents rated their use of the Two Waters consultation webpages. Feedback was often unfavourable, with 60% of contributors regarding ease of use as 'difficult' and the website scored a rating of 2.26/5.

Key themes which underpinned difficulty of use included: a lack of user-friendliness (23%), a lack of their contribution being acknowledged (9%), a lack of simplicity/ease of understanding (3%), repetitive and irrelevant questions (6%) and unrealistic images (3%).

In contrast, some respondents were more complimentary about the Commonplace consultation hosting, with positive perceptions of the value of map pinpointing (14%), a fast and easy feedback experience (6%) and praise for the ability to read the comments of others (3%).

The vast majority of participants (97%) chose not to use the voice contribution software feature included on the consultation website. Key reasons for this feature not being used included a preference to comment by text (37%), a lack of awareness of this feature (20%) and feeling uncomfortable being recorded (14%). However, 17% would consider leaving voice contributions in the future.

A number of suggestions were made to boost the inclusivity of future planning consultations. These included:

- Making consultations more user/public friendly (23%)
- More rigorous website testing (9%)
- Printed materials (6%)
- Wider distribution/publicity (6%)
- Face-to-face engagement (3%)

What Changes (if any)

Surprisingly, only 1% of our respondents were aged 16-24, which means that despite relying on digital platforms and social media to promote the consultation, this did not provide a guarantee that young people will be engaged by the process. In the future, the team will need to explore further how we increase the proportion of young people commenting in these exercises and dedicate particular time into achieving this.

The feedback suggests that residents are not satisfied with wholly digital methods of engagement.

Someone suggested in the web feedback session that planners should 'get normal members of the public to test websites/feedback forms before they go live.' This suggestion sounds like it may bring a lot of benefits, but it should be noted that this testing group should be representative of the wider demographic of the Borough.

A key change would be that the Council will consider which consultation platform they aim to take forward, and will undertake research on which platforms can deliver both user-friendly digital engagement, and meet the requirements set out in the regulations.

Cost effectiveness

Participating in the trial has allowed us to identify numerous factors where we believe that conducting digital engagement would allow the council to save time and resource compared to undertaking traditional methods of engagement.

Firstly, traditional face to face engagement (public exhibitions) take up a lot of time, resource and cost. However these events can prove very exclusionary towards the majority of the community, and they are often hostile. Digital engagement allows us to reach a much wider range of individuals.

Secondly, elements of the trial highlighted potential cost benefits in comparison to our existing digital offer, despite the problems identified with the methods we selected. The Council's current digital consultation platform has historically driven more people towards emailing their responses, which requires separate processing and takes more time.

For reference, during the most recent Regulation 18 consultation undertaken by the council, only 33.2% of comments were made directly in our online platform, meaning over 10,000 comments had to be manually processed by officers. We received a smaller number of emails during the two waters trial (estimated 20 emails c.5% of the response), although in this instance we had to be very clear to all those who emailed that the Council did not have the functionality to input their response into the system, so in order for their comment to count they would need to use the online survey. If we adopted a similar approach to our next statutory exercise it could potentially save considerable amount of time and money. Alternatively, if a platform could be developed that could deal with significant numbers of emails and letters and automatically process them alongside web comments, we would then be able to maintain our existing offer.

However, turning the attention to the trial we undertook, the work involved in developing a new platform and working with the numerous suppliers took a significant amount of time and resource. Also, the new platform was significantly more expensive than the existing one used by the Council. However the efforts resulted in much lower levels of response, in comparison to our consultations undertaken using more traditional methods, therefore it is arguable that digital engagement requires considerable thought before it becomes more cost/effective.

5. Development/Implementation

How you developed/ implemented/ mobilised the product with your suppliers

Development and implementation was undertaken through a wide range of meetings with suppliers/proptech companies. Inception meetings were undertaken and these were mainly supported by a high frequency of catch-up meetings, usually on a weekly basis throughout the programme. Further meetings were required at key stages to discuss and present new features, and to firm up content for inclusion in the engagement event.

Lessons learned

Managing interactions between the Council and consultants: We experienced sudden staffing changes, technical difficulties, and short notice annual leave – all are factors which extended the timeline if not accounted for in the beginning. Making sure timelines are realistic and take into account working with multiple parties will ensure future projects run more smoothly.

In addition to the challenges with coordinating the internal teams, it took considerable resource on behalf of officers in the council to engage with up to three suppliers for this proptech engagement fund. Many meetings did not yield any tangible outcomes. This is probably to be expected as part of a pilot programme however it is something that the Council would not wish to undertake regularly as part of its own initiatives to enhance engagement on Local Plans and associated documents and evidence.

Elements where the Council had more of a lead role in development of material were easier and it still lends itself to the case that the most efficient processes are once which the Council and its officers have control over.

Further Guidance

Potentially there is an opportunity for guidance to be provided to private companies who are involved in pilot projects around the basic requirements of the planning consultation process (such as the difference between Reg 18 and Reg 19, what information needs to be presented at each stage, how PINS expect the end product to be presented). This would allow them to better develop their offering to local authorities, and reduce chances for miscommunication.

Reflections

Local Authorities should be provided with funding to improve their existing software. They would also benefit from assistance from digital professionals who could deliver training and reduce the skills gap local authorities face.

DLUHC could potentially liaise with the RTPi and produce a mandatory training module for members to ensure all planners have the basic digital capabilities required (and potentially an advanced module for those interested), rather than this falling on one or two individuals within a department, or relying on consultants to plug the skills gap (if the funding is available).

Providing something like this would reduce the reliance on the private sector and ultimately improve efficiency and internal resilience of Councils, allowing planning teams to have greater control of the process and meet the statutory requirements, whilst factoring in the needs of the local communities they specialise in. This would also allow the consultants to develop tailored, specialist services which support Councils, focusing less on delivering the 'basics' on their behalf.

6. Procurement

Procurement approach and outcomes

The Council considered a range of possible avenues to procuring consultants, mainly resulting from the guidance provided by DLUHC early on. It was decided that G Cloud would be used. As it was the first time that such a framework was used by the Council, it took some time for officers and the procurement team within the Council to fully understand the methodology for procurement, including the use of key words to identify a short list of candidate providers. The process resulted in the identification of Commonplace as the only shortlisted organisation which met the criteria set out in our brief.

Lessons learned:

An added complexity was the need to continue to follow the Council's standard procedures for procurement alongside the use of G Cloud. While ultimately it delivered some time savings, on balance there were still some delays and the level of officer resource required ultimately felt no different in the end. Having said all of this, it was still considered worthwhile to use G Cloud for this pilot in this instance.

The procurement team within the Council were unable to offer much support on the use of G Cloud or the wider Digital Marketplace as it was quite a new process for them. It raised a number of questions with respect to what was the most appropriate one and how do you compare/contrast each one to determine 'the best fit'.

Trialling new technologies and processes for engagement ultimately raised the question -how much will this all cost? While it can be easy to assume and predict costs for established engagement, it was difficult to say with any confidence how much the pilot would cost, especially where we wanted to trial new technologies (voice to text).

On suggestions for improvement, the biggest complexity is that each authority has their own rules and processes to support procurement. The use of framework contracts are beneficial, however they still need to operate within the remit of the local authority's system, which are frequently complex. Standardising and fast-tracking ways in which local authorities can commission work, even if ring-fenced to certain sectors such as planning, would be extremely helpful. It equally makes the process much more clearly for those proptech companies willing to engage.

7. Conclusions & Policy Reflections

Potential policy and/or process improvements

Planning, and in particular plan-making, struggles to achieve high levels of engagement with communities. Frequently, the most contentious elements of plan making require primitive forms of engagement, such as costly leaflet drops to every household and business in the area. These place an added strain and resource on the Council, both in terms of the cost of design and production, but also that they do not deliver the desired outcome as information is summarised to key points.

The pilot has demonstrated that more information can be provided, and in many cases at much cheaper cost, to people's own devices. What is missing is the ability to notify all consultees of these events in a cost efficient and modern way. Email mailing lists are good but they are normally only a tiny fraction of the target audience. People's contact details change, their addresses change, their businesses change, but not many let the Council know this. Marketing in areas such as social media is helpful, but again it can be quite costly. A policy to which all residents can be notified, even if by a simple push notification/text message on their mobile phone (i.e. cell broadcast), could go a long way to replacing archaic ways of engagement. Existing engagement platforms will only ever go so far.

Further Guidance

Where do you think further engagement guidance is required?

(This could include guidance for both local authorities and the wider proptech / consultancy sector)

Any tools/platforms developed or used should be designed to be fully accessible. Updated national guidance on how to achieve this would be helpful as many are not aware of what requirements might be necessary or how to achieve these (image descriptions, ease of use screen readers, translation).

Standards for consulting on Local Plans, etc. could be updated through planning reform, in a similar manner to data standards. It could be linked with better guidance that can be updated regularly, and remove the need for Statements of Community Involvement (SCI) to be prepared by Councils. The Covid pandemic was an example where engagement on Local Plans had to change through temporary legislation and addendums to the SCI.

DLUHC Support Recommendations

With regards to the support DLUHC could provide, alongside the various recommendations within the report, it is noted that there hasn't been a wide scale audit assessing the digital capacity of Local Planning Authorities relating to

- In house digital capacity;
- Data collection/sharing;
- Platforms and tools used; and
- The digital literacy of practitioners.

This should also investigate the costs associated with purchasing software/licenses, digital training courses and employing consultants/external companies.

An exercise like this would give DLUHC a sense of scale when proposing digital transformation, and a more realistic picture of some of the barriers authorities face.

Although guidance for existing providers will be welcomed, we believe an aspiration for DLUHC should be to provide a standard, customisable engagement platform for all local authorities which is owned/maintained by DLUHC. This would ensure all the requirements are complied with. This would also help residents, as they do not need to learn multiple systems. This could be closely linked to a new interactive map for planning for the country.

Long Term Changes

The Council still aims to review its existing consultation methods. We will also ensure that document and site accessibility is factored into all procurement briefs as a minimum. The trial allowed us to move away from our existing approach and understand the full implications of trialling new methods and moving away from the traditional offer. Therefore although the outcomes are not what we originally hoped to achieve, this will allow us as an organisation to view this project in a much more informed and realistic way.