Department for Levelling Up,
Housing & Communities

PropTech Engagement Fund Round 1

Final Report

April 2022

Local Planning Authority	Watford Borough Council
Date	8th April 2022
Theme	**Theme 3:** Development Management: Planning Publicity

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1.0   Project Aims and Objectives

1.1 Ambition
"Make it radically easier for citizens to find out about planning applications and increase public participation from a broader audience."

1.2 Desired Outcomes
To remove unintentional barriers that prevent people from engaging with the planning process:
- People not being notified of development;
- People finding the engagement process too difficult to understand.

1.3 Focus of consultation

- Engage with a broader audience for major planning applications;
- Explore modern ways to publicise planning information including use of a 3d model;
- Encourage people to register for planning alerts;
- Improve accessibility of planning information with new map tools and QR codes.

2.0   Project Summary

2.1 What did you deliver?

✔ A new process allowing members of the public to register for planning alerts https://www.watford.gov.uk/planning-information/register-planning-alerts

✔ A new visual online platform for members of the public to view major planning applications https://watfordplanning.commonplace.is/

✔ The use of QR codes on publicity for **all** of our planning applications – see APPENDIX A

✔ 2 new visual map tools to search for planning information https://www.watford.gov.uk/planning-information/planning-applications-planning-constraints-map

2.2 Opportunities

This project allowed us to explore the potential of how publicity for planning applications could be modernised to:

(i)   reach a broader audience;

(ii)   be more engaging for members of the public.

Whilst new engagement methods were used e.g. social media, we also explored how traditional engagement tools, such as a site notice on a lamppost, could be enhanced with visual images and QR codes, to better engage members of the public.

2.3 Funding review

The funding was sufficient to deliver our aims for this project. This was mainly due to us not having to pay for a project manager because a new role was created within the Council (Digital Improvement and CIL/S106 Officer) which provided this resource.

3.0   Community Engagement Summary

3.1 Outreach Methods (SEE APPENDIX B – OUTREACH METHODS)

Outreach methods were managed internally, over a period of 4 months, by the project manager and Council's web/communications teams. The engagement tools used included:

- ☐ Council website, Local businesses website (Watford BID), Local press website (Watford Observer);

- ☐ Social media posts – Facebook, Twitter, Linked in, Next door, Instagram;

- ☐ Leaflets with annual Council tax bills, press release in local newspaper (Watford Observer), Local magazine article (About Watford);

- ☐ Digital boards in the Town Centre;

- ☐ Internal/external project briefings, webinars;

- ☐ Survey sent by email to people registered for planning alerts, 1-2-1 virtual testing sessions with members of the public who have previously done testing for the Council website.

3.2 Lessons Learned

3.2.1   Challenges

- ● Concerns/resistance in using social media for the publicity of planning applications as it creates negative comments

- ● The Commonplace platform allowed comments to be made on a planning application live online, without the Council having the opportunity to check them first (which is the current process.) This raised a GDPR risk and concern over unacceptable comments being viewable in the public domain which we would have to report. Throughout the pilot, we had 1 comment that needed to be hidden due to defamatory comments.

- ● As we had several different elements for our project, products were delivered over a period of time. This meant early on that although we had launched new products, we couldn't really showcase them until everything had been delivered. This is because we wanted our marketing campaign to be for the project as a whole, a staggered approach would not have been as effective.

3.2.2   Additional guidance and support that would have helped?

GDPR support would have been very helpful, similar to what was provided for procurement. We do not have our own GDPR officer and support is provided externally by Hertfordshire County Council (HCC.) Therefore, we didn't have a direct contact to check GDPR requirements with which would have been useful.

3.2.3   Anything else? (including surprises)

The timing of the project (pre-election) was sensitive in terms of restricted communications and new major planning applications being submitted e.g. developers will wait until after elections to submit an application.

4.0   Pilot Outcomes

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

Engagement (how many people engaged and who?)

▪ Since our major planning applications platform launched on 24/1/22, the site has had 2561 visitors (29/3/22.) 37% of people surveyed said they would not be likely to engage with major applications without this platform;

▪ 309 members of the public have signed up for planning alerts (1/4/22.) 100% of people surveyed said that receiving planning alerts by email makes it easier for them to find out about planning applications and 75% said receiving alerts would make them more likely to get involved with the Council's planning service;

▪ 93% of people surveyed said that they like having the option to view planning information on a map and 84% said they're likely to use the new maps;

▪ 83% of people surveyed said that QR codes would enhance the engagement process for them and 80% said it would allow them to access and understand planning information online quicker and easier;

▪ No-one under the age of 35 engaged with the survey.

4.2 Comparison of Baseline data (What baseline data did you compare the outcomes with and what does it show?)

In terms of planning applications, engagement cannot not be measured by the number of comments made. For example, people may engage with an application by looking at the plans but do not wish to make any comments. This is shown in the ratio of 2561 people visiting the major planning applications platform which translated into 9 comments (0.3%).

The social media posts prove successful in engaging people and driving traffic to the platform (SEE APPENDIX A – SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS.) The graph shows that the site experienced its highest number of visitors following social media posts which cannot be matched when compared to other outreach methods.

4.3 Summary of community feedback - key themes / learnings?

Whilst digital engagement tools are welcomed, they should not replace traditional methods which are also very important for people.

Visual engagement is key for people e.g. enhancing planning publicity with images, maps and QR codes which make it quicker and easier for them to access and understand the information. (SEE APPENDIX C – SURVEY FEEDBACK)

4.4 What changes (if any) have come about as a result of engagement and opportunities to deliver?

Following feedback received, further changes were made to our planning publicity to include instructions on how to use QR codes.

4.5 Cost effectiveness

This project did not conduct any digital engagement which allowed us to save time or resource compared to traditional methods of engagement.

5.0   Development/Implementation

5.1 How we developed/implemented/mobilised the product with our suppliers

- Commonplace – we met daily for 5 weeks during the build using slack for messaging. During the build, both parties had dedicated people solely working on the project who were always available on both sides. After launch, the platform was maintained by Commonplace with ongoing support provided. Early on, we discovered that IT integration was not possible with our back office system (Idox) and this was our biggest challenge. It meant a daily manual export process was needed to share data with each other. As a result of this, the initial proposal for the platform to include all planning applications would have been unachievable and was changed to include only major planning applications. The product evolved throughout the process as there was no existing Commonplace prototype for this type of statutory engagement for planning applications. Commonplace are a community friendly engagement platform whose typical approach did not always fit in with the legislation requirements for planning publicity, therefore, in this case, it was vital that the project manager was a planning expert.

- Esri - specific brief was provided to Esri who split it into 4 requirements. 3 project managers were appointed to build the applications using ArcGIS online with contact via kick-off/update meetings and emails. Knowledge sharing/handovers were completed with our in-house GIS expert when the products were finished and the Council will maintain the products going forward. As the products are our own, we have embedded them onto our website which allows us to monitor engagement.

- Vu.city - in order to be viewable for public engagement, the Vu.city 3D model has to integrate with a compatible platform and cannot be used as a standalone system e.g. installed onto our website. Therefore, our vu.city data was incorporated onto the Commonplace platform to enable a 3D map tab. Vu.city and Commonplace had an existing relationship and shared data directly with each other.

5.2 Lessons learned

5.2.1   Additional guidance and support that would have helped

A project manager (within the Council) was recruited to assist with the wider management of the project internally. The project had to meet the same requirements as other Council projects and an internal project team was fundamental to help and support delivery.

5.2.2   Any surprises you faced, or other reflections?

- o Overcoming internal IT issues was a huge challenge. At least 2 of our products worked externally but would not work when logged in via our VPN due to internal IT firewalls. This required IT resource and expertise to resolve and took some time.

5.2.3   Ongoing engagement requirements/ambitions for this project

We are delighted to have achieved several legacy products for Watford from

this project which we will continue to deliver and promote. This includes our planning alerts system, QR codes on our planning publicity and planning information map tools. The only product that ends as part of the project is the Commonplace platform for viewing major planning applications. We will replace this with a similar version of our own which will be more sustainable for us to maintain going forwards.

Whilst successful in reaching a broader audience, social media will not be used to publicise major planning applications for the foreseeable future, due to the negativity that it creates. However, we will continue to progress with other digital improvements within our planning service e.g. enhancing our own site notices to make them more visually engaging with a map extract.

6.0   Procurement

6.1 Procurement approach and outcomes

❖ Commonplace – we were aware of Commonplace as they were being used for an engagement project elsewhere within the Council. We approached them with our aim for the Proptech project which was to improve existing planning publicity. This corresponded with a recent project that Commonplace had recently worked on and had hoped to deliver in the future. Using G-cloud, Commonplace were the only supplier to match our specifications which meant that we could directly award them as our supplier. Our internal legal/IT teams had to check and authorise the contract and IT specifications as part of the procurement process.

❖ Esri – due to our existing contractual relationship with Esri and in-house expertise, we approached them with a specific brief and found out that they could deliver the digital products we wanted. Esri were an existing supplier and the works (and their value) meant that we could vary our existing contract with them. This led to a much easier and quicker process as there were no legal/IT requirements.

❖ Vu.city procurement was achieved via an exemption from contract procedure rules. This is because the Commonplace platform worked in partnership with vu.city to deliver the 3d mapping feature. Therefore, an exemption was approved on the basis of a limited market/no competition for suppliers. Our internal legal/IT teams had to check and authorise the contract and IT specifications as part of the procurement process.

6.2 Lessons learned

6.2.1   Challenges

Due to the tight time constraints of the project, we needed to start work with the suppliers imminently however, delays were caused during procurement by having to consult internal legal/IT departments which we didn't have time for;

6.2.2   Additional guidance and support that would have helped

The DLUHC procurement support helped us enormously.

6.2.3   Any suggestions to improve procurement

For a specific project, DLUHC could procure suppliers on behalf of Local Authorities (once they know who they want to work with) or procure a framework to simplify and make the process easier.

6.3 Working with suppliers

Commonplace were happy to start work based on a purchase order. If they had not been willing to start work until completion of the procurement process, our product would have been delayed by a much longer time period.

7.0   Conclusions & Policy Reflections

7.1 Potential policy and/or process improvements

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

The main concerns were meeting the legislative requirements for planning publicity and GDPR.

7.1.2 **Are there policies you would like to see changed in the future?**
Generally, I think that more people would make comments on planning applications if they could remain anonymous.

7.1.3 **Where do you think further engagement guidance is required (this could include guidance for both local authorities and the wider proptech / consultancy sector)**
Local authorities and the wider proptech sector need to adopt an open data approach. A guidance note on how this could be achieved e.g. by building your own (open data) platform would be useful.

7.1.4 **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?**
Similar projects can continue to support individual LPA's. However, wider projects that look to provide central platforms would be ideal as these could be used by all LPA's and would appear consistent for the public. They could also adopt an open data approach to encourage this within the sector.

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

✔ Introduce a 'user friendly' process for labelling major application documents;

✔ Redesign our site notices (in line with engagement feedback) with map extracts to show the site;

✔ Continue to promote our planning alerts service for people to register. We have approx. 42,000 residential properties within the Borough which means roughly 0.7% are currently signed up;

✔ Launch and maintain our own platform for people to view major planning applications;

✔ Future project work in order to adopt further digital tools e.g. Round 2 Proptech and Digital Site Notice project with Camden Council;

✔ Share learnings with other Local Authorities who are interested in adopting similar tools.

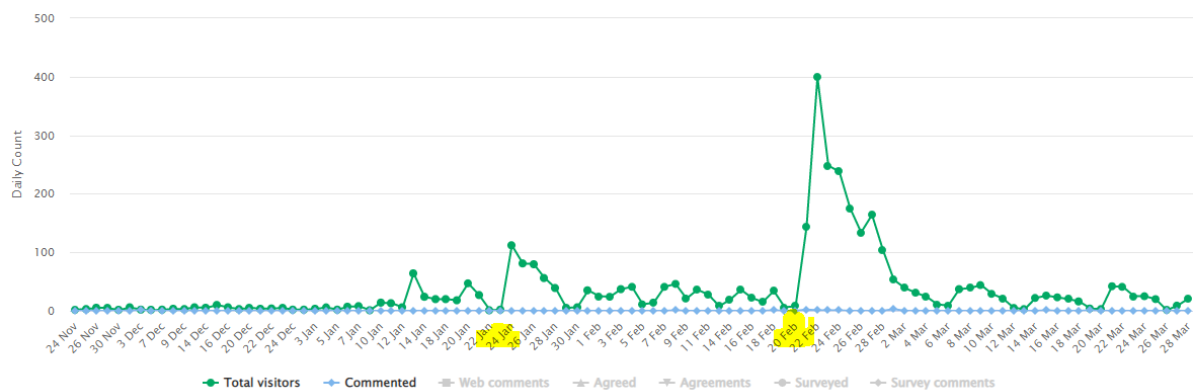**8.0   Appendix - Further examples**

APPENDIX A – SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

https://www.facebook.com/watfordcouncil/posts/327543319407144

https://www.facebook.com/watfordcouncil/posts/318681240293352

https://twitter.com/WatfordCouncil/status/1495808251287461890

https://www.linkedin.com/feed/update/urn:li:activity:6901571196627079168

https://nextdoor.co.uk/p/zfkjY2Pkn3k3?utm_source=share&extras=MTc1OTIxODkyMzEyOTE%3D

The graph below shows traffic to the major planning applications platform.

Note - the launch date of 24/1 and social media posts on 21/2.

APPENDIX B – OUTREACH METHODS

Council website:
https://www.watford.gov.uk/news/article/93/funding-helping-to-reimagine-planning-notifications

Local businesses website (Watford BID):
https://watfordlinkup.com/news/survey-new-digital-planning-tools-for-planning-process

Local press website (Watford Observer):
https://www.watfordobserver.co.uk/news/19667392.watford-council-wins-funding-modernise-planning-process/

Local magazine article (About Watford):

Digital boards in the Town Centre: