



PropTech Engagement Fund Round 2

Final Report

September 2022



Local Planning Authority/ies	Harborough District Council
Date Report Submitted	20th October 2022



Executive Summary

Region	Leicestershire, East Midlands
LA Rural-Urban Classification Category	District code:- 31UD, ONS code: - E07000131 Classification:- R80, Numerical classification: - 6
Project summary	The aim of the project was to get a wider participation by the local community in engaging with the planning department via the development and deployment of a user-friendly digital platform for consultation.
Funding allocated	£125,000
Supplier(s) Appointed	JDi Solutions (Opus Consult) & Blue Fox (Opus Map)
Consultation Topic	Open Spaces (existing & new sites suggestions)
Consultation Outcomes	A positive response from the public towards the digital platform with greater numbers of participators (see Appendix 1)
Consultation dates	Digital/Communications Campaign: July to September 2022 Platform live from 25th July to 12 th September 2022



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1.0 Project Summary

- **Summary:** provide a high-level overview of the project in a few sentences or bullet points. If applicable, include links to your project website and/or images of consultation materials.

To trial innovative technologies to encourage greater public engagement, by enhancing our existing planning software (Opus Consult & Opus Map) into a more user-friendly digital platform which the public could use to get more involved in planning matters and issues. The pilot allowed us to explore new ways of engaging with our residents, specifically:

*to ensure opinions from all local communities are heard earlier and more effectively,

*to make consultation/engagement documents and supporting information visually more attractive, accessible, simple to understand and to simplify the submission of responses and their analysis by the authority,

*to increase feedback and communications between formal consultations and

*to widen participation in engagement across all ages and backgrounds, thereby unlocking the potential of the wider community who find it hard to feed into formal engagement processes, to share their perspective and experience.

The questions asked on this engagement exercise on 'Open Spaces' departed from the traditional consultation style and instead we used styles like the Likert scale (represented by emojis) and tick box selection answers accompanied by the option of free text feedback. These styles were used to make answering the questions simpler and easier to use especially for those who may not have previously engaged in planning matters.

- **Status quo pre-PropTech:** how did your local authority approach planning consultations before you received PropTech funding?

Harborough District Council used the following traditional planning consultation methods:

*Press release (newspapers, HDC (Harborough District Council) webpage, social media).

*Posters & exhibitions.

*E-mails & letters.

*Public, Town & Parish meetings (hiring of venues & provision of light refreshments).

*Production of printed materials, consultation forms & power point presentations

*Drop-in sessions on specific dates and times to Council offices with the associated prolonged period of dedicated planning officer/s.



- **Outcomes:** what did the project achieve? Summarise the main impacts in a few bullet points, a table, or other format. Note: there is a section dedicated to project outcomes further on in this report so only include a high-level summary here.

The key high-level summary outcomes and lessons learnt: -

Outcomes:

- *Received a larger number of feedback submissions.
- *Greater numbers of people accessing 'Open Space' engagement webpage.
- *Developed a digital tool which was useable on handheld devices (mobile phones & tablets).
- *Improve the legibility of digital engagement platform by changes to layout and formatting.
- *Transformation of the digital platform to provide information interactively about planning restrictions / constraints and policies affecting any suggested new 'Open Space' site.

Learning or Lessons Learnt:

- *Need to prepare advance publicity of intended engagement exercise much earlier.
- *Need to provide a more detailed information about the purpose of the engagement exercise and how to use the new digital platform.
- *More time needed to decide which map layers and constraints to use, and which ones not to use.

- **Opportunities:** what did the funding allow you to do that you would not have been able to do otherwise?

The fund helped Harborough District Council to work with the existing 'OpusConsult' software providers (who are on the G Cloud list of approved suppliers) JDi Solutions (OpusConsult) & Blue Fox Technology (OpusMap) to transform operational capacity of the digital platform including via handheld devices for an engagement exercise on 'Open Spaces' across the administrative area.

HDC (Harborough District Council) created a separate area on its webpage specific to the engagement exercise; - <https://www.harborough.gov.uk/quickpoll> .

Images of the consultation materials deployed are included in annex 2.

- **Funding review:** we are working to help other LPAs (Local Planning Authorities) budget in the future and understand where you encountered surprises. Please fill out the table below and include any additional reflections about the funding in the text box underneath the table. For example: was more/less funding needed than you expected and for what elements? With the benefit of hindsight, how would you re-do your budget if you were starting this project again?

Having delivered the PropTech 2 project within a short timeframe our reflections



are as follows; -

*More funding and time to be allocated for advanced digital outreach and communications / marketing to enable, support and empower communities to use online digital platforms, well before the start of school holidays.

* A dedicated Project Manager, possibly on a full-time basis, could reduce the pressure on permanent staff and existing suppliers.

*If an external contractor is engaged as Project Manager, then the appointee needs to be in place quickly and ideally within 4 weeks of funding approval.

*More time to be allocated for in-house user testing with focus groups.

*Additional training budget for officers within planning and other services for training on ArcGIS mapping tools and software use.

Budget Item Description	Amount Bid	Amount Spent
Project Manager (HDC (Harborough District Council))	£20,000	£24,000
System Development (JDi)	£44,500	£44,500
Mapping System Development (BlueFox)	£44,500	£44,500
Administrator (HDC (Harborough District Council))	£6,000	£0
HDC (Harborough District Council) Staff Time (backfilling)	£10,000	£8,000
Training & Roll Out of New Functionality	£0	£4,000
TOTAL	£125,000	£125,000



2.0 Lessons Learned

As part of developing guidance for best practice, we want to understand the lessons learned at each stage of your project. We know that these project stages might look different for different projects so feel free to edit the table to reflect your particular experience. Please provide as much detail as possible as these insights will be integral to developing national best practice guidance. Where applicable, please share links or attachments to supplementary evidence such as a copy of your business case, supplier briefs etc. These can be included in the appendices at the end of the report.

Project stage or milestone	Approach - what process was undertaken?	Lessons Learned
Getting started: Developing the business case/gaining organisational buy-in to apply for Round 2 funding.	The inhouse senior stakeholder and project team member developed an internal business case that had to be approved by departmental Directors, CEO & Council members.	Having full support from Directors, the CEO and Cabinet Members meant that we enabled early buy-in & smoother internal approval
Procurement: developing supplier brief and project budget	As we were already working with G-Cloud approved PropTech suppliers (JDi Solutions & Blue Fox) in operating and managing our planning software (OpusConsult & OpusMap). HDC (Harborough District Council) took the cost-effective route and prepared the project brief internally with support from the suppliers.	Although we took a cost-efficient approach of working with our existing suppliers, the tight timelines for delivery did erode capacity for scoping the brief and budgeting expenditure. We should have planned for more reflective periods to take stock and refocus.
Procurement: finding and appointing a supplier(S)	HDC (Harborough District Council) took the cost and time efficient route of appointing our existing suppliers who are on approved G-Cloud framework to undertake the delivery of this project. The goodwill of the suppliers meant that they were on board from day 1 of the project, even before the contract was in place.	Although we appointed our existing suppliers it still meant that we had to draft a new G-Cloud contract which would be fully compliant with GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations). This still required considerable scrutiny by colleagues in Procurement, IT and Legal. Completion of the



		contract with the lead supplier at an earlier time would have allowed more hours to be spent on the transformation of the platform.
Onboarding: PropTech suppliers, additional consultants, and internal teams	The authority had minimal difficulties in on-boarding existing suppliers as they were keen to work further to enhance the OpusConsult & OpusMap into a more user-friendly digital platform	It would have been more beneficial to appoint the contracted PM earlier and budget for more hours each week. Earlier buy-in from internal teams would have been helpful. The oversight and governance groups could have had fewer members. DULHC's G-Cloud contract expert provided advice and support.
Campaign Development: developing marketing and engagement strategies. This might also include developing survey questions, platform content, or user research.	The Project Manager worked with the Head of the Communications Team and jointly prepared the marketing and communications plan. The Project Manager provided the time scales and the marketing plan. The Head of Communications developed the overarching strategy, press & social media releases / bursts.	The authority modified its final marketing campaign out of respect for the passing of HM The Queen. More targeted media releases at an earlier stage to ethnic minorities and younger people (schools & colleges) could have been beneficial. We could have used social media at an earlier point to announce the digital platform to engage with the planning department.
Campaign launch and management: working with suppliers to 'go live', attending in person / hybrid events, troubleshooting tech issues	The going live date had to be moved slightly due to the tight deadlines and limited capacity of the developers to undertake inhouse testing and HDC (Harborough District Council) user testing. Many virtual "teams" meeting were held during the testing period for cost efficiency and time saving reasons. Several matters were addressed via these constructive and interactive meetings. Two meeting per week were held during the 3 weeks leading up to going live. There were a	We could have benefited for having more time for in house user testing and making use of focus groups for feedback on both the new digital platform, plus also the 'Open Space' questions and its drop-down list and structure. The project would have benefited from a greater campaign on social media more in advance of a published going live date. Internal sign-off to go live with the engagement was done in stages to allow for



	<p>couple of technical issues which need to be resolved and the supplier used Git Hub as a method for the Project Manager to post items needing resolving and communications back.</p>	<p>in-house testing to be completed and resolve outstanding issues.</p>
<p>Campaign wrap-up: Closing campaigns, running analysis, agreeing next steps</p>	<p>There were social media bursts and reminders on the authority’s website that the engagement exercise was ending soon and to encourage people to use this opportunity to make their voice and opinions know. Following the end of the engagement exercise messages of thanks and appreciation were posted on the Council's website against the ‘Open Spaces’ page and these messages were also shared in newsletters issued by the Council, Towns & Parishes, plus on social media outlets.</p>	<p>The end date was a week or so after the re-opening of the schools and colleges after the summer break; the numbers of younger people engaging was lower than it would have been if the engagement exercise were held during normal term time. A much longer lead up to the start of the engagement would have been helpful, preferably a month before school summer holidays. Allowing the engagement exercise to run until mid-end of September coupled with multiple media bursts during the closing month could have attracted a younger audience.</p>
<p>Feedback loops: e.g., developing opportunities for ongoing feedback from the community, following up with people who responded to the consultation, sharing consultation insights with key stakeholders</p>	<p>The whole ‘Open Spaces’ engagement exercise allowed respondents to make free text comments and give feedback which was followed up by an email back from the planning department. The first stating that their enquiry will be resolved within a few days. The next e-mail within the specified time was a direct response to matters raised. The insights and learnings from this engagement exercise will be shared with key stakeholders with sharing of this this report in strict confidence. This engagement exercise was about testing the new user-friendly mobile device digital platform and there will be a separate</p>	<p>Less than 3% of the total respondents made negative comments about the engagement.</p> <p>Perhaps participants should have been asked the question if this was the first-time they had engaged with the planning department? A key objective is to strike the right balance to keep participants engaged and reducing uptake by asking too many questions that take up more of their time.</p>



	opportunity for the community to ongoing feedback about digital consultation with the planning department.	
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Final Reflections: Where applicable, please also respond to the following questions:

- Looking back at this project, was there additional guidance or support from DLUHC or other stakeholders that would have been helpful to work through these and other stages of delivery?
 - * It would have been helpful to have had a nationwide marketing/awareness campaign by DLUHC from the date the PropTech funding was approved regarding the Government’s objective to transform public engagement and communication with the local authorities on planning matters via digital platforms. This could have included the list of local authorities involved with trialling and testing the new digital platforms and the subject areas.
 - *If DLUHC/other government departments had a portfolio of emojis, more digital depictions e.g. more flowers, trees, walking pathways, then local authorities could potentially use these in their digital platforms without having to pay additional sums for creating them or paying licence fees for their use to third party developers. This would be most cost effective for DLUHC and all the other Governmental Departments especially as there is a growing push for digital platforms as a means of engagement with the public and modernisation.

Please see annex 3, Project Delivery Plan & annex 4, Comms Plan



3.0 Pilot Outcomes

- **Proposed Outcomes:** What outcomes were you aiming to achieve? To what extent were these achieved? What were the main outcomes (quantitative and qualitative) of your project? **(Please use the attached spreadsheet to detail this further).**

- **Baseline data:** what existing data did you use to compare your project's outcomes to? Did you review or change this approach at any point? How does your baseline data compare with the outcomes achieved in your Round 2 PropTech project?

*The baseline comparison that we used for this exercise was the latest HDC (Harborough District Council) "Open Spaces" Strategy Consultation, which was undertaken in 2015, although not directly comparable it served as a basic measuring yardstick. (Copy of consultation statistics attached in annex 5)

*The key data we used for comparison was the number of responses received during the traditional consultation methods deployed (with email responses) vs the digital engagement on 'Open Spaces.'

- **Measurement challenges:** how did you measure the impact of your outcomes? Did you have any challenges assessing the impact of your project? If so, in what ways?
- **Demographics:** (if applicable) how did you collect demographic data as part of your consultation? If so, please share any demographic breakdown of consultation respondents (e.g., age, gender etc). How does the demographic of your PropTech funded consultation compare with previous consultation responses?

*We did not undertake any demographics profiling; in the past, public hesitancy to register details and providing data about demographics. The purpose of this engagement exercise on 'Open Spaces' was to test the ease of use of this digital platform and to gain a true and fair reflection of the adoption of this new method of engaging the public on planning matters.

- **Cost effectiveness:** did a digital engagement approach save time or resources compared with traditional engagement approaches? If so, how was this measured?

* The numbers of responses were greater for the digital method deployed (198 responses from 73 respondents) even though much more money and time (longer period of consultation and lead up to the consultation process) was spent on the traditional consultation method (50 responses from 12 respondents) (venue costs, printed materials, power point presentations, etc) plus weeks of several planning officers' time over and above what was expended using the digital platform. (Appendix 5; Baseline Consultation)



4.0 Community Feedback

- **Summary of community consultation:** what was the focus for engagement and what questions were asked? How were these questions decided? Were there any surprises (either in responses and/or who responded)?

*The engagement exercise was on 'Open Spaces' on the basis that the largest number of the public would have at some point in their lives made use of public (some private) land which is accessible for resting, playing, walking or exercise (parks, sports grounds, church yards, cemeteries, and general spaces for flora, fauna and wildlife habitation), thus garnering the most interest.

*A positive decision was made to not only ask questions about the existing 'Open Spaces' but to also allow the public to make their own suggestions on potential new sites to create further 'Open Spaces' to capture the public views and needs with regards to additional space.

*As the key purpose of this exercise was to test the digital platforms use of technology, the option for the public to suggest additional 'Open Spaces' made use of the ArcGIS Mapping (OpusMap) ability to allow the public to plot an area on the HDC map and submit that location, its size and shape along with their comments / rationale for this additional space.

*To keep the exercise short enough and to maintain the attention of the public and take up the minimal amount of time (estimated to be between 5 and 8 minutes) only 5 questions were asked; -

1. What do you like about the existing site? Followed by a drop-down list of 10 possible answers (to aid quick response) plus a 'other' tick box; this box allowed free text to be entered by the public and submitted.

2. What improvements, if any, would you suggest? Followed by a drop-down list of 9 possible answers (to aid quick response) plus a 'other' tick box; this box allowed free text to be entered by the public and submitted.

3. Why did you suggest this site? Followed by a drop-down list of 11 possible answers (to aid quick response) plus a 'other' tick box; this box allowed free text to be entered by the public and submitted.

4. What proposed usage would you suggest? Followed by a drop-down list of 12 possible answers (to aid quick response) plus a 'other' tick box; this box allowed free text to be entered by the public and submitted.

5. How easy was this digital platform to use? Followed by a score of 1 to 5 with emoji plus comments box about experience using this consultation. (See Appendix 7 for public response data about digital platform user friendliness)

- **Summary of community responses:** what were the key themes and learnings from the consultation?



*Major learning points were all positive around the ease of use of the new digital platform from handheld devices as well as the traditional computer.

The ability of the digital platform to provide information about restrictions / constraints and policies affecting any suggested new 'Open Space' site which the public had been able to draw on the map. A great innovation in providing the public with interactive communication and information that they would not typically know. The greatest benefit of this project is potentially the saving in terms of time spent on analysis and providing bespoke feedback. Historically the planning officers would have to research and find all policies affecting that proposed site and email / write back to the public, all of which would take considerable time and resource and oversight by managers to ensure a consistent approach. The delay in communication and supplying of information to the public is likely to be perceived negatively by many in the local community.

- **Delivering on feedback:** how has the community feedback shaped the project delivery plans? How has this validated, challenged, evolved key assumptions and potential project outcomes?

*HDC took the decision to capture the feedback on the digital platform during the engagement live time and all comment which would enhance the capability of the software (OpusConsult) and GIS mapping (OpusMap) would be feedback to the supplier, and they would work on further refining the software or GIS mapping which would come on stream once fully tested by both the developers and HDC user testing teams.

*Therefore, the feedback did not actually change the project delivery plan with regards to the 'Open Spaces' engagement exercise as part of PropTech2. However, the feedback validated our assumptions that it could be used to deliver legacy outcomes and benefits to OpusConsult & OpusMap for not only HDC but also all other local authorities which use the same system to manage their planning department functions. (See attached detailed report produced by our suppliers of legacy outcomes and benefits in annex 6)

5.0 Conclusions and Policy Reflections

- If you could re-start this project what, if anything, would you do differently?



*If HDC were to re-start this project we would have preferred to avoid the schools, colleges and universities long summer holidays which not only impact the younger members of the community but in many cases affects the capacity of parents and legal guardians to engage in any consultation or engagement exercise. This is especially significant for Leicestershire where the school year finishes much earlier than surrounding counties, reflecting the long-standing association with the textile and shoe industries across the county.

*Advance notice to the successful bidding local authority prior to the start of the project would be highly beneficial to allow time to plan the project and the digital outreach programmes within the community and recruit additional staff.

The time period to deliver this project should ideally be extended by a couple of months to enable the appointment of a Project Manager earlier in the process This would expedite the scoping of work required for the suppliers and allow more time for gradual refinement and testing of the software.

- What longer-term changes, if any, do you expect to make as a result of this pilot?

*Due to the positive feedback and the greater numbers of the public willing to participate in this trial engagement exercise, the authority sees the potential for more planning related activities and communications with the planning department to be via the digital platform. Normally planning officers spend considerable time on preparation and subsequent analysis of responses. Automation and / live interactive maps for use by the public can be applied to other subject matter which could be of potential use to residents, visitors and businesses.

*To roll out a programme of more if not all forms and submissions for planning related queries and applications electronic and digitised.

*Make all future public consultations fully electronic via the OpusConsult & OpusMap platform and deploy a myriad of social media outlets to publicise well in advance and during the consultation alongside the traditional newsletters, public notices and interactive live publicity boards with possibly one physical event, albeit at a smaller scale.

*Use the enhancements to the OpusConsult & OpusMap digital platform to add extra functionality to collect data and information in an enhanced structured manner with more automated actions/constraints to save officer time and help increase the speed in responding back to the public in an efficient and effective manner.

*Make more and better use by breaking down the information shared into bite size chunks to aid public understanding and avoid overloading with too much information at once (keep them engaged).



- What (if any) other stakeholders (outside of those who responded to consultations) do you think should be involved alongside LPAs (Local Planning Authorities) to support long term adoption of digital planning?
 - * A national long-term campaign on a whole wide variety of media (TV & Radio ad campaigns, Government website, and DULHC social media feeds) would promote publicise the Government's commitment and drive to move towards total digital / online planning submissions, consultations, and enquiry methods and away from paper based.
- Policy reflections:
 - Did any existing planning policies limit your ability to achieve your goals for this project?
 - *No
 - *Not necessarily planning polices, but the Local Planning Regulations relating to Local Plan preparation do limit the potential of authorities to depart from conventional consultation arrangements. Are there any policies (national and local) you would like to see changed in the future? If so, how?
 - *Many everyday businesses and entities have already deployed electronic methods of making submissions, enquiries and obtaining information which has helped overcome the resistance to change.
*However, there is a challenge to using innovative digital platforms in relation to local planning due to the highly regulated and complex nature of statutory planning consultations (especially at Regulation 19). This has often created resistance in the community to the requirements to comment on the draft Local Plan in a highly prescribed manner online. Community groups have commented that engaging with the tests of soundness is extremely challenging. .
 - How could DLUHC (Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) better support LPAs (Local Planning Authorities) in the future with the further adoption of digital citizen engagement tools, best practice guidance, or other support?
 - *The pooling of all the PropTech 1 and 2 projects digital / software creations of emojis, Icons depicting things related to planning (trees, wilding, dog walking, seating, housing, schools, medical facilities etc) to be made Crown property and standardized for use by all LPAs on their digital platforms (cost & development efficiency)



*Share the best practice gleaned from PropTech 1 & 2 projects outcomes, delivery methods and software platforms so that it becomes quicker, easier, and cheaper for wider digital engagement tools.

- If additional funding was available - what do you think future PropTech Fund rounds should focus on delivering / achieving?

*Funding the creation of a wide variety of standardised digital emojis, icons and symbols that can be used to aid the understanding and depiction of planning related functions. Copyright and intellectual property issues would hopefully diminish, allowing more visual tools and symbols to be made available to all local planning authorities. 's as part of their digital platform development. Pictorial depictions can encourage the public to engage more with planning and simplify the communication of complex planning regulations. Long term funding streams would enable in-house skills to be developed and enhanced.

Please use this space to include any quotes from your team about your project. Don't forget to attribute the quote so it is clear whose perspective you are sharing (e.g. 'project team member or 'supplier' etc).

- Quote 1:- **Project** Sponsor; - "The PropTech2 funding has enabled HDC to deliver a significant enhancement to our on-line consultation offer in liaison with our software providers OpusConsult & Blue Fox. It has been an interesting and rewarding project and the enhancements will bring about efficiencies and improvements in the future"

6.0 Additional reflections and feedback for DLUHC (Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities) (optional)

This is a space for you to provide any additional reflections or feedback for the DLUHC team that you prefer not to be published publicly.

- Appendix 8; Staff Time / Efficiency Savings Calculation