Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

PropTech Engagement Fund Round 2

Final Report

December 2022

Walsall Council

Local Planning Authority/ies	Walsall Council
Project Lead(s)	Keith Beech – Director of Communications Marketing & Brand
Senior Stakeholder(s)	Philippa Venables – Director of Regeneration & Economy Simon Tranter - Head of Regeneration, Housing and Economy
Additional Team Members	Bryte Legister – Town Centre Projects Director Neville Ball – Principal Planning Policy Officer Anna King – Corporate Consultation Officer Sam Evans – Communications & Engagement Officer Stevie Cattell – Social Media Specialist
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Executive Summary

Region	West Midlands
LA Rural-Urban Classification Category	Walsall is a metropolitan borough situated in the West Midlands between Wolverhampton and Birmingham. The local authority is Walsall Council (formerly Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council). The Metropolitan Borough of Walsall is based on an amalgamation of two former local government districts, Walsall County Borough and Aldridge-Brownhills Urban District. The estimated population size is 285,500 (ONS, 2019)
Project summary	The objective of this project is to harness new and diverse voices so that community needs are at the centre of Walsall's ambitious regeneration agenda for the borough and the Council's aims for economic growth through housing, employment and commercial activities.
Funding allocated	£120,000
Supplier(s) Appointed	Commonplace
Consultation Topic	Community feedback on plans for the regeneration of Walsall
Consultation Outcomes	Engagement continues on a range of projects including the development of a long term Borough Plan for Walsall. Although still in its early stages, feedback through Commonplace is adding to the overall engagement programme, reaching new audiences and bringing in additional interactions and opinions.
Consultation dates	The digital engagement tool https://walsallsays.commonplace.is went live on 15/09/2222. Engagement, through Commonplace on We Are Walsall 2040 (the Borough Plan) launched on 30/09/2022. Other projects for engagement followed including the M6 motorway Junction 10 improvement scheme, Walsall Town Centre Masterplan and Walsall Active Travel

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1.0 Project Summary

- **Summary:** The aim of this project is to harness new, younger and diverse voices so that community needs shape Walsall's ambitious plans for regeneration. Engagement rates with minority ethnic communities within Walsall, those aged between 16 and 40 and those living in the most deprived areas of the borough have been typically low. The PropTech Engagement Fund has enabled the Council to introduce a new method to engage with these audiences, at their convenience and through their preferred digital devices. The introduction of this new digital approach will complement the existing methods of engagement which are already embedded into the Council's planning and consultation process.

- **Status quo pre-PropTech:** Walsall Council uses a range of online and offline tools, techniques and methods to engage and consult with communities. The Walsall Council website is the content hub, setting out clearly the reasons for consultations and Council protocols while providing access to live consultations [Consultations | Walsall Council](#). Comments on planning applications are encouraged here: [Comment on a planning application | Walsall Council](#). The Council's website attracts in excess of 600,000 views per calendar month. Social media is regularly used to raise awareness of consultations and surveys. The primary social media channels for this purpose are Facebook (18,848 followers), Twitter (35,429 followers) and Linkedin (9,555 followers). Consultation documents are available to download and to view at all libraries in the Borough. Engagement, face-to-face and otherwise, through community associations and in partnership with a network of voluntary sector organisations and businesses provides additional feedback. Even though approx. 30% of the Walsall's population is from a black or minority ethnic background participation rates of these groups in consultations is low. Likewise participation of younger people 16-40 is generally low.

- **Outcomes:** The PropTech Engagement Fund enabled Walsall Council to procure the Commonplace Online Engagement Platform. The platform [Have Your Say Today - Walsall Engagement Hub - Commonplace](#) went live on 15/09/2222. The first projects showcased through the Hub were launched on or by 30/09/22. Early signs of engagement are encouraging. Within the first 3 months, the Hub was seen by more than 1100 visitors. In those first 3 months there were 250 contributors to live projects resulting in 75 subscribers by 15/12/2022. A social media marketing campaign to raise awareness of the Walsall Engagement Hub was launched in November 2022 and has run through until the end of the year. The results of this will follow through future reporting.

- **Opportunities**: Without the funding we would not have been able to gain approval of the business case to procure Commonplace. The PropTech Engagement Fund has enabled us to begin to gather evidence to support the long term use of such a digital engagement tool. The evidence that we are gathering, and will continue to gather through until the end of the contract with Commonplace in September 2023, will help us to identify the progress made towards our aim to engage with new, younger and diverse audiences to help shape Walsall's regeneration.

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- **Funding review:** The funding has enabled us to secure the engagement platform and to raise awareness of it. In addition to the software license, supporting digital marketing campaigns have been secured through the PropTech Engagement Fund. These campaigns will accelerate the uptake of the Hub by raising awareness much more quickly than would have happened with purely organic growth. Digital marketing campaigns that are in place and that will be delivered in the coming months will be targeted towards those audience groups that we are keen to engage with. They will hopefully give us the level of engagement with the platform that we need to measure its success in a robust way.

	Amount Bid	**Amount Spent**
Commonplace Engagement Hub License including content creation	£55,000	£50,000
Social media package add on + audience targeting	£15,000	£5,500 to date
Strategic management, including reporting & evaluation	£45,000	£11,500 to date
Gamification Budget for Local Social Initiative Funding	£1000	£0 to date
Technical Integration Budget	£4,000	£0 to date
TOTAL	£120,000	£67,500

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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 need to reach and engage more effectively with minority ethnic communities, younger audiences and residents living in the most deprived parts of Walsall had already been highlighted. Solutions were being looked for by planning, engagement and regeneration officers. A presentation outlining the issues and sharing what was possible through the use of innovative digital engagement tools was shared with the Council's Corporate Management Team (including the Chief Executive) in the early part of 2022. When we became aware of round 2 of the PropTech Engagement Fund it gave us the opportunity to move this forward more quickly. The bid for funding was developed jointly by engagement, planning and regeneration teams. Key officers were involved from the beginning and Director-level approval was secured before the proposal was drafted.	Those teams who had previously highlighted the need to reach and engage more effectively with minority ethnic communities, younger audiences and residents living in the most deprived parts of Walsall only became aware of round 2 of the PropTech Engagement Fund shortly before the submission deadline. Pre-engagement with senior officers about the issue enabled the speedy approval of the submission but placed the project team under considerable pressure. Cross- Council communication to ensure a better shared understanding of such funding opportunities has since been put in place.

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Procurement: developing supplier brief and project budget	Procurement teams were brought into the project from an early stage enabling the supplier brief to be developed and agreed on time. Information Governance expertise was sought and made available to ensure that the specification would ensure the procurement of a tool that would be compliant with accessibility legislation. IT and members of the web team were part of the process bringing with them their digital expertise. Conversations took place with other authorities that had previously procured similar tools.	This stage went well. Several months beforehand a Council-wide Third Party Spend Board (TPS) had been established by the Director of Commissioning to consider all major purchasing. TPS brings together key officers from all parts of the Council and facilitates a timely sign off procedure.
Procurement: finding and appointing a supplier(S)	We used the G-Cloud Procurement Framework to identify and select a supplier. The selection of keywords from the specification enabled us to identify 5 potential suppliers. Scoring against the set criteria enabled us to short list two preferred suppliers. Commonplace was selected following a robust evaluation process.	The G-Cloud Procurement Framework enabled us to come to our decision more quickly and confidently in the knowledge that all identified suppliers had already been evaluated through the process to select for the framework.
Onboarding: Proptech suppliers, additional consultants, and internal teams	Onboarding was delayed as the Council's Project Manager was unexpectedly taken ill and was away from work for a number of months. His detailed knowledge of the project was missed and it took some time for the project to get back up to speed in his absence. Once this was picked up by others in the team onboarding went well. Commonplace were both supportive and responsive to our questions. An account manager was appointed early by Commonplace to facilitate training and to implement user accounts.	The absence of a Project Manager should not delay a project of this kind but knowledge and materials hadn't been shared as they should have been which made it more difficult for others to move things forward. The use of Sharepoint across the Council is being embedded into programme and project management to reduce the risk of this happening in the future.

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Campaign Development: developing marketing and engagement strategies. This might also include developing survey questions, platform content, or user research.	Our approach has been to develop and publish onto the platform content from a number of different projects. We know residents engage with us for a number of reasons whether that be proximity to a project or the connection that they have to a project through their workplace, interest or community. By publishing a number of projects onto our engagement Hub at any one time the aim is to capture the interest of residents with one or more project and then to ensure effective online navigation from one project to another. Creative and engaging content is key as we aim to move viewers to our Hub from project to project and so contributing to a range of proposals. Showcasing a range of proposals gives the viewer a better sense of the whole, borough-wide picture. This is particularly important to deliver our ambitions to increase engagement with our plans to regenerate the borough.	Whilst delivering this approach we have learnt that smaller, short term surveys and projects that in themselves may appear to be low priority can have a considerable impact. For example we published onto our Hub a survey on bonfire celebrations before and immediately after 5 November. This was hardly core or critical to our ambition to raise engagement with our regeneration programme but we found, because of the topicality of the survey, that it attracted many new viewers to the platform. The survey attracted 88 comments. The involvement of communications and marketing staff in the project team enables us to spot these opportunities to encourage new viewers to the platform.
Campaign launch and management: working with suppliers to 'go live', attending in person / hybrid events, troubleshooting tech issues	Build up to launch was managed remotely with workshops and 1 to 1 meetings with Commonplace over Microsoft Teams. Development of the Hub and its homepage was done hand in hand with our Commonplace account manager. We decided on a soft launch on the Hub homepage to be followed soon after with the	Commonplace had worked with a number of Councils prior to working with Walsall. Their experience was invaluable as they were able to better anticipate our needs and resolve our challenges. Looking forward the opportunity to work with a small number of providers who are experienced in working with councils will, I believe, deliver best outcomes.

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	launch of projects. This enabled any teething problems to be resolved before we went live with our engagement content.	
Campaign wrap-up: Closing campaigns, running analysis, agreeing next steps	n/a – the project is still in its early stages.	n/a
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	We are still in the early stages of this project in Walsall but the first 3 months have been encouraging. Of late we have launched a social media marketing campaign which will raise awareness of the platform. We will repeat this in early 2023. We are developing a dialogue with those who subscribe with the tool and alerting them to new projects as they come on line. We are also entering into conversations with partner organisations to begin to share learnings and to show the potential of a tool such as Commonplace as we consider place-based engagement for Walsall going forward.	
Other?		

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Final Reflections: Where applicable, please also respond to the following questions:

- How did you conduct community outreach (digital and/or in person)? What approach, including timelines, budget, and tools were adopted?
- 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?
- What was the primary reason you chose your particular PropTech supplier?
- Were there any wider surprises which surfaced through undertaking the project?

Commonplace was our engagement tool of choice because of its simple, straight forward navigation and its ability to showcase multiple projects at any one time. We have found the content management system easy to use and flexible, enabling us to showcase a range of content including text, images and video links. Commonplace fits our multichannel approach. It won't replace feedback and consultation techniques that are well-established through the Council's website, social media and face-to-face, but instead will complement them.

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3.0 Pilot Outcomes

- **Proposed Outcomes:** The aim of this project is to harness new, younger and diverse voices so that community needs shape Walsall's ambitious plans for regeneration. Engagement rates with minority ethnic communities within Walsall, those aged between 16 and 40 and those living in the most deprived areas of the borough have been typically low. The project in Walsall is still in its early stages. The engagement platform was launched in the middle of September with the first projects going live on or around 30 September. Initial results are encouraging:

  o There have been 1175 views of the platform in its first 3 months
  o We have received 244 contributions to date
  o 75 people have subscribed to the Hub
  o 7 projects have been published on the platform so far

- **Baseline data:** We are in the process of drawing up baseline/comparative data to enable us to evaluate the project. It is too early into the project to draw conclusions.
- **Measurement challenges:** The project in Walsall is still in its early stages but we are finding the reporting tools available to us within Commonplace are enabling us to effectively track engagement with the Hub.
- **Demographics:** The project in Walsall is still in its early stages we plan work with our community partners to carry out qualitative research into the effectives of the Hub as an engagement tool to reach our target audiences. This focus group activity will take place in Q2 of 2023.
- **Cost effectiveness**: It is too early into the project to draw conclusions.

4.0 Community Feedback

- **Summary of community consultation:** The aim of this project is to harness new, younger and diverse voices so that community needs shape Walsall's ambitious plans for regeneration. Our approach has been to develop and publish onto the platform content from a number of different projects. By publishing a number of projects onto our engagement Hub at any one time the aim is to capture the interest of residents with one or more project and then to ensure effective online navigation from one project to another. The project in Walsall is still in its early stages but early results show us that people are viewing the platform in significant numbers. As we receive more user data we will be cross-referencing those who subscribe to the Hub with those who regularly engage with our more established channels.
- **Summary of community responses:** The new engagement Hub has been well-received so far, both internally and externally. Feedback tells us that viewers find it easy to use. Content they tell us is engaging but more visuals are requested for every project that we place onto the Hub so we are learning that it is this type of content that works particularly well on hand

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held devices.
- **Delivering on feedback:** The project in Walsall is still in its early stages but we are building in the ability for feedback to shape the project as it continues
- **Community testimonials:** not currently available

5.0 Conclusions and Policy Reflections

- This report comes at an early stage for the Walsall project so it's too early to draw conclusions. Although early signs are encouraging we need to remain object and allow the data that we receive in the coming months shape the way that we engage going forward.
- Longer term we know that we need to improve the way that we engage with our ethnic minority communities, with our younger residents and those who live in the most deprived parts of Walsall. Going forward we know that we will require a wide range of engagement techniques and we know that digital engagement will play an important part in this. The data will tell us in the coming months whether the Commonplace Engagement Hub can help us to achieve our ambitions.
- We are now entering into conversations with partner organisations to begin to share learnings and to show the potential of a tool such as Commonplace as we consider place-based engagement for Walsall going forward. Our local NHS partners are looking at similar digital tools and there is a desire from all parties to share experiences and to work collaboratively in order to find solutions to reach and engage with all communities
- Walsall has big ambitions for 2023 and beyond. This year we have launched the We Are Walsall 2040 programme [Vision for the future - We are Walsall 2040 | Walsall Council](#) which shape the long term borough plan. The PropTech Engagement Fund has enabled us to develop a new digital engagement Hub to support this along with other regeneration projects. In 2023 we will also begin the process of developing a Local Development Plan for Walsall. Our ambition is to utilise the engagement Hub for this purpose and to continue to use the Hub beyond its current license (funding permitting)

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
- Quote 2
- Quote 3
- Etc

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6.0   Additional reflections and feedback for DLUHC (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.

7.0   Appendices (delete this section if not applicable)