PropTech Innovation Fund – Case study 4

# How the adoption of digital tools reduced officer time spent analysing consultation responses

DIGITAL PLANNING

Department for Levelling Up, Housing & Communities

# How the adoption of digital tools increased the number of responses to planning consultations

## THE CHALLENGE

Local authorities have reported that gathering and analysing consultation responses, as well as providing bespoke feedback to respondents, is traditionally a time consuming and resource intensive process. It typically involves extensive manual data entry, analysis and administration, which following a nine month consultation period, can take up to 450 days of officer time to process each consultation. The lack of feedback loops also means that communities have limited visibility of how their input influences decision-making. This can lead to frustration and reduced trust in local authorities' budgetary decisions.

This case study explores the impact of pilots across Round 2 of the DLUHC PropTech Innovation Fund on reducing officer time and resources in three local authorities, Harborough District Council, West Oxfordshire District Council and Stevenage Borough Council. Their projects explored how digital tools and technologies could streamline processes, automate data collection and analysis and facilitate more efficient communication channels between communities and local authorities.

# Harborough District Council



## THE PROJECT

Harborough District Council received funding from the DLUHC PropTech Innovation Fund to encourage greater public engagement in their planning consultations. The council aimed to make their existing planning software more user-friendly enabling a broader range of community voices to be heard.

## THEIR APPROACH

Harborough District Council worked with their existing technology software partners OpusConsult and Opus Maps to enhance their digital platform. To improve accessibility and user experience, the digital tool was made accessible on handheld devices, and layout and formatting changes were implemented including introducing innovative question styles such as Likert scale representations and tick box selection answers.

Additionally, the platform was also transformed to provide interactive information about planning restrictions, constraints and policies. The introduction of automated constraint searching proved to be a significant innovation, offering efficiency gains.

Results became more instantaneous and automated, thanks to the use of spatial data and additional field types. For example, it became easier to determine if a site was located in a flood zone. Furthermore, the implementation of secondary ID fields allowed the reuse of the same form across multiple subjects, streamlining processes.

## RESULTS

Harborough District Council emphasised the significant advantages of this piloted approach, stating "The greatest benefit of this project is potentially the saving in terms of time spent on analysis and providing bespoke feedback… it's envisioned that on average officer efficiency saving would be around 2 to 2.5 hours per week".
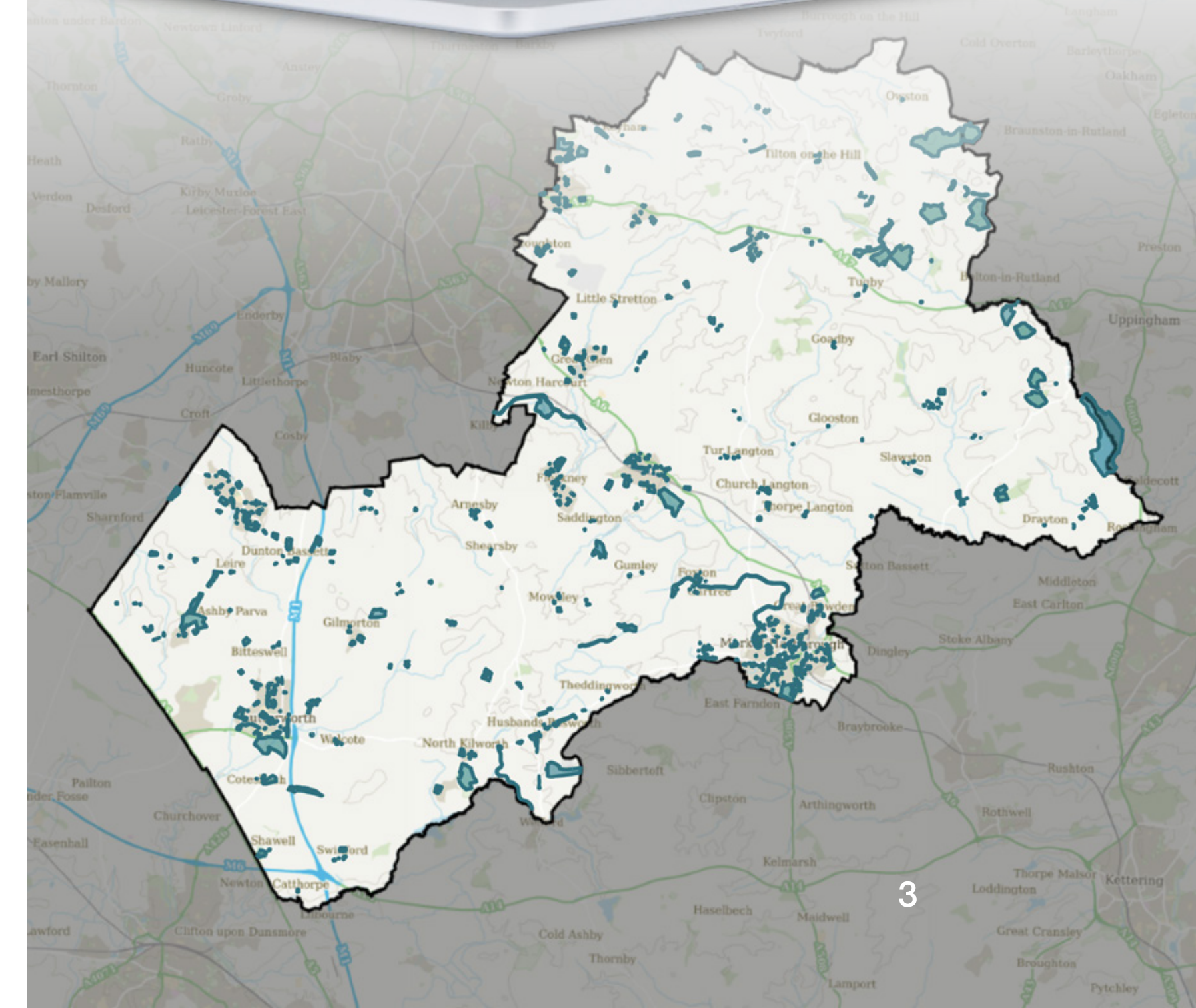
# West Oxfordshire District Council

## THE PROJECT

West Oxfordshire District Council aimed to implement a new digital engagement platform to create a more transparent, engaging and interactive approach towards the identification of community infrastructure priorities and funding opportunities.

## THEIR APPROACH

To achieve these goals, the council designed map-based and gamification elements, empowering individuals to use a simple "slider" tool to express their preferences for allocating available infrastructure funds on the Commonplace digital platform. Strong visual content and design and the use of simple language were employed to engage a diverse audience.
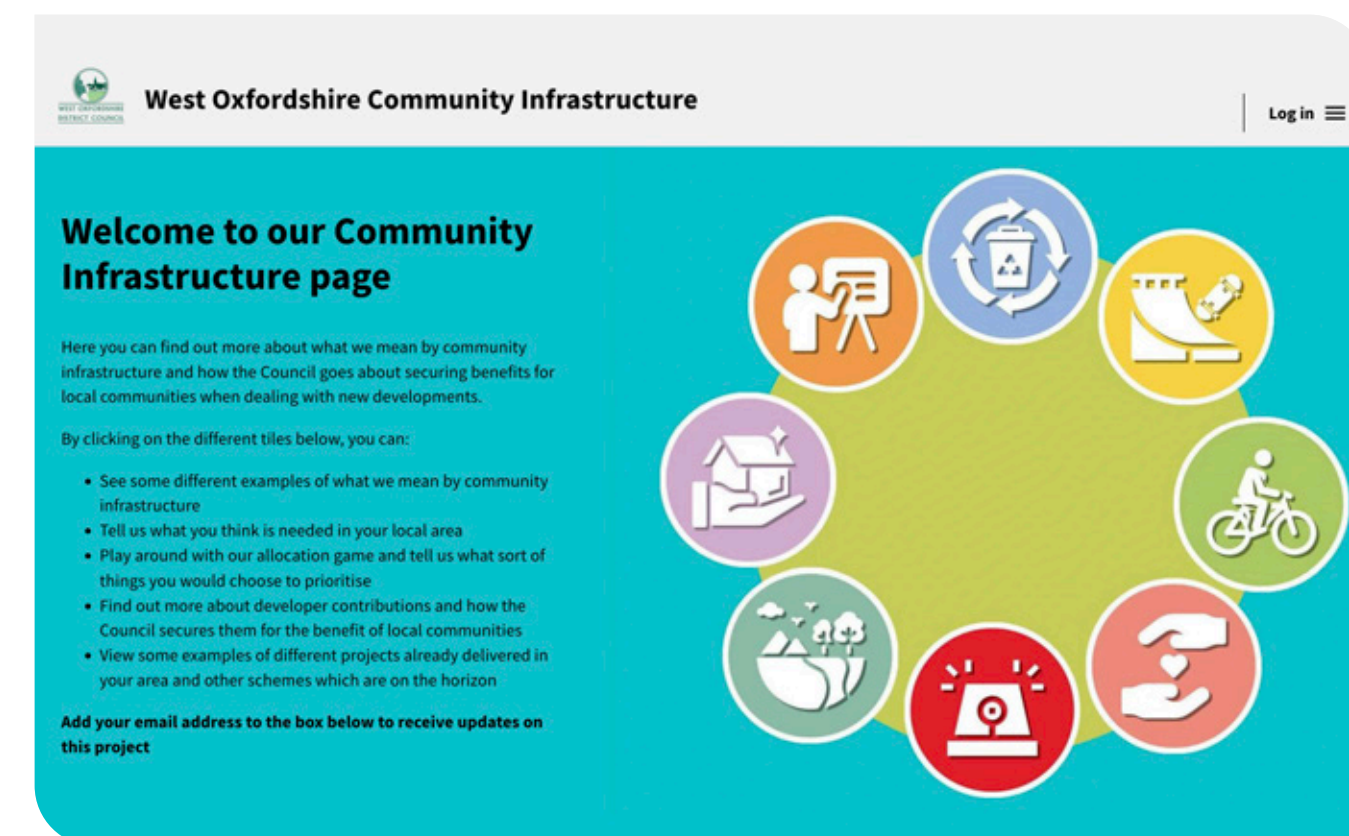
## RESULTS

The combined methods resulted in significant resource savings despite a large increase in consultation responses. The council witnessed a shift in consultation feedback methods with only 20% of responses received through letters and emails, previously the significant response methodology. The council stated "This has saved us weeks, even months [of officer time]. We estimate that this change has resulted in a 40% reduction in officer time required to manually input this information".

Furthermore, analysis of responses became quicker, more efficient and provided the council with robust, transparent and up-to-date understanding of local community development priorities. For example, the data collected through the interactive map where users could pinpoint and express their needs in specific areas will be used alongside other evidence collected to support the council's forthcoming Local Plan review. This will be used to help shape the future growth and development of the district until 2041.
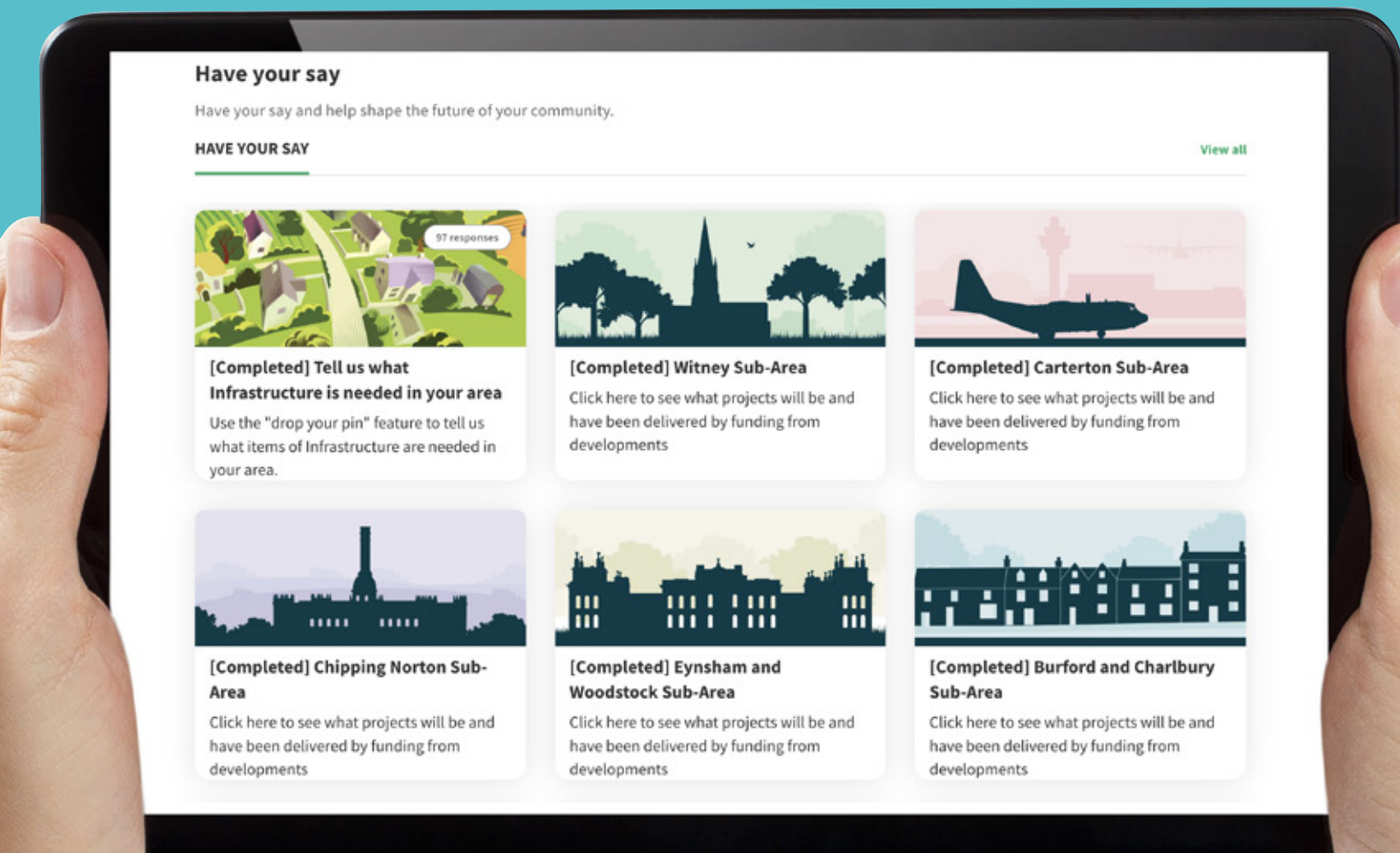
# Stevenage Borough Council

## THE PROJECT

Stevenage Borough Council recognised the opportunity digital tools presented to engage the community in the planning process. The council aimed to use funding received from the DLUHC PropTech Innovation Fund to explore digital solutions which could be the building blocks of an ongoing engagement cycle which would enable a cooperative relationship with local communities.

## THEIR APPROACH

Stevenage Borough Council partnered with Novoville on their Co-operative Neighbourhoods Programme to gather feedback on what residents would like to highlight within their local neighbourhood. The council used a hybrid approach, with Novoville's digital platform along with face-to-face engagements.

## RESULTS

The adoption of digital tools as part of a hybrid engagement approach resulted in significant improvements in community involvement and resource efficiency. Previous consultations which had minimal digital elements required approximately 117 hours of officer face-to-face engagement, resulting in 487 consultation responses. Through adopting a hybrid engagement approach in this pilot the council received over 1,900 responses requiring only 40 hours of face-to-face engagement.

The council outsourced analysis to Novoville to save time, whereas historically, council officers would conduct in-house analysis of representations – taking up to 50 hours to analyse 487 responses.

By utilising supplier expertise the council were also able to produce customised reports via a dashboard. This ability to thematically analyse results enabled a more comprehensive understanding of local residents' views.
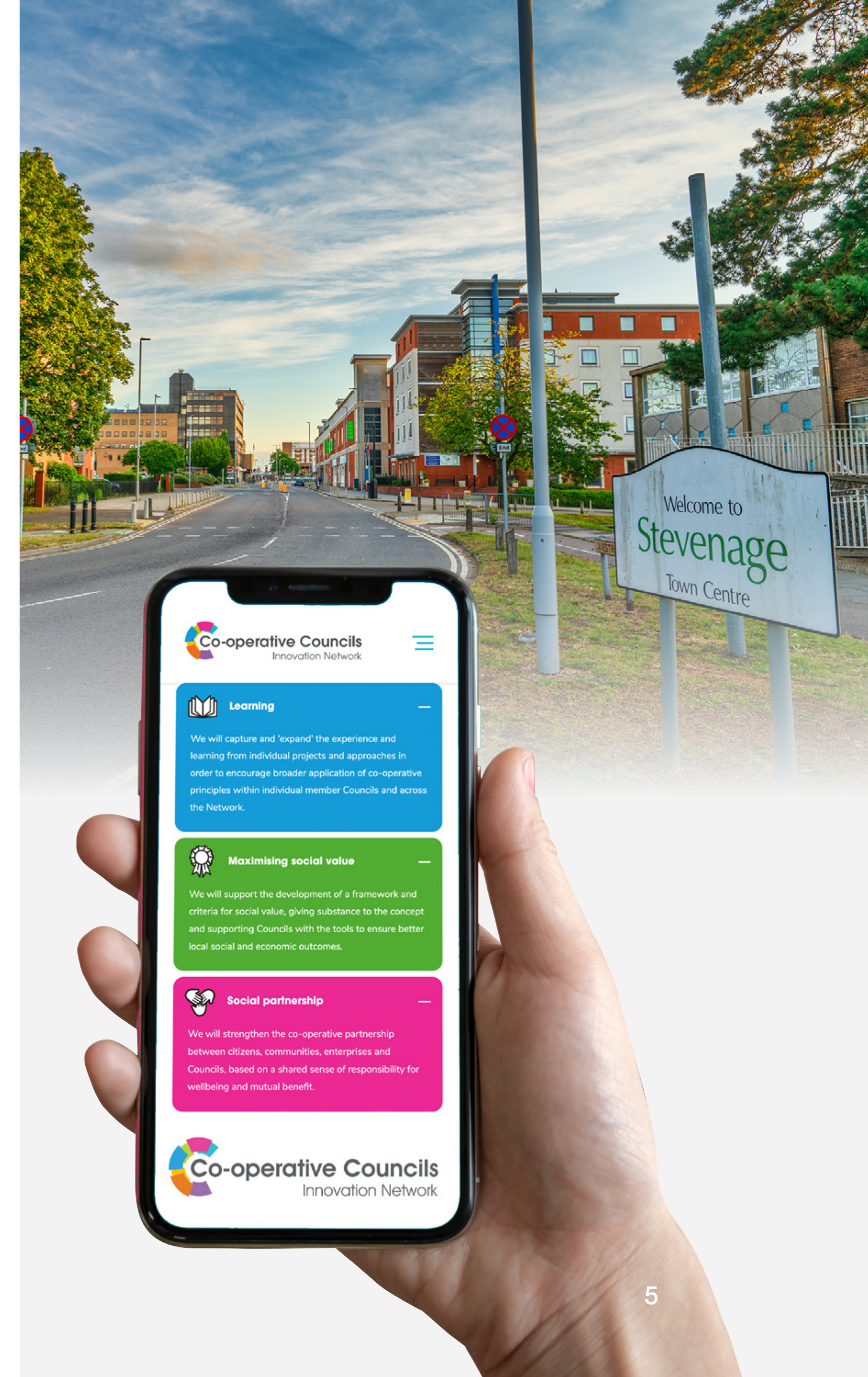
## CONCLUSION

These three pilots spotlight how the adoption of digital tools can lead to positive outcomes in terms of time and resource savings, as well as improving community engagement and transparency. These digital initiatives have successfully streamlined processes and automated data collection and analysis, optimising officer time and resources.

You can find out more about the work of the Digital Planning Programme as we work to use digital to modernise England's planning system by reading our **programme overview document**. A **plain text version of our programme overview is available**. If you require another format please **email the team**.

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