

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



**DIGITAL  
PLANNING**

 Department for Levelling Up,  
Housing & Communities

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

## THE CHALLENGE

Planning consultations are an important method of gathering public input to shape the future development of communities. However, despite the resources invested, consultations are reportedly still difficult to find, access and use, which restricts those that can participate. This is reflected by [less than 1% of local people currently engaging in the plan making process](#) and challenges in getting a more diverse audience to respond to consultations.

Across Round 2 of the PropTech Innovation Fund, local authorities have tried to address this challenge by successfully adopting Property Technology (PropTech) tools to increase the number of consultation responses they received. In this case study we will share the approach taken by [Harlow & Gilston Garden Town, South West Hertfordshire Joint Strategic Plan \(JSP\)](#), and [Plymouth & South West Devon Joint Local Plan](#) to increase their engagement by up to 300% in comparison to previous consultations.

Read on to find out about the different methods of engagement they used.



# Harlow and Gilston Garden Town

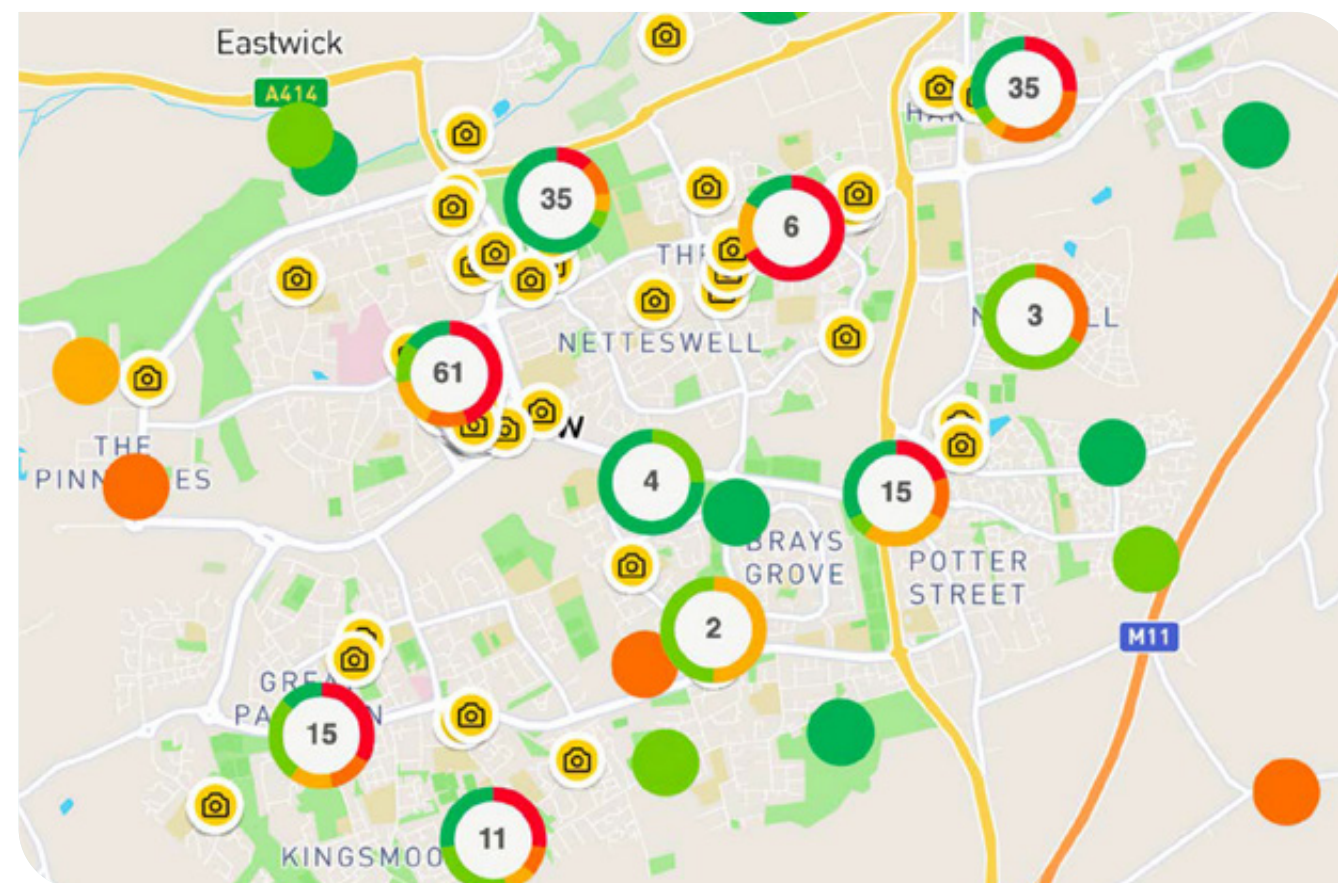
**Local Planning Authority**  
Harlow and Gilston Garden Town

**Project type**  
Quality of life and social value mapping

**Consultation dates**  
July – October 2022

**Funding from PropTech Innovation Fund**  
£228,800

**Link to project report**  
[Harlow and Gilston Garden Town report](#)



PropTech Innovation Fund – Case study 1

## THE PROJECT

**Harlow & Gilston Garden Town** (HGGT) received £228,800 from the fund to better understand the local community value and need in their area through a public digital consultation named “**Your Quality of Life**”. The consultation ran from 15 July to 14 October 2022 and allowed the Garden Town to establish a baseline to monitor change in quality of life and social value through future consultations.

HGGT, where 23,000 new homes are planned, is committed to delivering healthy growth and successful, scalable stewardship arrangements, but needed a way to measure whether these are being achieved, and a platform to enable the community to have a say in those decisions.

Through designing a hybrid engagement programme which combined digital and in-person events, HGGT more than tripled the number of people taking part in conversations about their local area, compared to their previous consultations, enabling community feedback to influence projects and policy now, and in the future.





## THEIR APPROACH

HGGT found that the Quality of Life Foundation’s [monitoring framework](#) was closely aligned, however, they still needed a platform to engage.

HGGT already used several digital solutions in their consultations including surveys, online workshops, video promotions and social media. However they found that this approach usually limited respondents to those who had the time, skills and tools to engage, and it also made collating and analysing the responses a very long and manual process.

To improve this, HGGT worked with [Commonplace](#), [Quality of Life Foundation](#), [Rainbow Services](#) and [Stantec](#) to make their consultation approaches more inclusive and engaging among young people and underrepresented groups.

## Some examples of how they did this include:



Running user research sessions with the Harlow and Epping Youth Councils to understand what engages young people between the ages of 13 and 18 years old.



Employing two local young people under the age of 21 as Community Researchers to support Rainbow Services and community outreach.



Taking part in 49 in-person events, going to places where people already spend time.



Setting up a [new website page](#) for digital consultations with [Commonplace](#), where people can comment and see each other’s comments.

## RESULTS

This more inclusive approach to their consultation helped HGGT triple the number of people that responded to the Your Quality of Life consultation in comparison to two previous HGGT-wide consultations. They received over 7,000 visitors to the Your Quality of Life Commonplace consultation platform, 554 individual respondents, and even doubled the percentage of respondents over the age of 75.

But that’s not all. Community feedback has resulted in change. Following the consultation, independent recommendations from Quality of Life Foundation have been translated into a HGGT Action Plan of projects and proposals, including:

- Updating Communications and Engagement policies
- Establishing a physical Urban Room to enable ongoing in-person engagement
- A Quality of Life monitoring strategy, enabling HGGT to measure stewardship outcomes and quality of life over time
- Progressing a public facing digital dashboard, for accessible and transparent data.

These examples will ensure the local community have more of a say – and more equitably – in proposals and policies.

# South West Hertfordshire

## Local Planning Authority

Five authorities within South West Hertfordshire (SW Herts)

## Project type

Community engagement to support Joint Strategic Plan development

## Consultation dates

September – November 2022

## Funding from PropTech Innovation Fund

£121,750

## Link to project report

[South West Hertfordshire report](#)

## THE PROJECT

The five authorities that make up [South West Hertfordshire](#) (SW Herts) are preparing a Joint Strategic Plan (JSP) working alongside Hertfordshire County Council. The plan will look ahead to 2050 and will address strategic issues across the area.

In Round 2 of the PropTech Innovation Fund they received £121,750 to generate interest, enthusiasm and engagement in a vision for SW Herts that will guide the next stages of the plan. Following on from a successful initial engagement in early 2020 entitled “[SW Herts – Your Future](#)”, the SW Herts authorities identified a lack of local youth engagement in plan making. To address this, their ‘Realising our Potential’ Regulation 18 consultation in 2022 sought to focus on engaging the 18-25 demographic and other hard to reach groups.

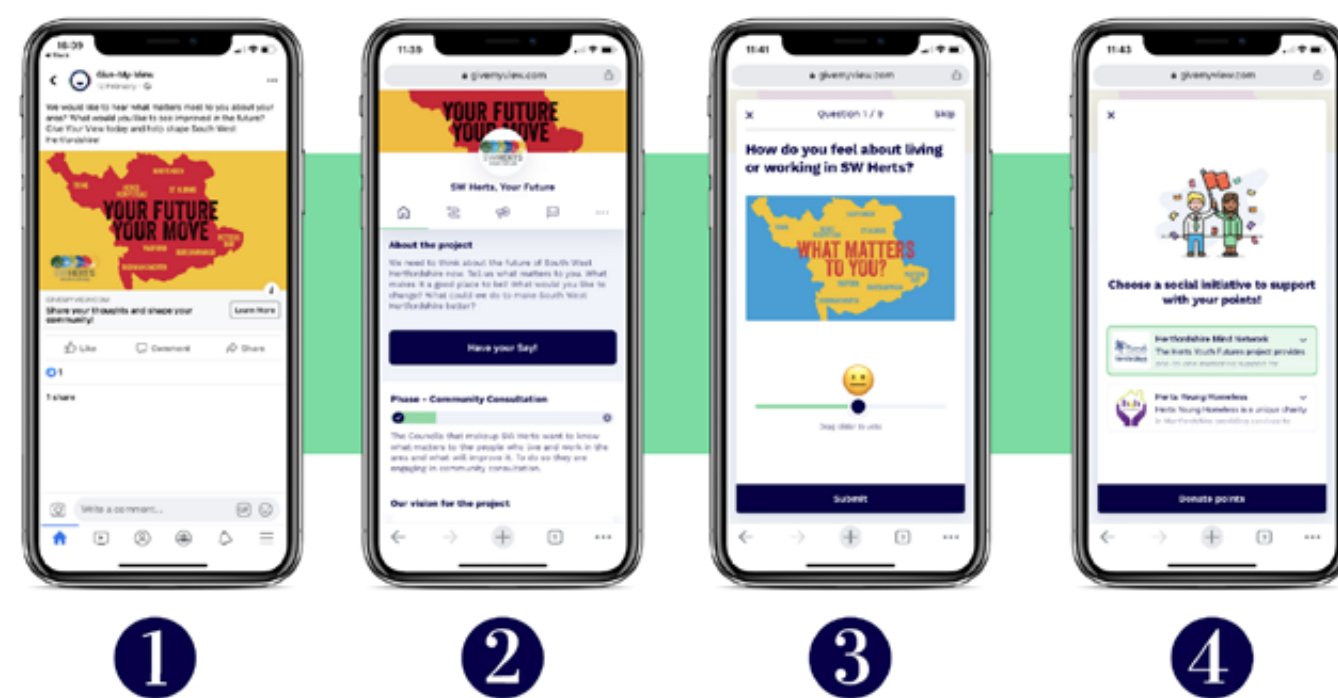
authorities approaching consultations using traditional methods such as in person events, leaflets, lengthy questionnaires, and with limited scope for digital participation.

Taking a strategic and inclusive approach to digital innovation, the SW Herts authorities chose to collaborate with suppliers [Bang the Table](#), [Built-ID](#), [Penknife](#), [Hyas](#) and [Iceni Projects](#) to attempt to increase engagement with hard-to-reach groups. They also leveraged feedback from a newly formed Youth Forum, which was set up to advise the councils on the consultation approach and how to engage the younger demographic. Their approach included an interactive online-based consultation document, with an embedded infographic-led survey that could be completed and submitted online, together with targeted series of distilled ‘quick fire’ polls that were hosted on social media.

## THEIR APPROACH

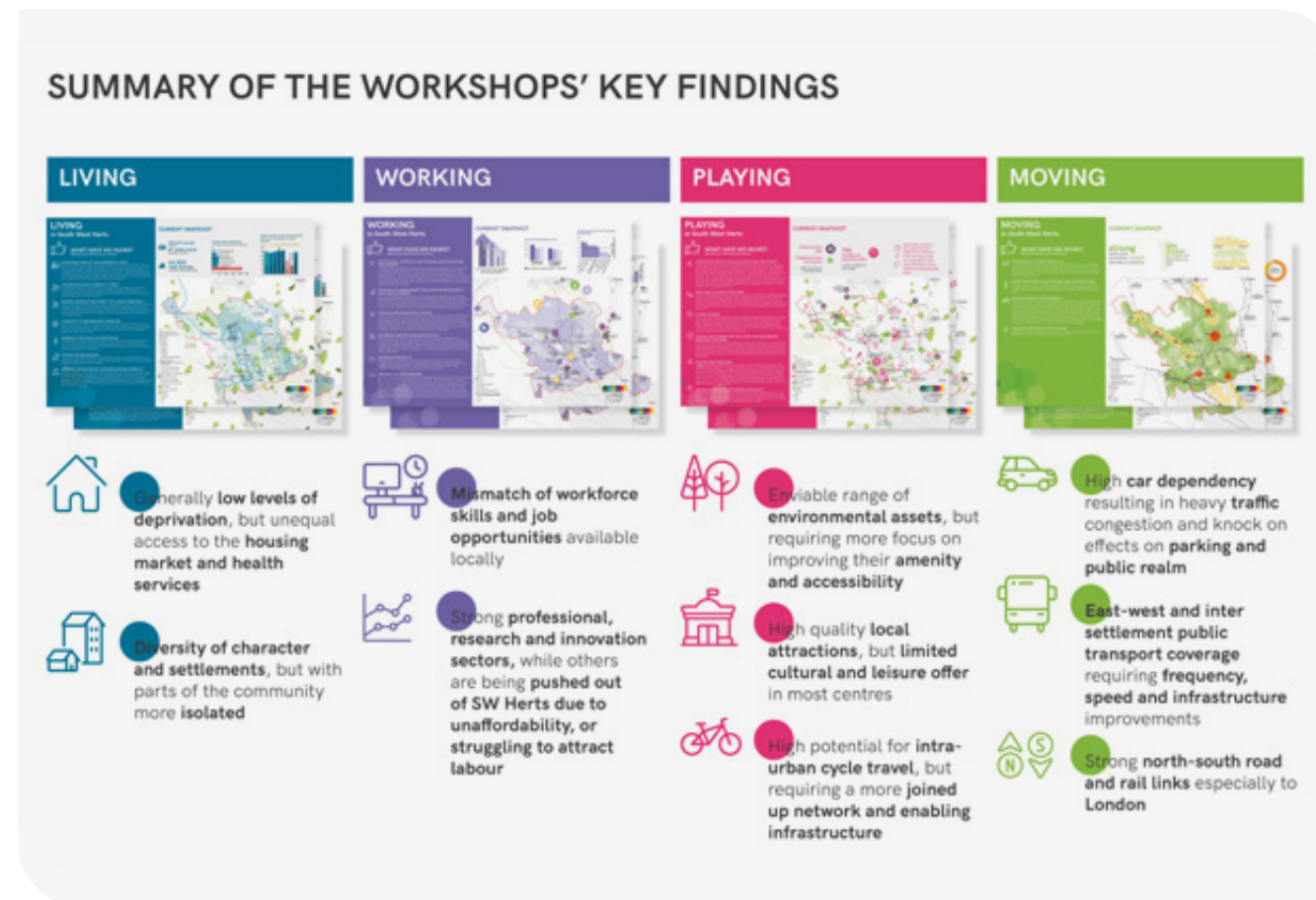
Budget and technological constraints often hinder efficient Local Plan consultations and put a strain on limited local authority resources. As part of their strategy to adopt a more innovative and digital approach to their Regulation 18 consultation, the SW Herts authorities sought to expand and improve on the ‘typical Local Plan’ consultation processes which often result in local planning

A key principle embraced by the SW Herts authorities in designing, and then deploying the consultation strategy was to ensure that all communication was done in a simple and concise way. This included writing the consultation material and associated questions in as simple language as possible to make it accessible to the general public, non-native English speakers, and those with other accessibility needs.



## RESULTS

Compared to the ‘SW Herts – Your Future’ engagement in 2020, the 2022 engagement saw a significant increase in both visits and responses to the consultation. These results are even more positive when considering that the 2020 poll ran for twice the length of the 2022 poll, and the 2020 poll included fewer questions.



Your Future Poll  
**2020**

Realising Our Potential Poll  
**2022**

Total visits to poll

10,647

15,944

Total number of voters

3,291

3,122

Total number of questions answered

15,042

24,734

Pieces of free-text feedback provided

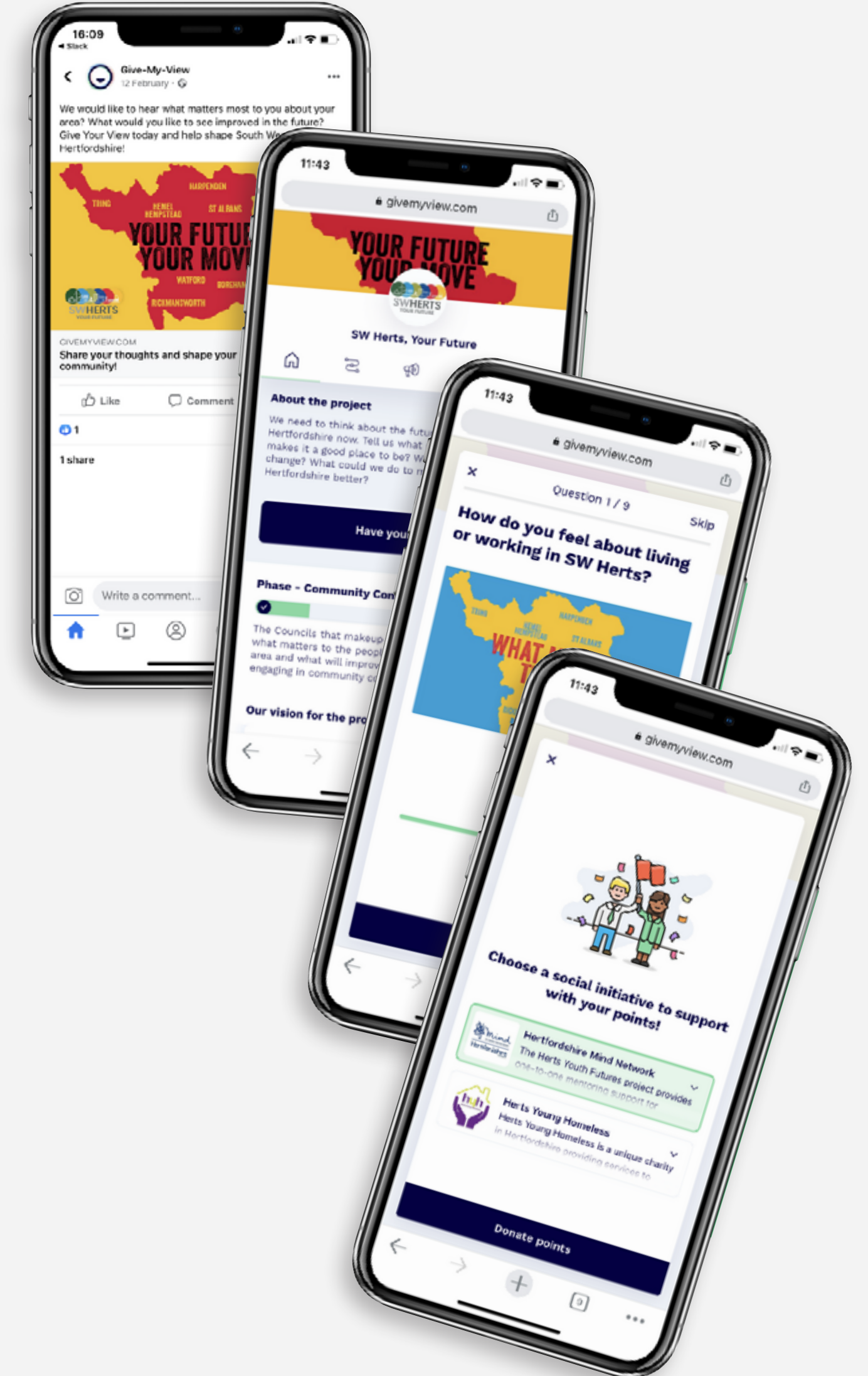
2,082

5,198

Number of voters who left their email address to allow future contact

1,057

1,007



# Plymouth, South Hams and West Devon Joint Local Plan

## Local Planning Authority

Plymouth City Council, South Hams District Council and West Devon Borough Council

## Project type

Community engagement to support Joint Local Plan development

## Consultation dates

July – October 2022

## Funding from PropTech Innovation Fund

£285,000

## Link to project report

[Plymouth, South Hams and West Devon report](#)

## THE PROJECT

The third example of using PropTech to increase community engagement in consultations is [Plymouth City Council](#), [South Hams District Council](#), and [West Devon Borough Council](#). As part of work on their Joint Local Plan (JLP), they wished to improve their understanding of the role of settlements and neighbourhoods throughout their plan area, receiving a total of £285,000 in funding.

This work has helped them to form a basis for future conversations about Neighbourhood and Strategic plans ahead of a review of the JLP in 2024, including informing emerging briefs for evidence work to ensure consultation is informing planning policy from the earliest possible stage.

## THEIR APPROACH

The JLP team worked with [Commonplace](#) and [City Science](#) to run a two-stage process. The first stage involved a consultation across the three partner local authorities using the Commonplace online engagement platform, while the second stage encompassed a quantitative analysis using data from Open Government Licences and emerging GIS tools (Cadence 360) to benchmark results. Their aim was to test whether a digital consultation tool could improve representation rates across the JLP when measured at a parish and ward level and engage residents who had not previously participated in consultation on the JLP.

To make sure that they reached lower represented areas, in addition to their [new consultation platform](#), the pilot team continued to monitor participation throughout the consultation, using data from previous consultations and parish and ward population estimates to measure participation rates live. This proactive approach allowed them to adjust their approach during the consultation to capture responses from less represented areas. It also allowed them to capture demographic data for the first time which will now directly inform future targeted work with less represented demographic groups such as adults under the age of 35.



## RESULTS

Along with increasing the number of visits and responses to the consultation, the JLP learned a number of things, including that:

- Spatial analysis indicated a link between low representation and areas of high deprivation in urban areas
- The digital platform allowed for better segmentation analysis than previous platforms
- Despite offering paper surveys, no groups or parish councils requested them in addition to the digital platform.

In total they received 10,471 visitors to the online consultation, which collected 99.9% of all survey responses.

Plymouth and South West Devon Joint Local Plan Log in

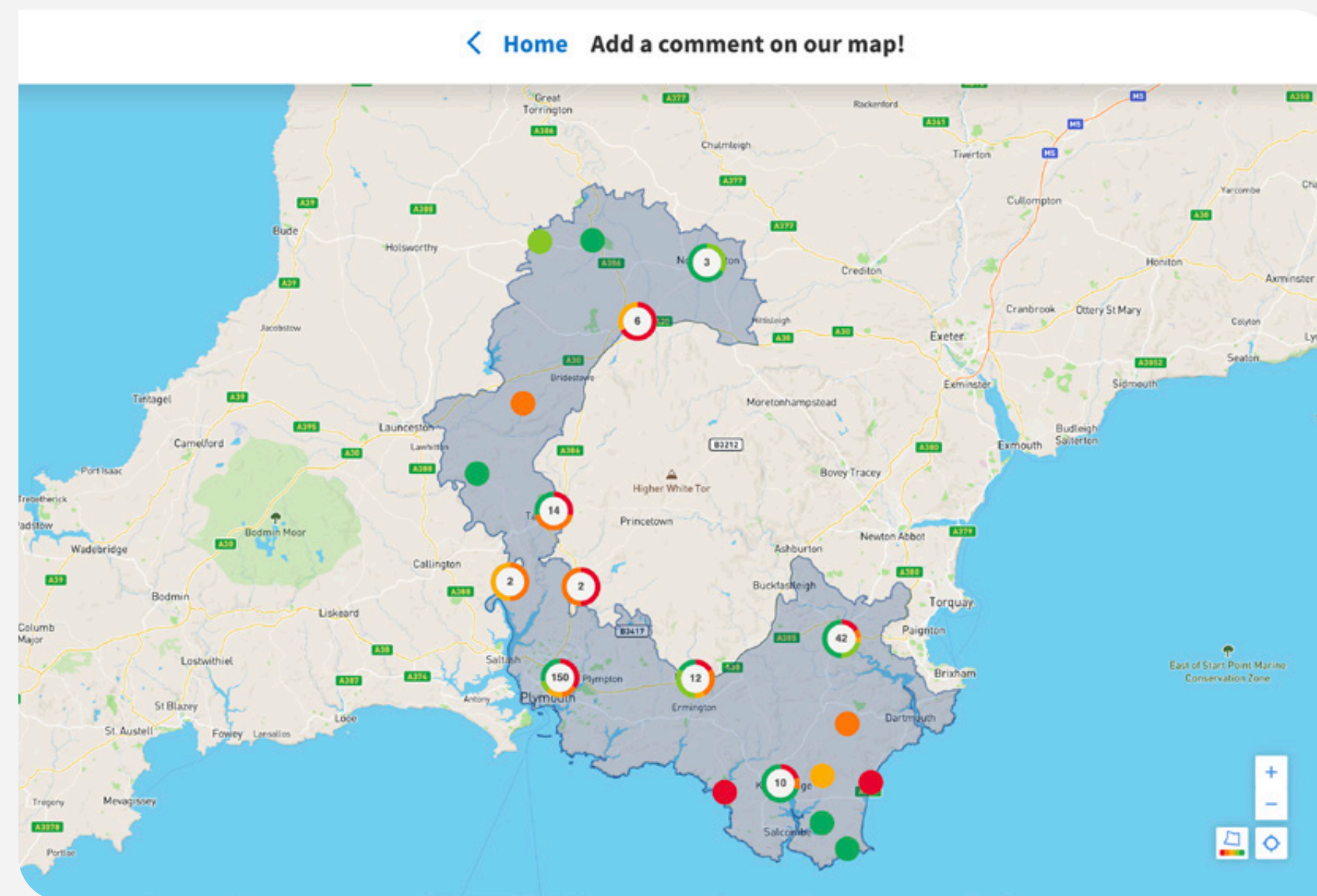

### Be part of the conversation about your neighbourhood

We want to hear how people use their local spaces and places to help us shape the future over the next decade through the Joint Local Plan.

We know people's habits are quickly changing, particularly since the pandemic, so we want to make sure we understand how these changes are affecting local communities and are reflected in our future plans.

Ensure you stay a part of the conversation about the future uses of land in our city, towns, villages and countryside by providing your e-mail address.

You can also get in touch with us at [jointlocalplan@plymouth.gov.uk](mailto:jointlocalplan@plymouth.gov.uk)





## CONCLUSION

These authorities used PropTech in a variety of ways to achieve the same goal, increased community engagement. By leveraging tools like online consultation platforms, GIS maps, and social media, the three pilot projects have all managed to increase responses to their consultations, including from identified hard-to-reach communities. The learnings from these projects will undoubtedly contribute to future advancements in citizen engagement strategies.

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](#).

You can visit our [Digital Planning Case studies page](#) to read more about other funded projects and find out more about [Digital Planning funding offers](#). We also share regular updates about our work on [LinkedIn](#) and [Twitter/X](#) and you can [subscribe to our LinkedIn newsletter 'Doing Planning Differently'](#).

