



THE FUTURE OF ENGAGEMENT

DECEMBER 2020

GRAYLING
creating advantage
ENGAGE

 **RTPI**
Royal Town Planning Institute

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The ability to continue to engage local communities is essential to ensuring the projects that are key to the country's recovery are not stalled – infrastructure, housing, retail, energy, and health.

Introduction

Whilst there are not many benefits to the COVID-19 pandemic, one of the few upsides we have observed is a fierce appetite from both industry and local authorities to look at innovative ways to ensure the conversations needed to support local decision making continue.

This has meant moving conversations that traditionally took place in town halls, libraries and other public spaces, online. To better understand this rapid shift and what it could mean for future decision making we interviewed 24 experts, surveyed 115 industry professionals and sought the views of more than 2,000 members of the general public across the UK.

We found that not only have **the vast majority of organisations (83%) changed the way they engage with communities during the pandemic**, but that almost all organisations (93%) told us that digital engagement would continue to be important after the pandemic. This is an increase of more than 50% (64% prior; 92% post), indicating that many of the changes will become permanent.

Given that just under half (49%) of the general public surveyed told us that having the ability to respond digitally would make them more likely to get involved, **digital engagement might just be the key to unlocking participation from a larger, younger and more diverse cohort**. Having this wide range of opinions is essential to the decision making process, and is something that anyone who has delivered consultation and engagement activity will confirm is sorely needed.

However, the results from our research make it clear that digital channels must only ever be part of the solution. More work is needed to ensure that industry has the right skills and tools to make the most of the digital opportunity and care must be taken to reach those who are digitally excluded, as well as those who simply find face-to-face engagement works better for them. Industry warned us that building a rapport in person should never be replaced, while a fifth of people surveyed told us they still want to attend an in-person event.

This report aims to examine the changes that have occurred and provide practical guidance for anyone looking to deliver consultation programmes during the pandemic and beyond. We want to thank everyone who took part, and we hope you find these insights useful for your future activities.



Rikki Butler, Head of Grayling Engage



Isabella Krabbe, Royal Town Planning Institute

Executive summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way we engage. Society as a whole has switched to using technology at a greater rate than ever before, while businesses, politicians and stakeholders have been forced to rethink their approaches to engagement.

To better understand this shift, and what it might mean for future decision making, we interviewed 24 experts, surveyed 115 industry professionals and sought the views of more than 2,000 members of the general public across the UK.

WHAT INDUSTRY TOLD US

- **The pandemic accelerated a shift to greater use of digital engagement – but some found it easier to adapt than others.** 83% of survey respondents stated that they have changed the way their organisation delivers consultation activity.
- **Digital engagement has been legitimised in the eyes of the public and decision makers.** Nearly half (46%) of those surveyed stated that the expectations of decision making with both local authorities and the public had changed, with most citing the shift to and acceptance of online tools as reasons for this change.
“If we tried to do loads of online engagement before, people may have been suspicious, but now people have seen from their own experience the benefits. Communities have moved online so it feels logical and natural.” - David Radbourne, NHS England
- **However, teams often lack the digital training, skills and tools to be as innovative and effective as possible.** 73% of industry professionals do not believe their teams have the skills and tools they need to deliver effective digital consultation.
- **Online engagement has been embraced but it cannot replace all face-to-face approaches.** Almost all industry survey respondents (94%) stated there will continue to be a role for traditional engagement as this type of activity allows for greater human connections and is more effective at building trust over the long term.

- **Digital engagement offers the opportunity to reach a wider audience, but this isn't always achieved.** While it was acknowledged digital engagement could allow for greater reach with younger demographics, as well as those with travel or access issues, it was conceded that this opportunity was often missed as the work was not done to reach these groups.
- **The pandemic has highlighted the importance of diversity and inclusion in engagement.** 70% of survey respondents stated that there is a danger with going too far with online engagement, as this can result in digital exclusion.
- **The importance of working with established networks and advocates to reach traditionally excluded audiences was highlighted.**
“If you cannot engage someone directly, then ask yourself what networks are they part of and how can such connections help to break down barriers? By thinking ‘out of the box’ and doing a little more research into stakeholder networks, diverse engagement can be achieved, and although this might take a little more time, building relationships with some communities is a journey, not an overnight aim.” - Sue Manns, President of the RTPI 2020
- **Digital engagement tools and content must be designed by diverse teams to ensure inclusivity.**
“Technology and software developers need to be diverse (ethnically, socio-economic etc.), to consider end users and differences.” - David Ogunmuyiwa, the London Mayor’s Design Advocate
- **The pandemic has created a greater focus on the ‘local’ and this is changing the way people engage.** More than 77% of respondents to the industry survey agreed that community spaces and services will need to change after the pandemic.

- **Local people must be involved in the difficult choices that will be required after the pandemic.** When it comes to health services it was acknowledged that the nation will face big challenges after the pandemic and that local communities need to be involved in decisions about the future.
“The public has a huge role to play in helping to identify issues and helping services to develop solutions.” - Benedict Knox, Healthwatch England
- **The pandemic has reinforced the importance of ongoing engagement with local communities.**
“It is about relationship building. To just front load engagement, I don't think is enough. It is just like product design, take a new Apple product, Apple wouldn't just have one focus group at the early design stage and leave it there. Essentially, that is what is being suggested. You just wouldn't do that in product design so why would we think to do it that way for place design? The reality is – people change, they move, individuals and community needs change. People want to know, what's it going to look like? If you don't work in the industry it's difficult to get a view of what things will be like by looking at early stage plans.” – Emma Frost and Victoria Thorns, London Legacy Development Corporation
- **The impact of the pandemic on the speed of local decision making has been varied.** Two in three think the pandemic has slowed down decision making, with some saying they faced significant delays, while others told us that decisions had happened faster than ever before.
- **The pandemic has created opportunities to build stronger relationship with key stakeholders.**
“The shift to working from home has reduced travel time in between meetings and made planning officers more accessible. I hope this stays after the pandemic.” - Riette Oosthuizen, HTA Design

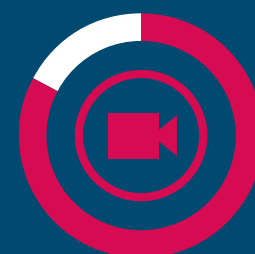
WHAT THE COMMUNITY SAYS

- **Most people are willing to get involved in local decision making.** One in four respondents (28%) took part in consultation and engagement activity over the past 12 months, but a much bigger proportion (63%) feel they could be motivated to participate in the future.
- **The biggest motivator for getting involved in decision making would be if the proposed changes had a direct impact on them, their family or their property or business.** Around one third (33%) said this was the biggest potential motivator for involvement.
- **One in four (26%) respondents cited not hearing about opportunities to participate as the biggest barrier to participation in consultation activity.** This was closely followed by a lack of understanding of how and when they can participate and lack of interest in participating (18%).
- **The move to online tools has opened opportunities for participation in consultation and engagement activity.** Almost half of people (49%) said that having the ability to contribute to local decision making online, as well as in person, would make them more likely to participate.
- **Whether in-person or virtual, people still like to speak to a real person.** On average one in five (20%) respondents who would respond to a public consultation or engagement said being able to attend an event and speak directly to a member of the team, either in person or online, was very important to them.
- **An increased focus on digital could be seen as a plus for some groups in particular.** Over one in five respondents with a disability (21%) said difficulty accessing physical events was a barrier to getting involved in local decision making.
- **The pandemic is likely to change communities and people want their say.** COVID-19's impact on almost all aspects of our lives extends to communities, with more than half (53%) feeling that changes to local places, spaces and services are needed to adapt to life post pandemic – and that local people should be involved in these decisions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Digital engagement is not a nice to have – build it in from the start.** The pandemic has helped to legitimise digital engagement methods and created an expectation that these options will be available after the pandemic. If not offered, organisations could risk criticism for not being fully accessible.
- Digital engagement is essential, but it shouldn't completely replace in-person activity.** While important, digital engagement is not a silver bullet. Without in-person engagement, organisations may struggle to build meaningful relationships with local communities.
- Amplifying activity is as important as delivery.** Regardless of the methods you use to engage, it is critical that equal effort is put into developing a strategy to promote the activity. This should be informed by the demographics and media consumption habits of the groups you are trying to reach.
- Think about what your audiences want, rather than just what you need from them.** Too often consultation and engagement activity can be seen as a list of questions that need responses. Creating a conversation that the community cares about joining and building in value-add activity for participants can help to reach the widest possible audience.
- Don't expect digital engagement to expand involvement on its own.** Digital engagement has the potential to unlock a younger and more diverse audience but to achieve this, it will be essential to think about how to attract and access them.
- Consider who might find digital tools difficult to access and put in place measures to ensure they aren't excluded.** This could involve offering alternative face-to-face activity, providing training to upskill those without the necessary digital skills, or loaning digital equipment to those who don't have access to laptops or tablets.
- Ensure digital engagement methods and tools are designed with input from people of diverse backgrounds.** To ensure that emerging digital engagement methods and tools appeal to a diverse audience, they must be designed by teams that reflect that diversity.
- It is essential that the desire to increase public participation in the planning system through front-loaded, digitally enabled engagement is properly resourced.** This will require a culture shift, greater investment, and training for local authorities.
- Harness the renewed interest in local areas to increase involvement and ensure this process is ongoing.** People are more interested in their local communities than ever before. Harnessing this interest will be essential to ensuring the many decisions needed as the UK moves toward recovery truly reflect the needs of local communities.
- Continual investment in digital tools and training is a must across the industry.** Ongoing research, testing and investment in the right tools to support engagement activity is needed, alongside ongoing training and skills development for industry professionals.

Industry professionals



83%
of survey respondents have changed the way they consult during the pandemic



2 in 3 think the pandemic has slowed down decision making

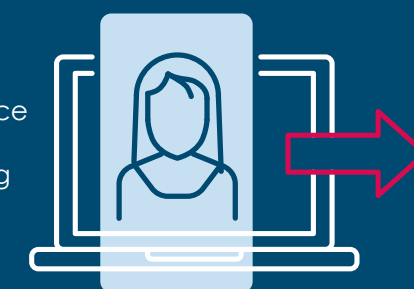
2 in 3

believe it's possible to go 'too far' with digital engagement



↑ 50%

rise in the importance placed on digital engagement during the pandemic, a change that is expected to stay (64% prior; 92% post)



77%
believe that community spaces and services will need to change after the pandemic and that local people should be involved in these decisions

73%
of industry professionals don't believe their team has the skills and tools they need to deliver effective digital consultation

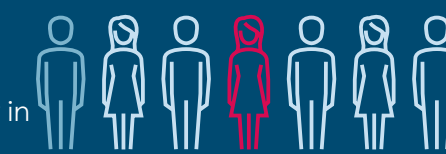


General public



Just under half of UK respondents are more likely to get involved in local decision making if they can do so online

Over 1 in 4 took part in consultation and engagement activity in the past 12 months



Over 2 in 5 people in the UK would prefer to share their feedback online via a website

21% of people still want to engage in-person via public meetings or exhibitions



56% of young people aged 16-34 think communities need to reduce climate emissions and adapt to climate change, and want to be involved in those decisions

SETTING THE SCENE

A rapidly shifting landscape

A SOCIETY IN TRANSITION

THE WIDE-RANGING IMPACTS OF THE PANDEMIC

There is no doubt that the pandemic will have wide-ranging long-term impacts on society. Many changes that had already started have been accelerated, such as more flexibility in both the way and where people work, and a re-evaluation of what 'home' means.

While many may have felt we were living in a digital society before lockdown, there has, for the vast majority of the country, been a move to socialise, work and shop online in ways and at levels that simply would have been unimaginable at the beginning of the year. This is not to mention the dramatic acceleration in adoption of digital health technologies during lockdown.

WIDER SOCIETAL CHANGES

However, even before the pandemic, society was changing. The climate crisis is now recognised by the majority of the public as an emergency and polling conducted last year found it to be seen by the UK public as the most important issue facing the world.¹ The Government is similarly committed to addressing this issue and sees the forthcoming COP 26 climate conference, to be held in Glasgow in November 2021, as one of its first chances to define post-Brexit Global Britain on the world stage.

And people want a fairer future.

Far from COVID-19 knocking this issue from public awareness, COVID-19 is shining a light on existing inequalities.

While there is no question everyone has been impacted in some way, the severity of impact has varied significantly depending on factors such as age, education, employment, quality of housing, access to social networks, ethnicity and where people live.

THE DESIRE FOR A FAIRER FUTURE

The public see this inequality and are standing up, from the removal of slave-trader Edward Colston's statue in Bristol, to Black Lives Matter protests which saw communities come together in towns and cities across the UK, to the fierce public

backlash to the Government decision to stop free school meals over the holidays. Meanwhile, the Government's majority in UK Parliament rests on the votes of 107 new Conservative MPs who were elected in 2019 – many of whom represent areas which the Conservatives have never represented and are now being given a new voice in Parliament. Similarly, elections for the Welsh Senedd and Scottish Parliament will be preceded by a swathe of new policies to attract voters. All of this gives greater urgency for the Government to deliver on the promise of 'levelling up'.

The influence of mayors in England, such as Andy Burnham in Manchester and Joe Anderson in Liverpool, at a national level has never been greater and they have had a very real effect in changing the Government's policies over recent months.

A DAUNTING ECONOMIC PICTURE

These shifts are happening against an economic backdrop that is the most daunting the country has faced in centuries. The economy is predicted to contract 11.3% this year – the largest drop in 300 years – with unemployment forecast to hit 7.5% in 2021. The Chancellor, Rishi Sunak has made it clear that tough choices will have to be made.

BUILD BACK BETTER

Notwithstanding this, infrastructure spending has historically been one of the key levers that Government can pull to stimulate the economy in difficult times. This crisis is no exception – in England, the Prime Minister has set a clear directive to "build, build, build" promising "the biggest programme of public investment ever" alongside his flagship reform of the English planning system. The publication of the National Infrastructure Strategy as part of the recent spending review demonstrates continued commitment to this project. The Scottish Government has also published an economic recovery plan which indicates the long-awaited Housing to 2040 strategy is being re-considered to support its COVID-19 recovery plans whilst in Wales, the Senedd is scrutinising Future Wales: the national plan 2040 which will set out a new National Development Framework.

TOWARDS RECOVERY

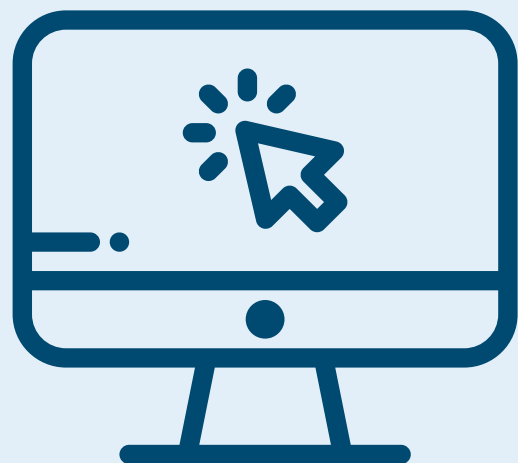
All this adds to a great feeling of uncertainty at a time when delivering major projects will be essential to the recovery of the country. Engaging people, building trust and involving them in the decisions that will shape the future is essential to ensuring these projects not only continue, but are delivered in a way that accurately reflects the needs of a rapidly changing society.

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS CHANGED THE WAY WE ENGAGE

There is a saying that 'necessity is the mother of invention', and there is no doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic forced businesses, politicians and stakeholders to rethink their approaches to engagement.

Within a matter of days, once face-to-face meetings became digital, websites were revamped as one-stop-shops for information and social media was utilised like never before.

The result was innovative engagement, allowing activity to continue, supporting employees and members of the public. Nevertheless, despite the positives, there are limitations of online engagement and the pandemic has highlighted the deep digital divide between different demographics, cutting through ethnicity, income and social mobility – true engagement can only be achieved when it is accessible for all members of society.



MOVING ONLINE

The pandemic has resulted in a greater proportion of society utilising online technology. A recent global consumer survey found that not only were 71% of respondents spending more time online during the pandemic, but that users were trusting digital methods as the preferred choice for business contexts.²

Furthermore, the adoption of digital methods has gone beyond the usual digital-savvy consumers. Research conducted by the Centre for Ageing Better found that among 50-70 year olds, 75% were making video calls more often during lockdown and 31% said they were emailing more than they did before the pandemic struck.³ This highlights a significant shift online, particularly within an older demographic who may have been reluctant to rely on digital tools prior to the pandemic.

AN OVERNIGHT TRANSFORMATION

Almost overnight, local authorities have had to gain a level of comfort with online collaboration and video conferencing tools that previously seemed years away. This has resulted in the mass digitisation of services to the rollout of tools to support neighbourhood planning and meetings.

The result is a shift in top down approaches to more decentralised methods to individual council teams and groups, aiding quicker responses with external stakeholders.

There is a sense that collaboration with communities, the voluntary sector and other public sector organisations has been at the centre of councils' COVID-19 responses. At the same time, the need to respond quickly to urgent services, such as connecting volunteers with vulnerable residents, resulted in shortening lengthy bureaucratic processes and changed perceptions about what was considered risky or not.

VIRTUAL PLANNING COMMITTEES

A major shift in local decision making has been the adoption of virtual planning (and other) committees to determine major outcomes. Once deemed as a back-up option used by a minority of local authorities, during the pandemic virtual planning committees became the norm, embraced by councillors and members of the public alike. In some authorities, that shift also prompted an increase in delegated decision making – where council officers decide a planning application, rather than elected councillors.⁴

Virtual Planning Committees have provided opportunities for greater engagement from members of the public. By removing the need to travel and allowing participation from the comfort of one's home, these committees are more accessible and inclusive for those who may have mobility issues and for parents who may not otherwise be able to find childcare, for example.

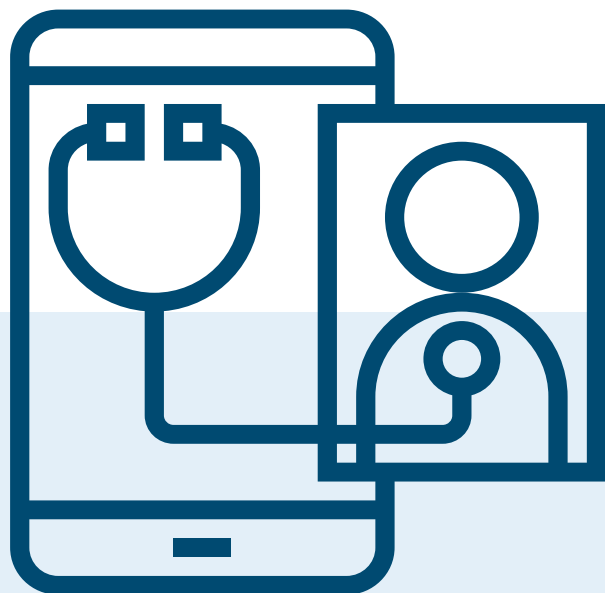
Nevertheless, virtual planning committees have not all been met with open arms. There have been concerns raised that all-important public scrutiny is not happening in some areas, especially where more decisions are taking place behind closed doors or with fewer planning committee members involved.⁵ While this was and is the reality of COVID-19, without robust arrangements for meaningful participation of third parties, the public voice risks being side-lined. Reliable live streaming of meetings and support and advice for the public on how to participate are essential to enable virtual planning committees to run smoothly.

At the same time, where communities are experiencing digital poverty or illiteracy issues, virtual planning committees become a bigger challenge to navigate and there is a risk of excluding key groups.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT WITH HEALTHCARE SERVICES

The pandemic has rapidly shifted the way in which people engage with healthcare services.

Research conducted in the summer found 78% of UK clinicians surveyed had increased the adoption of digital technologies to support clinicians. In addition, eight in ten (80%) had increased the adoption of digital technologies to provide virtual support and more effective ways of engaging with patients.⁶



This shift to digital services was an ambition of The NHS Long Term Plan, which stated that all patients would have a right to online GP consultations and digital first care by 2023/24.⁷ However, prior to the pandemic, 80% of GP appointments were face-to-face.⁸

At the same time, it must be recognised that online health consultations cannot always capture the full essence of health ailments, thus a need for a level of face-to-face interaction will always remain. Recent research conducted by Grayling found that while more than a third (39%) of people were happy to access healthcare remotely for common conditions, this fell to just 12% for unusual signs and symptoms, such as a suspicious lump.⁹

While technology is less of a barrier than in the past it can still present challenges, particularly for older audiences, who represent the largest patient pool. The Grayling survey found that 17% of people aged over 55 still do not feel confident enough to use remote technologies for their healthcare. And even younger audiences expressed concerns, albeit for different reasons, with just over a fifth (21%) of 16-24s saying they don't trust apps to keep their data secure.¹⁰ Additionally, those living in more deprived areas, also synonymous with greater health problems, also experienced digital barriers.¹¹



GROWTH OF LOCAL VOICES IN LOCAL DECISION MAKING

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT IN THE PLANNING SYSTEM

Public engagement in the planning system can be traced back to the 1960s with the publication of the Skeffington Report, which is widely viewed as a turning point, introducing publicity and consultation as required components of the planning system.¹² Since then, the role of citizen engagement in the planning system has ebbed and flowed with successive government reforms of the planning system. Today, public engagement is accepted as a way to modernise the planning system and democratise local decision-making.

Although planning is a devolved power in the UK, with each nation having its own planning system, public participation in decision making is a cornerstone of each planning system.

Across the UK, planning is based on two twin activities – developing local plans and policies to guide development and managing development through assessing and deciding on planning applications. Local communities are consulted during the development of planning policy and in some cases can also develop their own visions for place. The public also have an opportunity to comment on individual developments, either during the public consultation phase before an application is submitted to the council, or after an application is submitted.

Currently, public participation in planning tends to rely on traditional consultation methods, such as displaying information in physical locations such as town halls or local community centres and gathering feedback via questionnaires or comment cards. The use of digital technology tends to offer another way of engaging on the same information, rather than a tool to gather and present the information in a more visual and engaging way. Council websites offer a way to comment online by hosting the planning application and supporting technical information, however the information tends to be presented in a technical way, which is difficult for the public to understand and engage with.

As a result, public interest, understanding and engagement with the planning system is poor and current engagement methods can be time-consuming. Engagement traditionally comes from an older, educated and middle-class demographic with the time to engage.

The complexity of the planning system, along with the challenges it seeks to address, often result in more technical language being used, making it difficult for people without expertise in planning to engage.

THE FUTURE OF ENGAGEMENT IN THE PLANNING SYSTEM

There is widespread recognition of the challenges of engagement and low participation rates. Increasingly, decision makers are looking towards science and data to help de-politicise decision making and simplify information to aid public understanding and engagement in the planning system. Innovative digital technologies are more common than they used to be, but the opportunities for meaningful engagement through them is by no means widespread.

The past few years have seen growing momentum for the use of technology to facilitate community engagement. The coronavirus pandemic has accelerated the use of digital in consultation¹³ and sharpened our focus on the vital role that planning plays in a sustainable, inclusive and resilient recovery.¹⁴ In Northern Ireland for example, where digital engagement is extremely new, The Royal Society of Ulster Architects supported by the RTPI launched the #OurChangedPlaceNI Initiative. In recognition of the changes to the built environment brought about by COVID-19, the initiative calls on the public and interested parties to post on social media their ideas for changes that could be made to improve safety during the COVID-19 period using the hashtag #OurChangedPlaceNI.¹⁵

The move towards using digital technology or 'Plan Tech' is reflected in emerging ideas for the future of engagement in the planning system across the UK. In England, the 'Planning for the Future' White Paper¹⁶ published in August 2020, sets out a vision for early and enhanced engagement at the plan-making stage, supported by visual and map-based information presented in innovative ways and the use of digital technology to improve public understanding.¹⁷ The Scottish Government has also revealed plans for a digital transformation of the planning system in its 'Digital Strategy for Planning'¹⁸, which the RTPI is proud to have informed by coordinating research analysing the need, demand and possible impacts of digital planning.¹⁹

This desire for front-loaded engagement represents a challenge and will require a culture shift in engagement.

A 2020 YouGov poll highlighted that 69% of respondents had never engaged with a local plan consultation, rising to 80% for 18-34 year olds.²⁰

The increasing use of digital technology provides an opportunity to encourage interest and participation from this younger, tech savvy demographic who are often time poor and to whom the prospect of 24/7 access to information is more attractive. However, there is a risk that those without access to or understanding of digital methods can be further disenfranchised from engaging in the planning system. Additionally, while early engagement is encouraged, this should be the start, not the end, of the conversation with local communities.

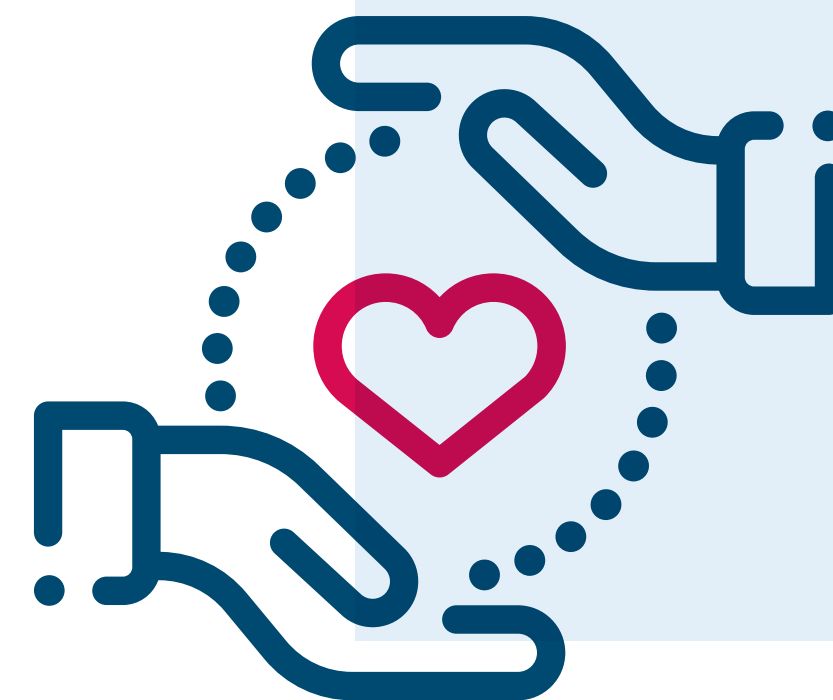
There is no doubt that digital technology and more innovative ways to engage will play a key role in the future of engagement, however both digital literacy and digital exclusion remain a barrier. In supporting public engagement, technology must capture the lived experience of people and empower planners to deliver great places. Policies must make it explicit where professional judgment is needed or where common rules can apply and should act to improve the negotiating position of communities and their trust in the planning system.²¹ We must be careful not to facilitate a step backwards towards exclusionary, top-down planning.

PUBLIC AND PATIENT INVOLVEMENT IN THE NHS

The pandemic has highlighted the value people place on our health services and generated a sense of shared national pride and gratitude for those working on the front line, best exemplified by the weekly 'Clap for Carers'. It has also highlighted existing health inequalities and emphasised the need for equitable access to services no matter where you live or what your social or cultural background. While recent efforts have, rightly, focused on understanding and dealing with the immediate challenges, it is clear that longer term changes will be needed as we move into the recovery phase.

The relationship between the patient and public health services in the UK has changed dramatically over the past few decades. We have moved from an environment where doctors and clinicians make all of the decisions, to one where patients and the public are empowered to be involved in the decisions about their care, and where services are co-designed with the community. The NHS Constitution places patients and the public at the heart of everything that NHS England does²² and the need to involve and consult patients and the public was established as a legal requirement in 2001 with enactment of the Health and Social Care Act.²³

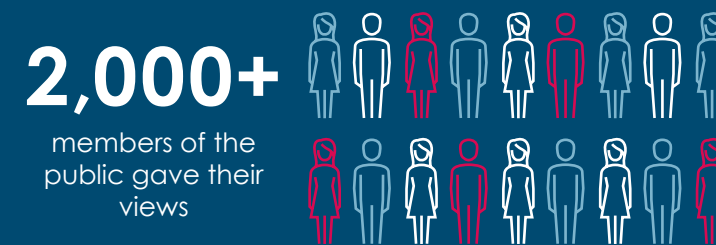
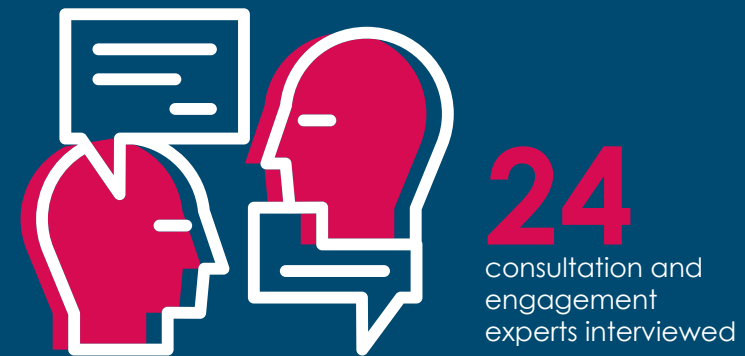
However, just like in the planning sphere, engagement events have traditionally been dominated by an older, white and middle-class group, which is often not reflective of the diversity of the local population. Additionally, the NHS has not always been at the forefront of digital engagement and consultation techniques. The fact that accessing and engaging with information digitally is now mainstream means the NHS has an opportunity to consider new ways to engage with a wider audience.



RESEARCH FINDINGS

Listening to industry and the public

To explore the recent shifts in consultation and engagement, we spoke to a wide range of individuals across both the industry - working in planning, property, infrastructure and health - and the general public. Our research covered a number of themes, from how digital engagement has been adopted during the pandemic, through to how we can ensure consultation is accessible to everyone. We also explored how our local spaces and services are likely to change to adapt to life post COVID-19 and the opportunities for people to be involved in this local decision making.



In addition to our own desk research, our research methodology included:

- Phone interviews with a wide range of industry professionals across sectors including planning, property, infrastructure and health
- An industry survey issued through Grayling Engage and the RTPI's networks
- A consumer survey of UK adults conducted by Opinion Matters, representative of the UK population

What industry professionals say

THE PANDEMIC ACCELERATED A SHIFT TO GREATER USE OF DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT – BUT SOME FOUND IT EASIER TO ADAPT THAN OTHERS

While many organisations were using some form of digital engagement methods before the pandemic, there was a need to move to almost exclusive use of these tools when lockdown measures were announced.

Over 83% of those who responded to our industry survey stated a change in the way their organisation delivers consultation activity.

While the vast majority of those who contributed had increased online engagement in some way, different organisations felt better prepared to embrace the change than others. Those organisations who were already using digital engagement methods regularly reported making the switch relatively seamlessly – with many embracing the acceleration of the change.



However, where digital tools were less well used, it was sometimes reported that engagement activity was halted for a period.

“Our work dried up almost overnight. The summer events we would normally engage at were all cancelled which meant we had no work for May, June, July and August. We are now developing a virtual town hall to sit alongside and, where necessary, replace our face-to-face engagement.”

Stakeholder engagement consultant

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT HAS BEEN LEGITIMISED IN THE EYES OF THE PUBLIC AND DECISION MAKERS

Nearly half (46%) of those surveyed stated that the expectations of decision making with both local authorities and the public had changed, with most citing the shift and acceptance of online tools as reasons why.

The acceptance of digital engagement methods as a valid way to involve the public was reinforced by those we interviewed. Many explained that before the pandemic they felt they would be criticised by local communities for taking the ‘easy way’. However, now that more people were using digital tools in all areas of their life, it had legitimised the increased use of digital engagement.

“If we tried to do loads of online engagement before, people may have been suspicious, but now people have seen from their own experience the benefits. Communities have moved online so it feels logical and natural.”

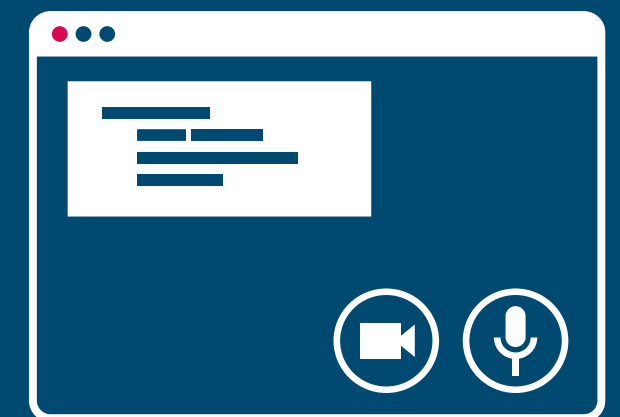
David Radbourne, NHS England

“It has made us more confident to do more online engagement. Before it felt like it was a bit of a cop out, but I think it is a really positive and effective way of engaging more people. We just need to ensure that we are connecting to a large and diverse cross section of people.”

Ed Tibbetts, L&Q

“The inability for traditional ‘village hall’ type meetings has forced the industry to embrace digital mechanisms for engagement... it has brought about a positive change as digital engagement addresses failures of more traditional approaches; aligns respondents to addresses, enables workshops and two-way conversations that can be recorded, allows questions to be analysed to inform responses, prevents objectors’ ‘soapboxing’ and hijacking meetings, and permits direct engagement between participants and the design team.”

Project Director



"Initially there was a big concern that we would miss a large proportion of the community through a virtual-based consultation, but in fact we reached over 10 times more people through social media advertising and received more than three times the amount of formal responses made to our previous consultation. There is a general acceptance now of the benefits of virtual based consultation and its effectiveness."

Local Authority officer



73%

of those surveyed told us they don't believe their team has the skills and tools they need to deliver effective digital consultation. This was echoed by those we interviewed with some suggesting that they felt it was important to work with external experts to deliver digital engagement activity effectively.

"We are passionate about bringing in innovative and enticing digital content to our consultations to increase the scope of our engagement, however we look for this to be provided by our appointed agency rather than looking to bring it in house."

Ian Davidson, ENGIE Regeneration

Additionally, 68% of those who responded to our industry survey stated that they did not particularly use any innovative consultation methods during the pandemic. Most added that Microsoft Teams or Zoom were the default for online engagement.

"Whilst we are looking for innovative ways to engage remotely with our audiences, up to this point we have focused on using MS Teams and Zoom simply because this is the technology that, particularly Councils and members of the public, have become most comfortable using since the first lock-down."

John Richards, CALA

Some of those interviewed explained that they were now developing longer term digital engagement strategies and looking to invest in innovative digital tools in the future.

"We are now looking at investing in new digital tools. We are currently testing some new systems and looking at what more sophisticated online tools we need and evaluating these to see if they add value."

Benedict Knox, Healthwatch England

ONLINE ENGAGEMENT HAS BEEN EMBRACED BUT IT CANNOT REPLACE ALL FACE-TO-FACE APPROACHES

While it was evident that even after the pandemic was over, there would be a greater use of digital methods, it was clear that face-to-face methods would continue to play a key role.

Almost all respondents in the industry survey (94%) stated there will continue to be a role for traditional engagement to aid a more personal approach and ensure inclusivity.

Many interviewed stated that face-to-face engagement is more personal, allowing for greater human connections and is more effective at building trust over a longer period of time. It was also highlighted that face-to-face engagement was critical to explaining complex information.

"Nothing replaces face-to-face engagement, online methods should be part of a package, not the only service."

Jennifer Ball, Ballymore

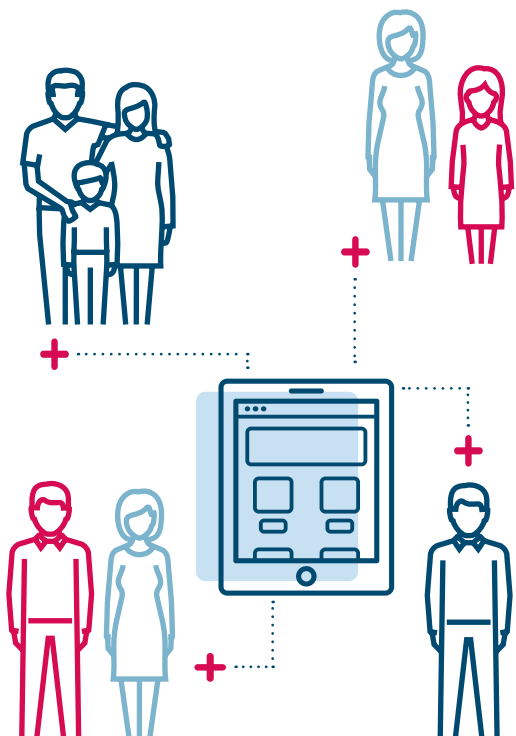


"I still believe that there is no substitute for face-to-face consultation. This allows for greater flexibility and offers the opportunities to actually engage and empower rather than just consult. I think as a planner this 'human' contact and personalisation that is undertaken by you actually delivering the consultation (hopefully) is better than the digital alternatives."

Lecturer

"Whilst we will increase our use of digital going forward, there are some traditional methods that work better face-to-face; workshops especially, where the community can come and draw on plans and work directly with our teams has proved very hard to replicate online."

Colin Campbell, Hill



DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT OFFERS THE OPPORTUNITY TO REACH A WIDER AUDIENCE, BUT THIS ISN'T ALWAYS ACHIEVED

It was widely acknowledged that digital engagement methods had the potential to reach a broader audience but that this was not always achieved.

All interviewees acknowledged that online engagement offered the opportunity to reach younger demographics, a core group often missing from traditional engagement. The ability to reach those with health issues and those who find travelling to physical events challenging was also highlighted.

"There's a wider opportunity to gain more responses and a large, diverse group of participants as digital methods tend to be less time consuming as there is no travel time for instance. They are easier to fit around other things, such as work, children, hobbies etc. Also think this appeals to a younger audience (16-30)."

Planning officer

"One of the other benefits is the work we've done with people with sensory loss. BSL speakers can have an interpreter with them which has helped BSL users feel much more involved in sessions."

Helen Green, Public Health Wales

However, it was also conceded that often this opportunity was missed because the work was not done to reach these groups digitally. It was noted that just like physical engagement, digital engagement requires a careful promotional strategy to ensure people know it is happening, and to convince them to participate.

THE PANDEMIC HAS HIGHLIGHTED THE IMPORTANCE OF DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION IN ENGAGEMENT

70% of survey respondents stated that there is a danger with going too far with online engagement, as this can result in digital exclusion, a concern echoed by those interviewed.

Related closely to this is illiteracy, prominent amongst some lower socio-economic groups and ethnic minority communities.

"Contact will need to be made with hard to reach groups (presumably in a non-digital format) and those people will need to have easy access to a digital hub where they can be given help to engage. I don't see how someone who has no access to digital equipment and/or lacks the knowledge of how to use it can be included digitally unless someone can be there to assist them."

Planner

Many also highlighted that those individuals excluded digitally, are also the ones typically excluded from any consultation.

"You still need to be able to penetrate into the groups that are less vocal. Importantly, these are also the groups that may be among the most impacted by new developments and whose views could genuinely ensure better outcomes for the overall project."

Jonathan Martin, London Borough of Waltham Forest

It was also acknowledged that not all areas have the internet infrastructure in place to support advanced digital engagement methods.

"Across Hackney access to the internet is not as widespread as one would anticipate. Experience suggests that this is not exclusively wealth related - younger age groups (into twenty- thirty somethings) tend not to have PCs/laptops and favour other more portable devices - that do not universally handle virtual engagement as well. Equally, the cultural context of some communities (such as the ultra-orthodox Charedi Jewish community) have patchy access to the Internet. In conclusion, in spite of all our modern technology face-to-face remains the bed-rock for meaningful engagement."

Local Authority manager

Meanwhile a health respondent explained that the way the pandemic has highlighted inequalities, alongside the Black Lives Matter movement had seen their organisation put greater emphasis on engaging diverse communities, and that more resources were being allocated to ensure this was being done effectively.

"We now have specific allocated time to do this outreach which we didn't have before. This has built trust and helped create a level of understanding about issues that wouldn't have been possible without those relationships."

Helen Green, Public Health Wales

THE IMPORTANCE OF WORKING WITH ESTABLISHED NETWORKS AND ADVOCATES TO REACH TRADITIONALLY EXCLUDED AUDIENCES WAS HIGHLIGHTED

Many interviewees highlighted the importance of engaging through established networks and trusted advocates. To do this well, it was acknowledged that detailed research was needed, alongside a commitment to take the time to build meaningful relationships with communities.

"If you cannot engage someone directly, then ask yourself what networks are they part of and how can such connections help to break down barriers? By thinking 'out of the box' and doing a little more research into stakeholder networks, diverse engagement can be achieved, and although this might take a little more time, building relationships with some communities is a journey, not an overnight aim."

Sue Manns, President of the RTPI 2020

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT TOOLS AND CONTENT MUST BE DESIGNED BY DIVERSE TEAMS TO ENSURE INCLUSIVITY

There was a recognition that the technology development itself must embrace diversity for it to be fully accessible.

"Technology and software developers need to be diverse (ethnically, socio-economic etc.), to consider end users and differences."

David Ogunmuyiwa, the London Mayor's Design Advocate

Additionally, it was acknowledged that more needs to be done to ensure information shared digitally is easy to access and understand.

"The sector's ability to provide information in digitally accessible formats is woefully inadequate. Local plans presented as books in PDFs, rather than in HTML. Policies maps presented as massive PDFs that take hours to download and are then impossible to navigate, rather than an interface as intuitive as Google Maps. Architectural drawings clearly made to be presented on A0 sheets, again presented as massive PDFs, rather than as interactive 3D objects. Even simple things like still producing documents in portrait format which are difficult to read on a landscape computer screen."

Planner

THE PANDEMIC HAS CREATED A GREATER FOCUS ON THE 'LOCAL' AND THIS IS CHANGING THE WAY PEOPLE ENGAGE

There is a recognition that family dynamics and working lifestyles have changed during the pandemic and at least some of these transformations are likely to remain in a post-pandemic world.

More than 77% of respondents to the industry survey agreed that community spaces and services will need to change after the pandemic.

The most obvious change has been more professionals working from home and the need for an appropriate working space within the home. Developers have found that more families are asking for dedicated working spaces or studies within their homes with some reporting that this is leading them to consider altering designs and internal layouts for future developments.

"Even when the pandemic is over, we will still be working from home more. At the same time people still want to be with others to socialise and talk about ideas. The ability to work and be around other people at a local level will be much more important and something we are thinking about with our developments. People don't want to have to go to the office all the time to get this. We won't want to travel as much and there will be a much bigger focus on the local."

Ed Tibbetts, L&Q

“With the 15 minute city concept becoming more mainstream and part of public value decisions, could well mean that community facilities are recognised as way more important than they were before – from pocket parks to local community centres. People really know what they’ve missed and what they’ve valued throughout the pandemic.”

Emma Frost, London Legacy Development Corporation

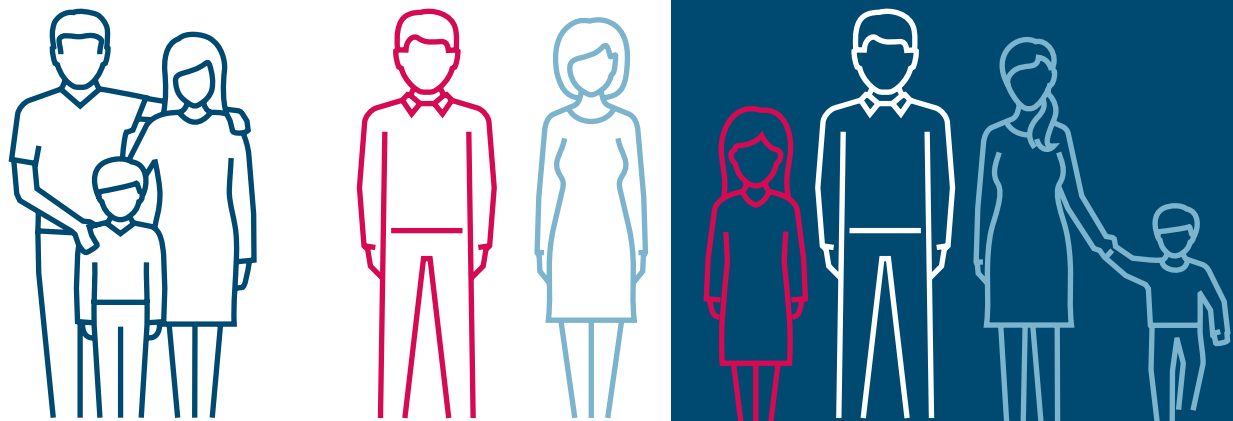
“We continually review and evaluate the spaces we design to best suit changing lifestyles and customer needs. One outcome of the pandemic has been an increase in customers seeking homes that can accommodate working spaces as well as demand for quality amenity space and good sized gardens, and these are reflected in many of our new projects coming forward.”

Colin Campbell, Hill

This renewed focus on local environments has also driven increased interest in local changes and projects, with some reporting new groups and audiences being established.

“People are out in their local area – using the roads so they are more interested and telling you what they think. This has driven a greater volume and more polarised views. We’ve also seen new local groups suddenly emerging across London. This has created a massive challenge to map and engage with those groups.”

Iain Killingbeck, Transport for London



LOCAL PEOPLE MUST BE INVOLVED IN THE DIFFICULT CHOICES THAT WILL BE REQUIRED AFTER THE PANDEMIC

When it comes to health services it was acknowledged that the nation will face big challenges after the pandemic. Those in health settings highlighted that local areas will need to decide what to do with the additional funding offered by Government. They also drew attention to the huge task of dealing with the backlog of health and social care cases. They were clear that to overcome all of this, it would require conversations with local people.

“The public has a huge role to play in helping to identify issues and helping services to develop solutions.”

Benedict Knox, Healthwatch England

THE PANDEMIC HAS REINFORCED THE IMPORTANCE OF ONGOING ENGAGEMENT WITH LOCAL COMMUNITIES

A key theme from those we interviewed was the way in which the pandemic had reinforced the importance of ongoing engagement. A number of contributors pointed to the fierce public opposition to temporary cycling and walking measures that have been implemented without consultation as an example of the impact of not getting this right.

“Government set out that temporary social distancing walking and cycling measures should be delivered through temporary or experimental measures, which meant no consultation or engagement was required. That created a whole host of issues. We have been trying to engage whilst a scheme is in place which has been challenging and sometimes more hostile. People want to know, why haven’t you consulted on this?”

Iain Killingbeck, Transport for London

Many of those interviewed also expressed concern about the potential impact of implementing the measures to front load public engagement outlined in the Government’s Planning White Paper.

“It is about relationship building. To just front load engagement, I don’t think is enough. It is just like product design, take a new Apple product, Apple wouldn’t just have one focus group at the early design stage and leave it there. Essentially, that is what is being suggested. You just wouldn’t do that in product design so why would we think to do it that way for place design? The reality is – people change, they move, individuals and community needs change. People want to know, what’s it going to look like? If you don’t work in the industry it’s difficult to get a view of what things will be like by looking at early stage plans.”

Emma Frost and Victoria Thorns, London Legacy Development Corporation

“Everything is front loaded, from experience people only really get interested when it really impacts them. If it is abstract and that’s the only opportunity to get involved, it will just store up issues. Take the low carbon neighbourhoods in London. These all had early engagement with communities, with low levels of interest. However, once roads started to be closed it completely blew up. The White Paper is essentially proposing the same thing, taking that level of engagement out at the point where it impacts the individual – it is human nature that people will want to get involved at that point. It has the potential to create reputational issues for developers.”

Developer



THE IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON THE SPEED OF LOCAL DECISION MAKING HAS BEEN VARIED

The speed at which decisions have been made during the pandemic has been mixed.

30% of respondents to the industry survey stated that local decision making had been significantly delayed, with a further 38% reporting slight delays.

Meanwhile only nine percent told us that decisions were being made more quickly than before the pandemic.

Those interviewed often reported two different speeds. Where decisions were critical to the pandemic response, decisions happened faster than ever before. Sometimes with less scrutiny and public engagement. Meanwhile, 'business as usual' decisions were significantly delayed or paused altogether.

When it came to local decision making with local authorities, it appeared those who were already embracing digital services before the pandemic were able to make the move much more quickly.



"On 31 March 2020, we held our first near virtual Planning Committee, using remote access with new technology. The following Planning Committees in May 2020 onwards have been fully virtual under new Government rules. We believe that holding safely operated virtual Planning Committees, are critical for local authorities and remain vital for investor confidence and our local economic recovery. It also signals the council's intention to remain bold and democratic, whilst securely helping to deliver the borough's development pipeline - with our development partners".

Jonathan Martin, London Borough of Waltham Forest

Other areas that did not have the correct digital infrastructure in place took much longer. Several contributors reported delays or cancellations to key forums such as Design Review Panels, scrutiny panels and planning committee meetings.

"Some local authority areas in Wales took a few months to adapt to running committee meetings online and had to cancel planning committee meetings. Some community councils in rural areas, in particular, have been even slower to adapt to online working as councillors have not had access to the fast Internet or lack of confidence with IT equipment. There were also delays in undertaking consultations as the Welsh Government had to update the regulations regarding the Pre-application consultation process."

Communications consultant

THE PANDEMIC HAS CREATED OPPORTUNITIES TO BUILD STRONGER RELATIONSHIPS WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Many we spoke to explained that they've had greater access to council officers and other stakeholders throughout the pandemic, with many finding it easier to attend video meetings.

For developers, this has meant having more time with planning officers during pre-application meetings, crucial at a time when many other aspects of planning had been delayed.

"The shift to working from home has reduced travel time in between meetings and made planning officers more accessible. I hope this stays after the pandemic."

Riette Oosthuizen, HTA Design

"We have found that since the pandemic and meetings moving into the virtual space, getting meetings with political stakeholders has become significantly easier."

Sarah Harris, National Grid

Additionally, this access has enabled key strategic relationships to be fostered.

"It has been a useful opportunity to check in on local aspirations of councils. As a major landowner, we want to play a role in ensuring places become resilient. The pandemic has bound local councils and third parties in a common goal - making sure what we are doing now is fit for the future."

Georgina Garland, The Crown Estate



What our audiences say

MOST PEOPLE WILLING TO GET INVOLVED IN LOCAL DECISION MAKING

Our research showed that around one in four respondents (28%) had taken part in consultation and engagement activity over the past 12 months, but that a much bigger proportion (63%) feel they could be motivated to participate in the future. Many took part in consultations for the provision of NHS health services, or housing, retail or commercial development – with the largest proportion of people who had participated around the UK residing in Greater London.

The move towards digital consultation was clear in the responses, with the vast majority of respondents who had participated doing so digitally – either online through a website (38%), via email (29%) or through a virtual consultation room, such as over Zoom (25%). This is compared to 21% who had participated face-to-face.

MOTIVATORS AND BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Around one third (33%) said that the biggest motivator for getting involved in consultation and engagement activity would be if the proposed changes had a direct impact on them, their family or their property or business.

Meanwhile, only one in 10 (11%) said the changes directly impacting their community would motivate them, suggesting that the majority of us are most driven by changes that are likely to affect us personally.

Not hearing about opportunities to participate was cited by one in four (26%) respondents when asked about the biggest barriers to participating in consultation activity. This was closely followed by a lack of understanding of how and when we can participate and lack of interest in participating (18%).

This suggests that we can do more to ensure that any communications being used to promote engagement opportunities clearly highlight the benefits of participating, ensuring that the impact that these decisions are likely to have on individuals, families and businesses is at the forefront of our messaging.

DIGITAL-FIRST – BUT INCLUDE FACE-TO-FACE

There is no doubt that the move online has opened up opportunities for participation in consultation and engagement activity.

Almost half of people (49%) said that having the ability to contribute to local decision making online as well as in person would make them more likely to participate.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this was more apparent with younger respondents (54% of people aged 16-24 vs 43% of those aged 55+).

Providing feedback online through a website was the most preferred way overall of taking part in consultation and engagement activity (41%), across all age groups.

However, while young people flagged social media as a preferred method (35% of those aged 16-24), it is clear that there is still a firm place for in-person activity, with one in five respondents choosing face-to-face engagement via a public meeting or exhibition (21%) or via smaller workshops or focus groups (20%) as their preferred method of giving feedback on plans.

In addition, it was clear that whether in-person or virtual, people still like to speak to a real person. On average one in five (20%) respondents across all age groups who would respond to a public consultation or engagement, said being able to attend an event and speak directly to a member of the team, either in person or online, was very important to them.

Overall, having a consultation and engagement process that is simple and easy to understand is what mattered most to the vast majority of respondents (69% said it was very or fairly important) – something which rings true whether activity is taking place face-to-face or online.

REACHING NEW AND WIDER AUDIENCES

An increased focus on digital could be seen as a plus for some groups in particular – out of those respondents with a disability, over one in five (21%) said difficulty accessing physical events was a barrier to getting involved in local decision making. Meanwhile, an average of one in four younger people (25% aged 16-34) labelled having information available in alternative formats, such as in easy read, braille or different languages was very important, compared to just 12% of older people (aged 45+), suggesting accessible content is key to ensure consultation activity can reach wider audiences.

The move to online engagement could also help attract younger audiences to local decision making, with over half (55%) of those aged 16-24 saying the ability to contribute online would make them more likely to participate, compared to 43% of those aged 55+.

Ensuring content is accessible, both online and offline was echoed in our conversation with the Neurodiversity in Planning Group. Considering the sensory impact, content and format of engagement materials is key. When drafting content for example, walls of text should be avoided and replaced by short sentences with large and simple font size and style. Bright white backgrounds can cause visual stress and should be avoided.

Storytelling which provides context to technical information is an important component and can be conveyed visually such as through videos with transcripts, diagrams or images.

PANDEMIC LIKELY TO CHANGE OUR LOCAL COMMUNITIES – AND WE WANT OUR SAY

COVID-19's impact on almost all aspects of our lives extends to our communities, with more than half (53%) of us feeling that changes to local places, spaces and services will need to happen to adapt to life post pandemic – and that local people should be involved in these decisions.

The need for changes to local services in order to reduce carbon emissions and adapt to climate change was the biggest priority for respondents out of the options provided, with almost half (45%) saying this will need to change and they would like to be involved in these decisions.²⁴ This was a particular priority for young people (60% of those aged 16-24, compared to 33% of those aged 55+). This was closely followed by the need for more communal areas and green space, for example parks and playgrounds (44%) – which have provided a haven for many families during lockdowns throughout the year.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND BEST PRACTICE

01/

Digital engagement is no longer a nice to have – build it in from the start

The pandemic has shifted almost every element of our daily lives online. Consultation and engagement are no exception. There has been incredible innovation delivered to ensure conversations continue online. This has not only helped to legitimise digital engagement methods, it will have also created an expectation with the public that these options will be available after the pandemic. Just like any other part of modern life, people will demand the ability to participate online. Digital engagement should be seen as a core part of any large-scale consultation or engagement programme. If digital engagement options are not offered, organisations could risk criticism for not being fully accessible.

02/

Digital engagement is essential, but it shouldn't completely replace in-person activity

While digital techniques must be seen as a core element of future engagement programmes, they are not a silver bullet and should not be seen as a replacement to face-to-face engagement. Without in-person activity, organisations and projects may struggle to build meaningful relationships with the local population. While there may be some exceptions to this rule, a blended approach utilising both digital and face-to-face techniques is recommended.

03/

Amplifying activity is as important as delivery

Our research found that the biggest barrier to participation in public consultation and engagement was not hearing about opportunities to get involved. Regardless of the methods you use to engage, it is critical that equal effort is put into developing a strategy to promote the activity. This should be informed by the demographics and media consumption habits of the groups you are trying to reach. Social media advertising can play a key role, but it is not the only answer. For example, while you might be running a digital event, if the local paper is well read this might be the best place to advertise.

04/

Think about what your audiences want, rather than just what you need from them

Almost one in ten people told us that a lack of interest was their biggest barrier to participating in consultation and engagement activity. To reach the widest possible audience, it will be important to think about what you are offering those who participate. Too often, consultation and engagement activity can be seen as a list of questions that need responses. Creating a conversation that the community cares about joining is likely to be far more effective than simply asking for feedback on the design of a building or service. Equally, building in value-add activity can also increase involvement. For example, is there an opportunity to run digital skill development sessions, or introduction to planning sessions, alongside engagement activity? Such initiatives would not only attract more people but may also develop a network of highly engaged and skilled individuals that can contribute in more meaningful ways in the future.

05/

Don't expect digital engagement to expand involvement on its own

There is no doubt that digital engagement has the potential to reach a younger, more diverse audience. However, simply having these options available is highly unlikely to attract these groups. To unlock the full potential of digital engagement it will be essential to think about how to attract and access them. In addition to the points outlined above, consider outreach with existing community groups and leaders who already have these connections.

06/

Consider who might find digital tools difficult to access and put in place measures to ensure they aren't excluded

This could involve offering alternative face-to-face activity, providing training to upskill those without the necessary digital skills, or loaning digital equipment to those who don't have access to laptops or tablets.

07/

Ensure digital engagement methods and tools are designed with input from people of diverse backgrounds

To ensure that emerging digital engagement methods and tools appeal to a diverse audience, they must be designed by teams that reflect that diversity. In practice, this is considering whether translation services need to be included and appropriate accessibility requirements for those with physical and neurological disabilities are incorporated into the tools. At the very least, all digital engagement tools should be tested by different end users to ensure they meet all diversity requirements.



08/

It is essential that the desire to increase public participation in the planning system through front-loaded, digitally enabled engagement is properly resourced

To achieve a culture shift in engagement, greater investment and training for local planning authorities is essential. Meaningful community engagement within the proposed timescales of a local plan will be challenging, and front-loaded, genuine engagement will present both opportunities and challenges for local authority planners and other professionals who will need to learn new skills and ways of working.

09/

Harness the renewed interest in local areas to increase involvement and ensure this process is ongoing

As we move toward recovery post pandemic, it is clear that changes to local spaces and services will be needed. People are more interested and invested in their local communities than ever before and our research showed that more than half of the population could be motivated to contribute to future decision making. It will be important to harness this interest to ensure the decisions that are being taken truly reflect the needs of local communities.

While engaging early (as outlined in the Planning White Paper) is to be encouraged, this should not be the end of the conversation. To engage meaningfully, this needs to be a continual process, delivered throughout the lifecycle of the project.

10/

Continual investment in digital tools and training is a must across the industry

Tools to support digital engagement and consultation will continue to be developed. Like anything in the tech sector, development is likely to be rapid and ongoing. It is essential that organisations continually research, test and invest in the tools that are going to best support their activity. At the same time, it will be important to ensure those delivering activity have the training and skills needed to be effective. It is likely that as new digital tools and methods emerge, it will necessitate the need for new skills, so this must be an ongoing process.

Principles for a digital planning system - RTPI and Connected Places Catapult²⁵

The RTPI has worked with Connected Places Catapult to create a vision for a digital planning system where data is collected, used and shared in ways that promote transparency, understanding, interoperability and inclusiveness. The vision is underpinned by eight principles covering data, digital infrastructure, skills, digital inclusiveness, measuring outcomes, policy discretion, community engagement and strategic planning.

PRINCIPLE 7: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Harness digital technology to foster participation in planning, unpack the decision-making process, and communicate the impacts of development.

Why?

To engage local communities earlier and more effectively in the planning process, increasing support and trust in the planning process, and making it easier for case officers to analyse large numbers of representations.

How?

Connected Places Catapult should bring together the emerging SMEs in this area to identify the needs and opportunities around standardising data on community representations to planning. Local Planning Authorities should develop and experiment with running digital community engagement processes.



Doing digital well

As more organisations adopt digital tools, the industry is becoming increasingly innovative with engagement to ensure maximum reach and diversity. Below are some examples of organisations leading the way in digital engagement.

LENLEASE AND GRAYLING ENGAGE – INTERNATIONAL QUARTER LONDON

Grayling Engage was appointed by Lendlease to deliver a programme of community engagement to support its planning application for a housing development within International Quarter London (IQL). As the area has experienced significant growth in recent years, the risk of consultation fatigue was high. To secure involvement, it was essential we delivered an innovative engagement programme.

Despite lockdown restrictions local community spirit was stronger than ever. People of all ages were moving online to create connections. To empower the local community, we invited residents to join a series of interactive workshops to co-design the shared public spaces in a way that would tackle loneliness locally and helped create a more connected community.

'Food for Thought' was a big virtual community lunch that used the power of food to harness conversation. We partnered with local E20 restaurant, Signorelli, a family-founded business based in the heart of IQL, to provide and deliver meals to those who participated. This was followed by 'Communal Connections', a creative virtual workshop looking at the design of indoor areas and outdoor public spaces.

Once local restrictions were relaxed a public event was also held to ensure those who preferred to engage in a physical environment, and those who may not have internet access, were provided with an opportunity to learn more about the plans and meet the project team.

The events generated a huge amount of creative ideas and suggestions which are now being incorporated into the development. Activity was modified to ensure we could deliver an innovative programme during social distancing.

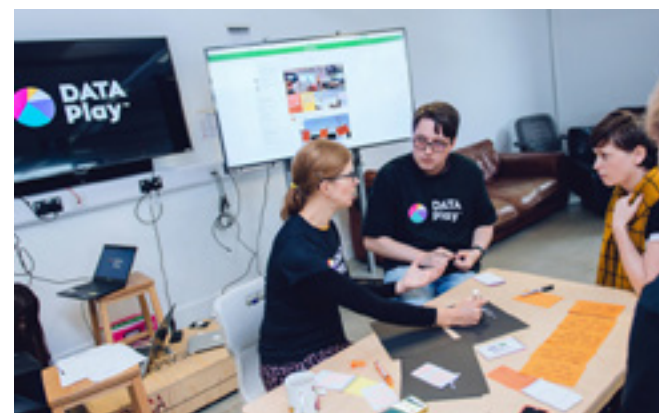


PLYMOUTH CITY COUNCIL – 'CROWDFUNDED PLYMOUTH'²⁶ AND 'DATA PLAY'²⁷

Plymouth City Council's 'City Change Fund' is a pioneering community infrastructure initiative which uses crowdfunding to actively empower the community and establish a citizen-led decision-making approach for how funds for community infrastructure raised by the Community Infrastructure Levy (CIL) are distributed. The council has used the Crowdfunder UK website to distribute the 'neighbourhood portion' of the CIL towards local projects that are led and supported by the citizens of Plymouth.

Through this digital platform the council has been able to engage thousands of residents in local projects from local green spaces to a sonic silent disco. This initiative was the winner of the 'Excellence in Tech within Planning' award at the RTPI's 2019 Awards for Planning Excellence. The council's 'Data Play' was also shortlisted for an award.

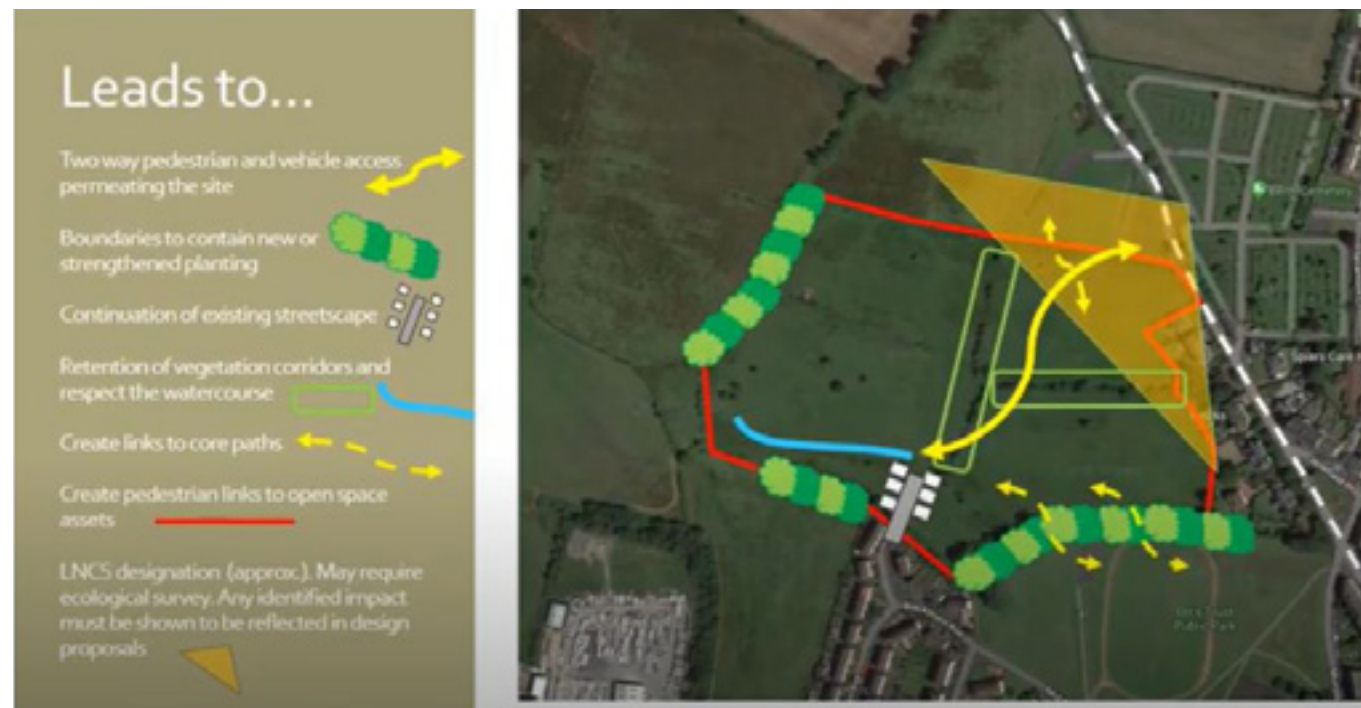
Led by the Neighbourhood Planning Team and working with tech developers, 'Play Days' allow players such as local residents, businesses and community groups to 'play' with data, giving planners an insight in topics from access to amenities to fuel efficiency helping them to better understand what different local communities need. The 'Play Days' also helped people understand their city better and build relationships between the council and Plymouth's tech community.



NORTH AYRSHIRE – DEVELOPMENT BRIEF PROTOTYPE

North Ayrshire Council has been recognised at the Scottish Awards for Quality in Planning in December 2019 and at the 2020 RTPI Excellence in Planning Awards for a video style Design Brief incorporating 3D fly-through as an alternative to traditional text-based planning documents. The video takes the user through a logical flow of the design requirements, using in-house 3D fly through technology and GIS footage of a site.

Using graphical methods, the video communicates design principles in a more user friendly format and creates a common expectation from all users including communities, developers, agencies and planners. A copy of the Design Brief Prototype video is available on YouTube at the following link: <https://youtu.be/rtisKkSjLLM>



COUNTRYSIDE - SOUTH WOODHAM FERRERS

Countryside is working with Chelmsford City Council (CCC) on a Masterplan for a sustainable extension of around 1,000 homes to South Woodham Ferrers, Essex. Community engagement has been at the heart of the Masterplan's development.

A joint consultation by Countryside and CCC took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. Countryside, working with a communications agency, developed a consultation programme with a range of methods specifically designed to overcome barriers to face-to-face engagement. The strategy ensured the whole community had access to information and enfranchised to take part, even with restrictions in place.

The approach embraced new technology and methods, including:

- Doubling the consultation length from three to six weeks, recognising the practical and emotional impact of the pandemic, and allowing more time for people to understand and respond.
- Consultation packs tracked and hand delivered to every property (7,100), with a freepost response mechanism – to ensure widespread awareness and engage those without digital access.
- A comprehensive website, with innovative methods to optimise user experience, increase interaction and levels of engagement, including:
 - » Virtual reality 'village hall' public exhibition
 - » Interactive Masterplans with touch screen functionality
 - » Recorded webinars on key topics
 - » Live web chat function
- Dedicated, freephone number direct to the project team – for those not able to respond digitally or by post.

The VR exhibition received c.3,500 views over the consultation period – a much higher level of interest than typically experienced at a physical consultation event. 275 consultation responses were received.

HTA DESIGN - AYLESBURY ESTATE, SOUTHWARK

HTA has been working with Notting Hill Genesis for seven years across their community engagement and regeneration throughout the Planning and CPO process. HTA started on site last year, with the first new homes to be delivered next year.

Prior to COVID-19 lockdowns, HTA spent some time with members of the community – particularly with individuals who had contributed something really meaningful to the estate - Community Heroes.

HTA photographed individuals, turned the photos into illustrations, and collected quotes that reiterated why the community wanted to celebrate these individuals.

The hoarding was installed in the summer, and an online celebration event was held where the heroes all spoke about why the regeneration is important to them in transforming the community.



FURTHER INFORMATION

Research methodology

A three-part research methodology was undertaken to develop this UK-wide report. This included:

01/ Desk research covering the key themes of the research, undertaken by Grayling Engage and the RTPI

02/ Industry research with Grayling Engage and the RTPI's professional networks, including:

- » Written survey conducted by Grayling Engage and the RTPI with 115 individuals. Survey undertaken between 18th November – 30th November 2020.
- » 24 phone interviews undertaken with consultation and engagement professionals spanning planning, property, infrastructure and health across the UK.

03/ Consumer survey conducted by research agency Opinion Matters, with 2,002 UK nationally representative adults. Survey undertaken between 18th November – 23rd November 2020.

Thank you

Thank you to the below individuals who offered their time to be interviewed for this report.

- Professor Samer Bagaeen MBA FRICS MRTPI, Lecturer and Councillor at Brighton & Hove City Council
- Jennifer Ball, Corporate Communications Manager, Ballymore
- Colin Campbell, Head of Planning, Hill
- Ian Davison, Head of Land and Partnerships, ENGIE Regeneration
- Emma Frost, Director of Innovation, Sustainability & Community, London Legacy Development Corporation
- Georgina Garland, Stakeholder and Public Affairs Manager, The Crown Estate
- Helen Green, Public Health Wales
- Sarah Harris, Regional External Affairs Manager – London & South East, National Grid
- Prue Hodges, Land Manager, CALA Homes Thames
- Iain Killingbeck, Community Partnerships Lead, Transport for London
- Benedict Knox, Head of Communications, Healthwatch England
- Sue Manns, President of the RTPI 2020
- Jonathan Martin, Director of Inward Investment, London Borough of Waltham Forest
- David Ogunmuyiwa, Architect and London Mayor's Design Advocate
- Riette Oosthuizen, Planner and Researcher, Urban Design, HTA Design
- Steve Quartermain, Director, Quartermain Ltd
- David Radbourne, Director of Strategy and Transformation (South East), NHS England
- John Richards, Land and Planning Director, CALA Homes Thames
- Lucy Smith, Graphic Designer and Communications, HTA Design
- Andrew Taylor, Group Director of Planning, Countryside
- Victoria Thorns, Community and Sustainability Manager, London Legacy Development Corporation
- Ed Tibbetts, Head of Planning, L&Q
- Alexander Wilson, ESRC Postdoctoral Research Fellow Architecture, Planning & Landscape Open Lab, Computing Science, Newcastle University
- Neurodiversity in Planning Group

Upcoming work

OUR FUTURE TOWNS

The RTPI and other professional bodies are supporting a project led by the Royal College of Art (RCA) called 'Our Future Towns'. Together with partners from councils, civil society and charities, the RCA have connected with three rural communities around England to develop a set of tools that will help them re-imagine how to build their community together, improve ways of getting around their town and beyond, and how they might share their ideas about the future in more collaborative and supportive ways. The work will be published in 2021.

To find out more visit www.rca.ac.uk/research-innovation/projects/our-future-towns-community-placemaking-and-transport-planning

GRAYLING ENGAGE LAUNCHES ENGAGEONLINE

Successful consultation has always been about creating conversations – genuine dialogue. Traditionally, this has happened in town halls, libraries and other public spaces, but the COVID-19 pandemic has meant this is no longer possible. The ability to continue to involve local communities in these discussions is essential to ensuring the projects that are key to the country's recovery are not stalled – infrastructure, housing, retail, energy, and health.

Grayling Engage's new offer, EngageOnline has been designed to provide the tools needed to comply with the consultation requirements for Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects, whilst also having the flexibility to meet the needs of a wide range of other projects from planning applications for housing developments, to change programmes being run by the NHS.

EngageOnline is fully customisable and offers complete flexibility. While there is no need for the pandemic to pause consultation activity, it is very important that flexibility is maintained. As restrictions have become relaxed, we have already seen local authorities asking applicants to take a blended approach, utilising both digital and face-to-face techniques. That is why EngageOnline has been designed to be as effective for 'digital only' consultations as it is for 'blended' programmes. It is not a pastiche of in-person events – it is a user friendly, all-device-compatible online home for the project.

To find out more visit www.graylingengageonline.co.uk

About Grayling Engage and the RTPI

GRAYLING ENGAGE

Grayling Engage brings together a multi-disciplinary team of specialists covering community relations, public affairs, stakeholder engagement, media relations and digital communications. We help organisations understand who they need to engage and consult in order to meet their business objectives and then help them to do this effectively. This could see us working with a client to build support for a specific proposal, such as a planning application for a new development, or gathering public views on how NHS services can be better delivered to support change within the health sector.

Our approach ensures our clients understand all points of view so that advocates can be mobilised and objections mitigated or countered. We deliver programmes that are innovative and creative whilst also being robust and proportionate.

For more information, visit www.grayling.com

ROYAL TOWN PLANNING INSTITUTE

The Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) is a leading membership organisation and the only body in the United Kingdom that confers Chartered status to planners, the highest professional qualification sought after by employers in both private and public sectors. We set the standards of planning education, accrediting world class planning courses nationally and internationally and are responsible for maintaining professional standards. We have over 25,000 members in the private, public, academic and voluntary sectors. Using our expertise and research we bring evidence and thought leadership to shape planning policies and thinking, putting the profession at the heart of society's big debates and championing the power of planning in creating prosperous places and vibrant communities.

For more information, visit www.rtpi.org.uk

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