

Neighbourhood Planning: Digital engagement success for Portishead

By Nouvella Kusi | Fri, May 13, 2022

8–10 minutes

How do you best involve the community in critical local planning decisions and gather insightful feedback to make a comprehensive plan? What's more, how is this achieved when Covid-19 has shaped the 'new normal' of social distancing?

Read more to learn how Portishead Town Council did just this.

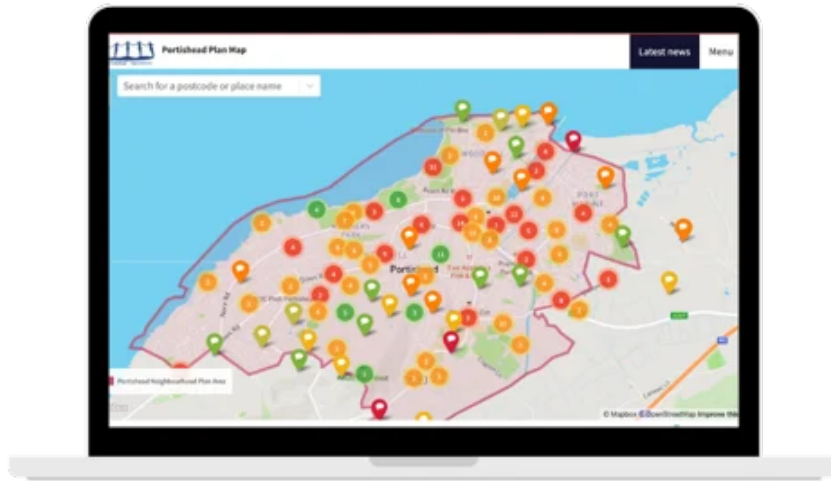
The coastal town of Portishead is in Northeast Somerset, a short distance from Bristol and is home to roughly 27,000 people. The Council was determined to reach and engage as much of this population as possible since the Neighbourhood Plan process would require engagement from the outset. At the same time, North Somerset District Council was preparing a Local Plan for the area and Portishead Town Council wanted to be sure to capture the full breadth of local needs and wants.

In April 2021 Portishead Town Council started using the [latest version of the Commonplace digital engagement platform](#) to consult its community on matters that could shape local lives for decades to come. The local voice was a key to highlighting significant aspects of the local business, culture, and character. The council wanted to ensure it was captured effectively and meaningfully.

Commonplace was invaluable to us. There was a good response overall and it saved us a lot of time collating results. Very good value for money considering what other forms of consultations cost.

- Paul Gardiner, Vice-Chair, Portishead Town Council

Engaging with the community



The Town Council deployed Commonplace's Community Heatmap and Design Feedback tools to communicate and **engage over 7,500 local people** in discussing its vision for a healthy, green and prosperous community. A Neighbourhood Plan was seen as the best tool for creating authentic, sustainable change, true to the character of the locality. The key aspects of the consultation were drawn from a previous scoping study (undertaken in early 2021) and included:

- Local bus services.
- Slade Green playing fields.
- Local employment.
- Building a BMX track in Merlin Park.
- Heritage and community assets, among others.

During this time, Covid-19 social distancing restrictions were in force, including a ban on gathering in groups of more than six people at a time; this made a digital-first approach essential and the Council's chosen method.

It's been great, and indispensable in supporting the Neighbourhood Plan, and consultations, especially in a Covid world.

Communicating the neighbourhood planning process to the community

A collaborative approach

The Town Council adopted a highly collaborative approach, which

underpinned its public engagement success. The Council worked alongside volunteers to explain how the Neighbourhood Plan can influence new housing design policy, protect and identify new community facilities, and determine the green spaces to be protected from future development.

Education is key

Portishead Town Council made full use of the different features of the Commonplace platform, dedicating a webpage to explaining in detail what neighbourhood planning meant for a town like Portishead, as seen below.

Making the most of the digital approach

Two-way conversations: From the beginning of the project to the end, the Town Council kept their residents in the loop. It made extensive use of Commonplace's built-in News platform, sending group emails and news updates to 650 community members who subscribed to this service. **The notification emails had exceptionally high opening rates of between 57% and 71%.**

Social media: Social media played a significant role in referring visitors to the Commonplace engagement website, with almost **50% of traffic** arriving through social media referrals - mainly from Facebook and local information websites.

Variety of Content: Different types of communication appeal to different people, and variety keeps people interested. Portishead created **shareable video animations** to capture the attention of their potential audience, informing them about Neighbourhood Plans in general and the difference their contribution would make.

Visual Components: Portishead Town Council recognised the power of images to inspire the local people and businesses to reimagine their physical surroundings. According to community feedback, being able to see artists' impressions of proposals, and contribute ideas via a map representing the local area, was key in helping the community visualise new possibilities for the future of their town.

What Portishead learned from the community



Portishead Town Council is very pleased with the levels of engagement achieved, citing a “good response overall”. Using **over 4,500 contributions**, the Council was well-positioned to compose a locally informed draft Neighbourhood Plan. These contributions, and the sentiment associated with them, helped feed local priorities into the nascent Local Plan.

Reach and sentiment

Of those who participated in the engagement, **29% were aged between 25 and 44 years**, and **45% were between 45 and 85 years**. **Almost 70% of comments received on all proposals expressed support or offered positive feedback**, represented by **positive or neutral coloured pins**.

The proposal to develop a BMX park received the most feedback - 419 comments. With such a significant change suggested for a widely used public space, this was no surprise, and the Council were interested to see that **65% of these comments were positive**.

The next topic high on the public agenda was public safety for pedestrians and cyclists. This proposal received 321 comments—80% of respondents on the Slade Road proposal wanted this to be addressed in the Neighbourhood Plan.

Finally, 112 of the comments received expressed the passion local people had for sustaining their local businesses. Using Commonplace, the Council could quickly identify sentiment on these matters and direction as to how to incorporate suggestions

into the Neighbourhood Plan.

Working with the Commonplace team and platform

The Commonplace Platform

Portishead Town Council took a hybrid approach to its public engagement. The digital-first approach made necessary by Covid was supplemented by some in-person events (limited due to Covid). Having seen how Commonplace successfully complemented and minimises non-digital elements, the Council's Vice-Chair referred to digital engagement as "the only way forward". The numbers help support this assertion: a previous "physical only" engagement for the Council gathered 700 responses from the local community; using a digital approach has **boosted this six-fold**.

Other feedback received from the Council about their Commonplace experience reflects the positive nature of responses. The new interface and question structure have **improved the customer experience, resulting in more positive public contributions**, unlike previous consultations conducted independently or in partnership with the unitary authority.

The Team

The Vice-Chair of Portishead Town Council expressed high levels of satisfaction with the project and platform's performance. He was impressed with his experience working with the Commonplace Customer Success team. He cited a great support network, high flexibility, responsiveness, and willingness to find creative solutions to unforeseen obstacles.

The platform was easy to use, easy to set up, and easy for people to navigate even though they're not tech-savvy. Easily a 9/10.

What's next?

One year on from the first round of engagement, the Town Council are now using Commonplace to launch a [new round of consultations on the Draft Neighbourhood Plan](#). Using data produced from initial feedback, the Council has compiled a wealth of exciting promotional material about the town and its future and suggested planning policies to guide the future development of a sustainable Portishead. Several drop-in sessions have also been

scheduled to give local people an opportunity to complement their online contributions.

More information can be found [here](#).

**All quotes are provided by Paul Gardiner, Vice-Chair,
Portishead Town Council**

Learn more about how Commonplace can help you gather the data for your neighbourhood plan engagement!

[Contact us](#)
