



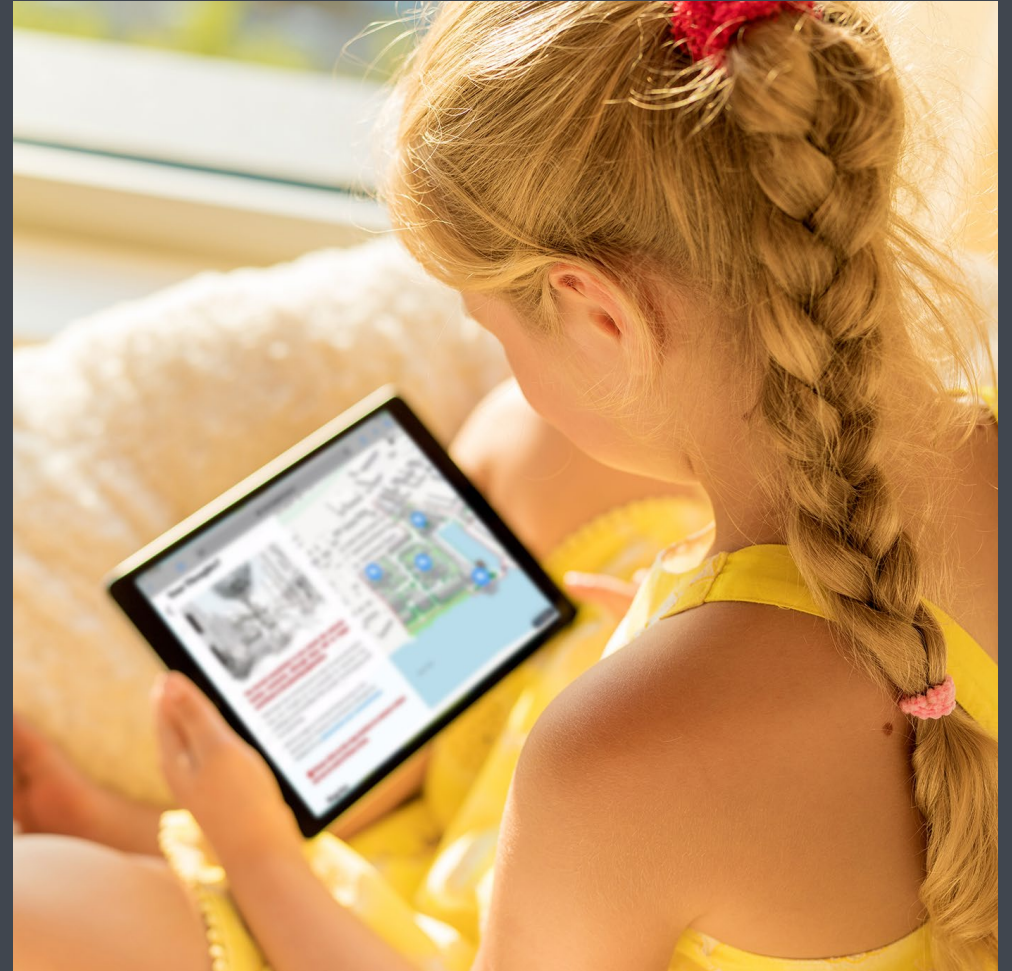
# 1. Expanding the Audience

Blog Series: Planning the Data Revolution

# Expanding the Audience

Welcome to this first edition of our series where we take a deeper dive into data collected over several years and explore what it means for planning, development and placemaking across the country.

Deetu was set up to answer the question “*What if we tried it this way?*” seeking to challenge the norm and deliver unique consultation methodologies that have earned respect from architects, developers and local authorities alike.



# It's not *what* you say, but *how* you say it

Every industry has its own terminology, acronyms, and phrases that are used daily. Unless you are an offshore rig worker, the language you hear on an oil rig in the North Sea would be confusing. Similarly, you might struggle if you had to work as a warehouse operator for the day. And the same goes for planning and engineering – a highly technical industry that is based around complex processes, making it difficult to translate to the general public.

The National Literacy Trust has found that one in six adults in England have literacy skills below that of a 7-year-old. An NHS Trust in the North East found that 42% of people are unable to understand everyday health information. The average reading ability needed to read the Sun Newspaper is equivalent to an eight-year-old, for the Guardian it is a 14-year-old.

When you combine poor reading comprehension with complex terminology, you create a situation where large portions of the community are simply not able to understand you.

# But planning *is* complicated!

Yes, there is a lot of regulation, guidance, and policy that complicates things, but that doesn't mean you have to communicate it all, at the same time.

Take a lead from some of the most successful political campaigns in recent years: “Get Brexit Done”; “Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime”; “The economy, stupid.” All these phrases communicate simple messages about complicated issues.

When Deetu was created, we examined all sorts of different consultations from across the country. What we found was a situation that excluded most ordinary people. Highly technical drawings and complicated explanations were common. We decided to see what would happen if we tried a different approach.

# Can it really make a difference?

Early in 2022, we conducted a consultation for the South East Milton Keynes Sustainable Urban Expansion (SEMK SUE). A similar sized scheme was brought forward a year previously for the Milton Keynes East (MKE) site. Both consultations were conducted with Covid restrictions in mind. While there are difficulties in comparing, these projects were sufficiently similar in both size and location that we can draw some interesting conclusions.

The MKE consultation included a website with an 8-minute introductory film, press releases in local media and the postage of 20-page consultation brochures to more than 26,000 residents. A total of 46 responses were received, with only 10 from members of the public. This is equal to a 0.03% response rate from the public they directly contacted.

In comparison, our [SEMK SUE consultation](#) received 261 responses from a much smaller area – we directly contacted 4,685 addresses, achieving equal to a 5.57% response rate. Both consultations made use of posted materials, press releases and a consultation website, but the major difference we found was how we communicated the information.

# So, what did we do?

- Readability assessments: we carefully considered the language used and ran the written consultation materials through our proprietary readability software, to assess and improve comprehension.
- Visual aids: we use interactive maps on our innovative Engaged Space platform to make those technical drawings come to life, supplemented by illustrations and images to display information in more digestible terms.
- Social media: 79% of the UK population use social media so we created short, snappy and engaging adverts that were promoted across the local area driving traffic to the consultation website.
- Asked the right questions: people participate in consultations when they feel they can shape the outcome. So, we carefully designed the questionnaire to uncover not just opinions, but actionable insights that could shape the outcome.

These different approaches to communicating the plans dramatically increased the response rate when compared to the neighbouring scheme. It creates better design outputs for planning applications and increases the legitimacy of the consultation exercise.



# Deetu

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