



**Where are the young people?
They're waiting and waiting...**

1. Executive summary

Talk to anyone who has been to a community consultation and they will describe a room of people over the age of 55. Where are the younger people? If you read some of the studies of this age group, you would be forgiven for concluding they are just working, shopping, gaming and interacting online, rather than interacting with their local area.

Our study of 1,350 comments from people under the age of 35 shows that such stereotypes of local apathy and disinterest amongst younger people are untrue.

Younger people:

- **Were most vocal about which shops make a high street work.** They recognised the social and economic value that the right mix of shops brings to a vibrant high street.
- **Recognise and value the quality of life that a great neighbourhood can offer.** From road safety to the ease of moving around on foot or bike, to greenery and social areas.
- **Have strong views but are open minded to conversation.** They want to find positive solutions to the problems of the world.

Younger people are in fact insightful, analytical, practical and full of energy for positive local change. However their voices are often inadvertently blocked - because the planning conversations happen away from the places they find comfortable. Whilst for the over 55s it might be a local meeting, for the under 35s it is online.

Our findings are based on contributions made to Commonplace, a digital engagement platform for neighbourhoods. Commonplace connects residents, developers and local authorities to discuss the needs and potential improvements

to an area. There are more than 300 'Commonplace Conversations' happening throughout the UK, many of which are around planning applications. In total they have attracted over half a million people. We sampled the responses of people under the age of 35 from twenty Commonplace Conversations, which were chosen to reflect a variety of locations and project types (housing, highways, town centre regeneration, neighbourhood plans and private development).

The results show that younger people are more motivated by the 'quality of life' that a place has to offer than by economic factors alone. In particular we found that younger people are:

- Overall most interested in the amenities that a place has to offer - whether that means shops, children's play areas or green spaces. Over 29% of the responses discussed these aspects of their neighbourhood.
- Least vocal about economic factors when talking about changes to their area. Only 9% of responses talked about issues such as the availability of affordable housing, training and employment.
- Very interested in the variety and quality of local shops. Of the topics discussed, this was the single thing that they talked about the most, with just over 6.5% of the responses referring to it explicitly. This was the case in both cities and rural towns.
- Keen to discuss the ease of getting around their area, whether on bike, walking or by car.
- Much more focused on health and well-being if living in urban areas compared to more rural areas (almost double: 22% of the discussions in cities compared to 12% in towns and more rural areas).

Younger people are waiting. And waiting and waiting... to be talked to about the place where they live, work or socialise. But too often when it comes to these local conversations, there is nobody trying to talk to them in the way that they want.

People in this age group represent the future of every area, and there is a huge opportunity to engage with them using the right mixture of tools and techniques. When they are offered an online opportunity to interact that feels like it will make a difference, our research shows that they do so with gusto.

We provide five simple recommendations for those who need to engage younger people more effectively:

- Don't assume younger people are disinterested. The evidence shows the opposite.
- Clearly explain how your proposals will impact on their quality of life.
- Ask for their views early in a project and maintain discussion throughout the project.
- Bring some of them into your project - give them a sense of ownership.
- Think carefully about how to reach them. You will need to include digital tools.



2. Introduction to Commonplace

Commonplace is an engagement platform for neighbourhoods. It is used by organisations who are making significant changes to the fabric of a neighbourhood (for example new housing, roads, public services or public spaces) to understand, respond to and incorporate the views of the community into their plans.

Two illustrative examples of Commonplace Conversations:

- London Borough of Lewisham uses the Commonplace Community Heatmap to understand what people think about Catford Town Centre in South East London and more specifically, what they need from it. This data is used to inform the forthcoming masterplan for the area. **Read the Catford case study.**
- Landsec used Commonplace Design Feedback to understand people's priorities for developing the West 12 shopping centre in Shepherd's Bush in West London. **Read the West 12 case study.**



Catford Community Heatmap



3. Methodology

This research sampled 1,350 anonymised responses from younger people (aged 35 or under, who disclosed their age) that were added to a Commonplace Conversation across the UK. To remove as much project specific bias as possible (e.g. people talking about cycling in cycling infrastructure projects), we grouped the projects into six categories: walking and cycling, regeneration, mixed-use development, garden towns, estate regeneration and neighbourhood plans. Equal weight in the analysis has been given to each of the six project types.

To analyse the responses, we created a 'coding framework' that lists the main themes people talked about across all the projects, and used this to categorise each response. In some cases people self-categorised their responses using Commonplace 'tagging' functionality. In other cases we used our platform to analyse and categorise what people said.

The framework contains five main 'big issue' categories:

- Connectivity and mobility - getting around an area
- Health and safety - wellbeing and issues of personal safety
- Sense of place - how a place appears and feels
- Local economy - jobs, training and issues that impact the economy such as development
- Amenities - the services and useful places that a place has to offer.

Each category contains between ten and fourteen themes. For example, 'Safety for cyclists' is a theme in the 'Health and safety' category, 'Sense of community' is a theme in the 'Sense of place' category.

We also collected some demographic data from people: their age, their connection to the area, their gender and postcode.

4. Respondents

The majority of younger people in our sample were within the 24-34 year age group (80%). This is a group of people who are often starting to go through major changes in their life related to priority, finances and the way they organise their lives. They are reported to be the least happy with their work life balance, amongst the highest users of social media, and increasingly still living with their parents.

They tend to be busy and time poor and are often re-evaluating their life and values. This process has been described as going through a 'quarter life crisis', a major factor of which is the quandary of how they will be able to afford a place to live. All of this points at people who, whilst sometimes seem apparently disengaged from the successes and challenges of the place where they live, work or socialise, actually could not be more invested in both those successes and challenges.

Age group breakdown



13-15: 1.9%

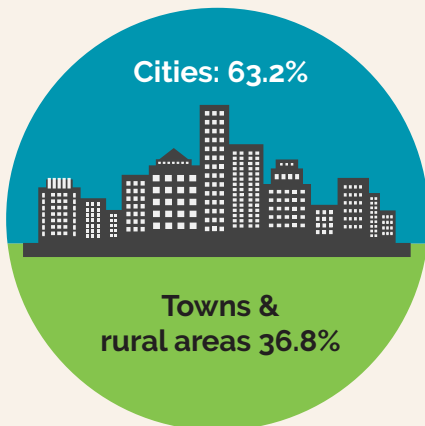


25-34: 18.1%



16-24: 18%

Location



The younger people in our sample were self-selected in that they chose to take part in a Commonplace Conversation about something material that was changing in their local area. They could therefore be expected to be more interested than an average person of that age in either community, local politics, the local environment or perhaps even urban design.

They live in a range of different types of socio-economic environments, the largest group being in areas that are amongst the most deprived, although an almost similar sized group lived in areas that are neither most deprived or least deprived. The weighting towards more deprived areas is probably influenced by two factors:

- The majority of the Commonplace Conversations are in urban areas (63% in cities vs. 37% in towns and rural areas).
- Most Commonplace Conversations are about regeneration projects, which tend to happen in less affluent areas.

5. Main findings

Almost a third of responses were about the “place’s amenities”: what it has to offer in terms of usable services such as open space, shops or children’s play facilities. This is the largest category of response by a sizeable margin and indicates that these people are practically minded when it comes to their assessment and priorities for a place.

The next largest category is ‘Sense of place’: how it feels to be in that place, what it looks like and how people respond to being there. This shows that although practical, younger people are also very tuned into the vibe of a place - they are sensitive to how the atmosphere makes them feel/affects them.

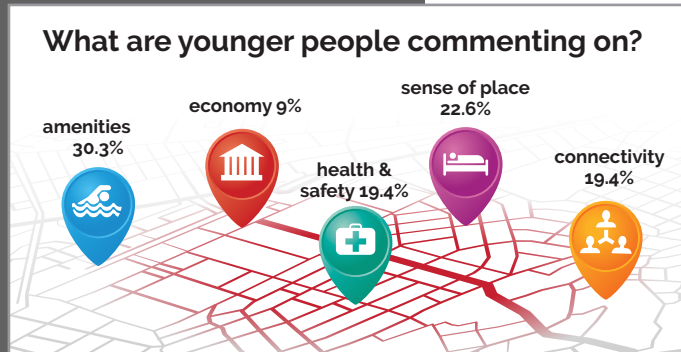
‘Connectivity and mobility’ and ‘Health and safety’ receive almost equal weighting, but the economic factors appear to have the lowest interest by a long way. Of course this doesn’t mean that younger people aren’t interested in jobs and economic prosperity - but that it isn’t the most important factor when they assess a place. For example they may be more willing to commute to find a job.

Of the top ten themes that people discussed, the variety of shops is by some way the most popular. It is interesting for a number of reasons, and is unpacked in greater detail below.

Other than the relatively high ranking of concerns around provision of car parking (which might be the most universal concern across all Commonplace Conversations and is therefore unsurprising) the other themes can be grouped into:

- Road safety
- Community spaces
- Aesthetics of a place - its physical appearance

What do these most popular themes and the focus on amenities and ‘Sense of place’ tell us when considered together? Faced with difficulty buying a home or dealing with a long commute, young people want ‘quality of life’ for their immediate futures - such as a neighbourhood with an atmosphere, community and level of safety that suits them.



6. In greater depth

'Shopping', 'Road safety' and a 'Sense of community' were three of the areas that people discussed most frequently. We looked into what people said about each of these in greater depth.

6.1 Shops

High interest in the variety of local shops is surprising given the backdrop of the growing dominance of online shopping, particularly amongst younger people. The largest number of comments about shops and shopping unsurprisingly came from projects that included town centres and high streets. The common portrayal of the

death of the high street certainly appears to lack credence with many of these people, who write passionately about how local retail is crucial as part of the blueprint to a successful community.

Their comments covered three main collections of views: The diversity of retail was mentioned most frequently. Some felt that independence and local shops are the most important, whilst others underline that a variety including larger chains is needed. The comments also demonstrated imagination and a sense of ownership over an area.

"Could current and future chains subsidise independent and family-run cafes and shops?"

"Think the future of the shopping centre needs a mix of shops, and don't think the town should be afraid of having a mix of chains and independent shops, to cater for a mix of tastes."

"Shopping is as expected for a residential area, but a Tesco Express/Sainsbury's Local would be beneficial, all of the corner shops are mediocre."

"Would love to see some clothing shops (independent or otherwise) and cafes introduced so that people have a reason to visit the area."

"It has improved over the last 20 years, with bigger names like Wilko coming in."

"The land opposite Tesco would be good for a large 'out of town' shopping area, such as a supermarket 'superstore', which will be needed as new estates are built. I think then the Sainsbury's can be moved from the centre, and space used for 'proper' town centre shopping."

Secondly, local shops (or lack of) can be important to the sense of a social place:

"There is not a lot here for someone of my age except getting my hair done and food shopping."

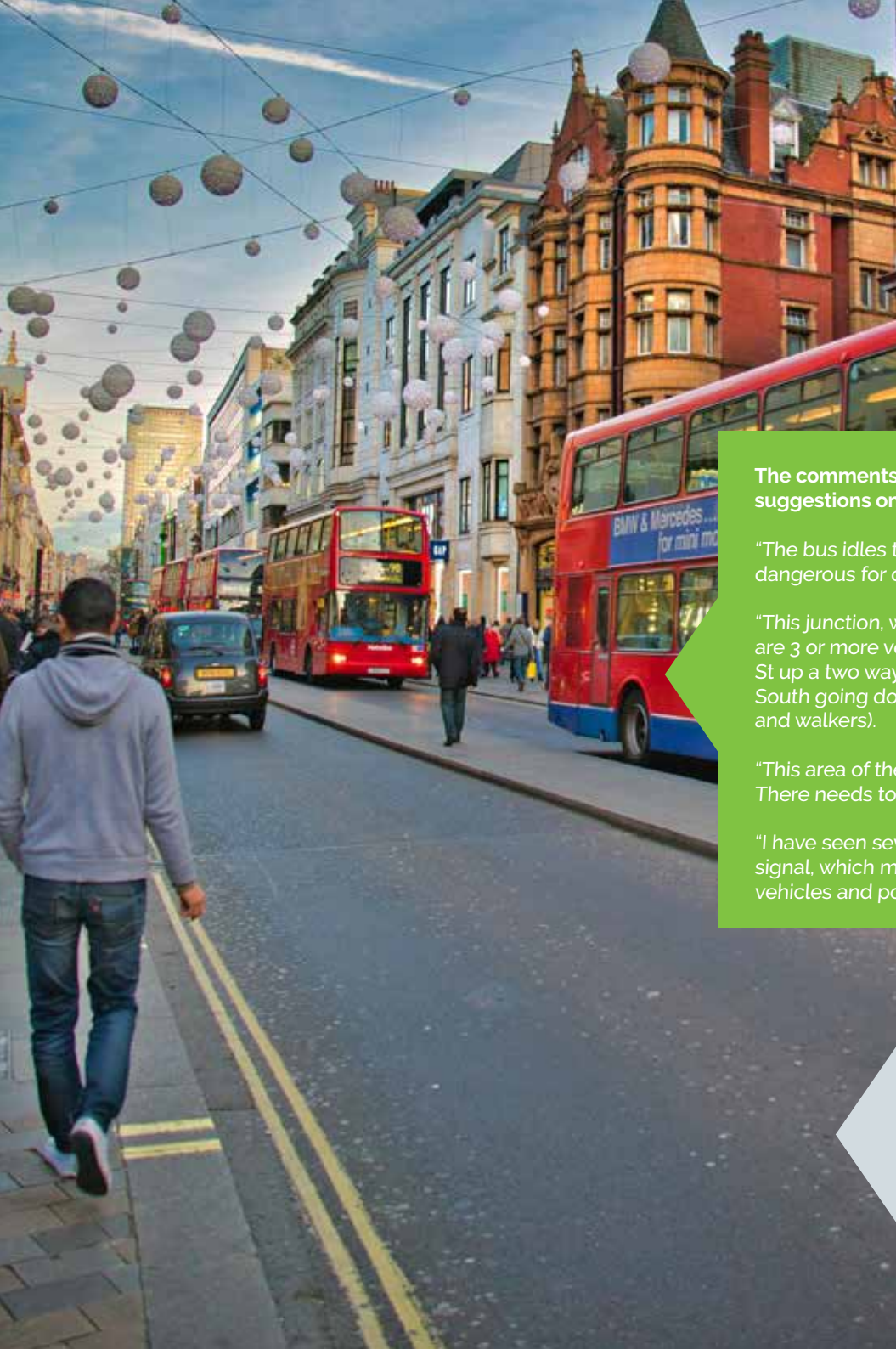
"Great shops with friendly workers who work hard to create community and relationship."

Conversely, some felt that other shops can detract from the community and even encourage antisocial behaviour:

"Never feel safe when I walk around this area. Consistent drug dealing ongoing for many years outside Morleys and the Betting Shop."

"Further along there is a whole set of disused shops which are unattractive and do nothing to boost the local area, trade or community."





6.2 Road safety

The data shows that younger people have strong views about the safety of their local roads, in particular for cyclists and pedestrians. This perhaps reflects the fact that they are as likely to be used to so-called 'active travel' as they are to be car owners. Parking does also appear in the top ten themes, so there are clearly drivers as well. There are two themes relating to Road safety in the top ten: safe roads (speed limits and driver behaviour) and safety for cyclists. If you look at this as a broader 'road safety' theme then it would be more popular than shops overall.

Within these popular themes, people talked about road safety from two main perspectives: firstly providing detailed description of problems; and secondly discussing the effect that roads safety in the area has on the place as a whole.

The comments contain significant detail describing unsafe aspects of the roads (e.g. junctions) and making suggestions on how to improve them:

"The bus idles there obstructing cars turning left. This creates a congested one lane exiting the station which is dangerous for cars and cyclists as well as pedestrians."

"This junction, where you come to the end of Eglinton St approaching Bridge St could be hugely improved. There are 3 or more vehicle lanes and no provision for cyclists. Why not make a route where cyclists can go on over Bridge St up a two way cycle lane going all the way up to the central station? There are loads of cyclists commuting from South going down Eglinton St every day, and vice versa. See Strava for proof." (Strava is a tracking app for runners and walkers).

"This area of the path is very steep and has a number of blind corners. There have been reports of crashes here. There needs to be additional signage, and a rumble strip or other intervention to ensure that cyclists slow down."

"I have seen several serious accidents here in only six months. Eastbound traffic on Southend Ln never gets a red signal, which means there is no pedestrian phase, and it's very dangerous to pull out of Moremead, due to speeding vehicles and poor sightlines."

As well as the granular analysis, people write more prosaically about the effect of different types of road on the place:

"This could be a real hub of community and tourist activity, unfortunately it feels unsafe and unpleasant with traffic."

"Lovely cycle path with a solar system night lighting floor would connect the villages and give a safe way for students accessing the schools and people cycling to/from the train station and shops."

"I LOVE walking down this road now that it's closed to traffic. Such a pleasant environment for all and feels far less dangerous. Please keep it this way when the building works are finished!"

6.3 Community spaces

The responses showed a keen interest in how a place facilitates social interaction through the communal spaces it offers and the sense of community they create. It is evident from the popularity of discussion about these issues that younger people see a successful place as one that has such a strong sense of community that is constructed around public, and in particular, green spaces.

Such interest in community and social spaces supports the idea that younger people are concerned and interested in the quality of life that a place can offer them. And whilst the practical stuff of shops and safety are vital to delivering this, the social and cultural fabric is no less important.

"Didcot could do with more communal spaces like this, maybe with some cover for when it is raining."

"Don't really know how to find out about local activities apart from word of mouth and the community service board - would be good to have more information of things that are happening."

In particular there was a large thread of conversation about green communal spaces:

"Love green space."

"Please protect the trees when you build the new road. They are so beautiful and challenge perceptions of Catford as a grotty high street. They add history and have a positive environmental impact."

"Outdoor activity area with slides and climbing equipment. More outdoor green areas."

In some cases there is resistance to change that in their view removes (particularly green) community space:

"I am not happy that the green spaces we have on Ladygrove will be built over significantly, to what I believe, will be to the detriment of the health and wellbeing of the local residents. We use these spaces to walk and run with our partners, children, friends, dogs, etc etc, and I feel like this hasn't been considered in the plans."

But as well as objecting to a change that they didn't like, many people also offered a variety of ideas for improving communal space and social or cultural facilities:

"Turn it into something nicer? Kids need a water park for example!"

"Should have a vision to create an amazing river!"

"I agree with the local theatre concept near Turnpike Lane. Ensuring it had a strong Learning & Community strand to its core would also ensure that young people are involved."

"They should include young people in their designs and decisions - they should come into school and talk to us about it."

"Green spaces along Rushey Green need opening up to encourage use, similar to Windrush Square in Brixton which went from underused and unsafe gated park (Tate gardens?) to an excellent vibrant public space which now forms a key meeting place in the town centre, due to high quality design of street furniture and opening up of green spaces and planting."





7. Conclusions and recommendations

In contrast to a traditional survey, this study observed people responding to the real world as they find it outside their front door, or to proposals for change in their immediate area. It provides a direct and fascinating way to see inside the minds of younger people when they talk about the place where they live.

The size of the overall dataset used in the study, and the concurrence of themes across the different projects emphasises the interest and concern around local retail, safety, community spaces and aesthetics. Younger people really are waiting to actively participate in discussions, idea generation and collaboration about improving their neighbourhoods.

The data supports the idea that there are clear themes of great importance to younger people, and that these are broadly around the 'liveability' or 'quality of life' of an area.



Drawing on key insights from this research, we propose five simple recommendations for any organisation or individual who is attempting to engage younger people in a discussion about a neighbourhood:

1. Don't assume that younger people are too busy or distracted to be interested in the place they live. They appear to have strong and well-informed views which they will energetically share given the right opportunities.
2. Clearly explain the detailed rationale for proposals, and articulate not only what the practicalities of the change might be, but also how it will affect their experience of living there, and the nature of the community.
3. Don't generalise about what you think might interest younger people based on stereotypes or trends in other walks of life. Listen to them and think about how you communicate accordingly.
4. Ask them for their views as early on as possible in the project, and keep talking to them throughout. If you can, take some of their ideas and embed them in your project to help create greater buy-in and legacy.
5. Think carefully about how to reach younger people. Whilst they are certainly not exclusively digital channel users, you will not reach them at scale without digital tools.



We would be interested in your views about this report, or in further discussion about how to work effectively with younger people. Please do get in touch: hello@commonplace.is