CIVIC TECH / CASE STUDY

From Diagnosis to Digital Tool

A step-by-step guide to creating civic tech

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Start with the problem, not the tool

The participation process itself was a barrier.

01 LOW VISIBILITY

Consultation information was hard to find.

People often did not know it was happening.

02 HIGH COMPLEXITY

Plans can run to hundreds of pages.

Specialist forestry language makes them difficult to navigate.

03 LOW PARTICIPATION

Many forest districts received no submissions — or only a few.

Often from specialist environmental organisations.

SO THE QUESTION BECAME: How do we turn “I care about my local forest” into “I can actually take part”?

Define the job the tool must do

Reduce the barrier — without taking civic agency away.

BEFORE

- I don’t understand the document.
- I don’t know what I can ask for.
- I don’t know how to submit it.

AFTER

- I understand the process.
- I can choose relevant issues.
- I can add my own words.
- I can send my submission.

NON-NEGOTIABLE Make participation easier, but do not disempower the participant.

Write a specification before you design

A shared map — not a technical document.

01
WHAT IS THE PROBLEM?

Very few people take part in Forest Management Plan consultations. The process is difficult to discover, to understand and to complete within 21 days.

02
WHO IS THE USER?

e.g. Residents, local activists, organisations — and the people who manage the website.

03
WHAT DO WE WANT TO ACHIEVE?

More people can prepare and submit a meaningful consultation response.

04
ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS

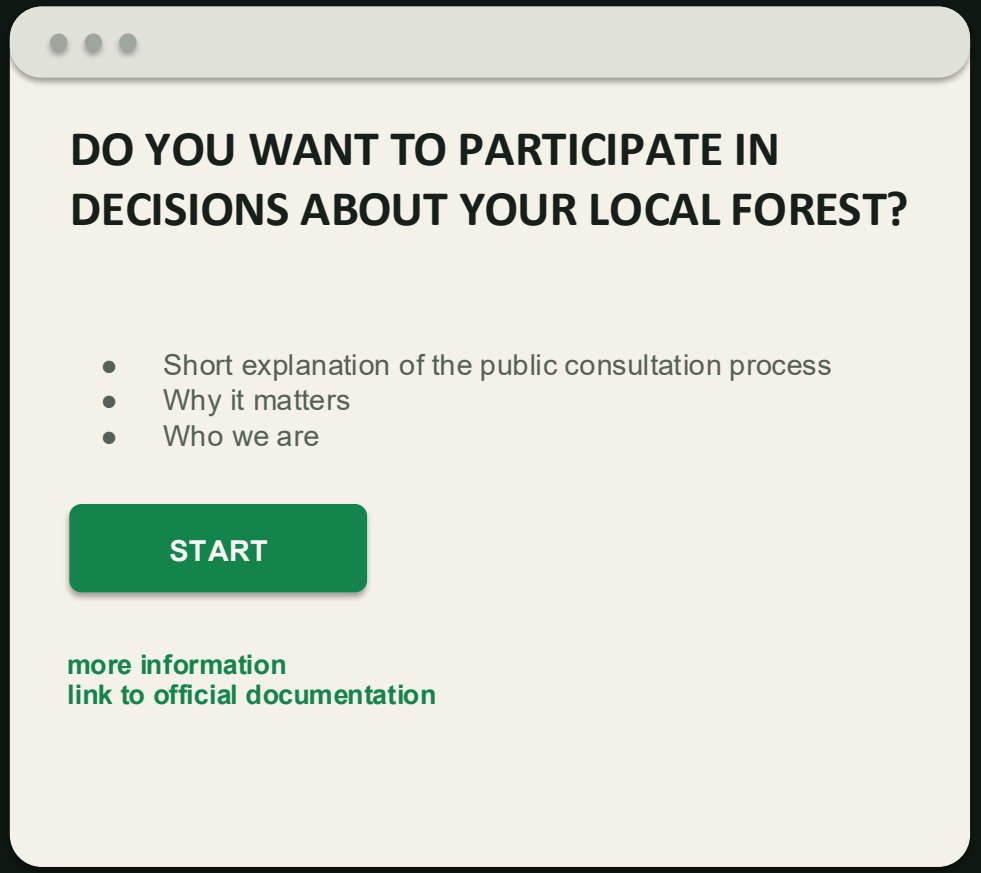
Explain the public consultation process, offer relevant suggestions from experts and other activists, allow editing and adding personal content.

EXAMPLES FROM OUR SPECIFICATION:

- **Users can edit suggested arguments and add their own content.**
- **We collect users' email addresses.**
- **A separate page for each forest district, with proposals tailored to its specific characteristics.**

Sketch the tool before someone designs it

Not to do the UX designer's job — to discover what you forgot.



01 · MY QUICK SKETCH

A rough Figma / Canva / paper sketch

Reveals missing steps, core flow, and content gaps before design starts.

02 · THEN UX

The UX designer refines the experience

Makes the user journey clear, accessible, and intuitive.

03 · THEN TECH

The developer builds realistic tech

Finds a practical and scalable implementation model.

Build a team — and make the NGO the product owner

Different roles see different risks.

01

NGO / PRODUCT OWNER

- Mission
- Users
- Context
- Non-negotiables

02

UX DESIGNER

- Clarity
- Flow
- Language
- Accessibility

03

DEVELOPER

- Feasibility
- Data
- Technical constraints
- Implementation

04

SUBJECT EXPERTS + USERS

- Content quality
- Local reality
- Testing

Our team: Hanna (product owner) · Gosia & Ilona (UX designers) · Robert (developer) · Grzegorz (internal technical expert) · Marta (internal civic expert)

Map the whole user journey

Before designing individual screens, map the steps a person takes — from first contact to follow-up.

01

DISCOVER

How will people hear about the solution?

Our case: ads, social media, local groups, Google search.

02

UNDERSTAND

What do they need to know before acting?

Our case: explain the issue and why their action matters.

03

DECIDE TO ACT

What helps them move from interest to action?

Our case: choose relevant arguments / requests.

04

COMPLETE THE ACTION

What do they need to do — and where might they drop out?

Our case: edit, add their own content, generate and send the submission.

05

FOLLOW UP

What happens after the action?

Our case: confirmation, copy of the submission and follow-up by the team.

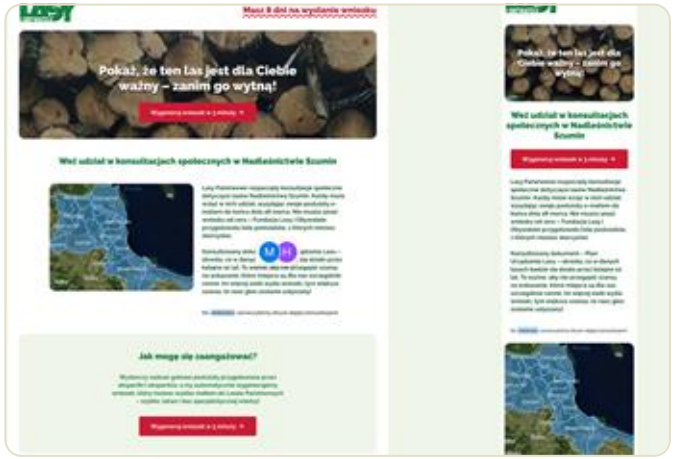
KEY IDEA

Map the journey first. Then decide what each step needs — content, information, interface or human support.

From the board to the mockup

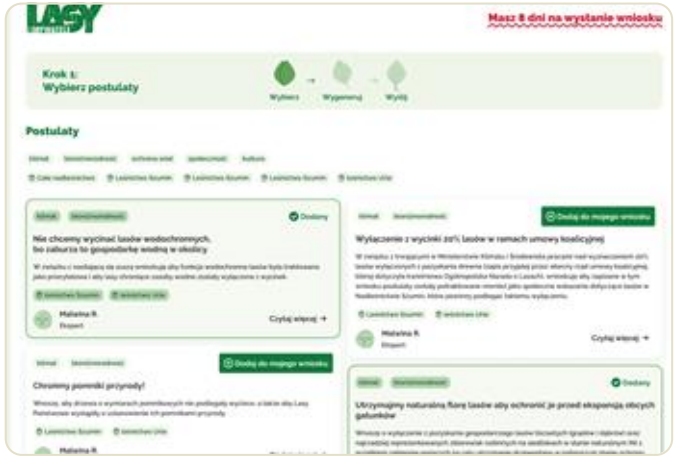
The first designed version — the journey turned into screens, desktop and mobile together.

LANDING PAGE



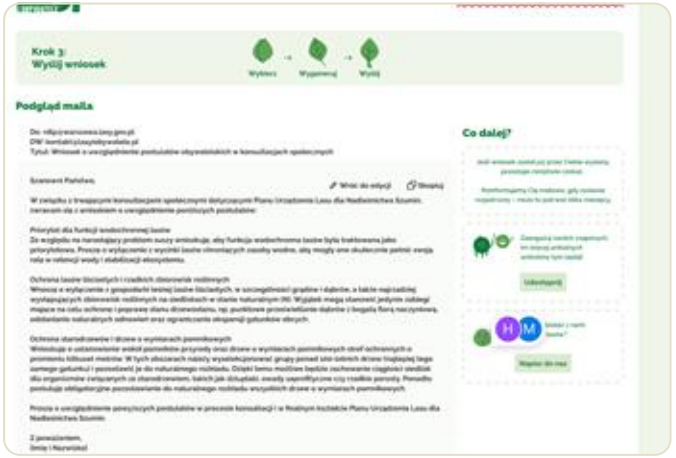
What is happening, where, and how much time is left — with a map of the area under consultation.

CHOOSE YOUR DEMANDS



Demands written by experts, filtered by theme and by forest location, added one by one.

EDIT & SEND



A preview of the message before it is sent to State Forests.
We subsequently changed the way the email is sent, because tests revealed a problem there.

Mobile and desktop were drawn side by side from the start, because many of our users use the tool on their phones.

Protect the things that carry your mission

A shortcut can change the social function of the tool.

PEOPLE MUST BE ABLE TO

1 edit suggested arguments

2 add their own comments

3 make the submission personal

WHY? MISSION

Our role is to give people information and tools for participation — not to speak instead of them.

WHY? CREDIBILITY

We wanted to avoid a system where many people simply copy identical NGO-produced text.

“Simpler” technically ≠ better civically.

Prototype → test → change

Your first version is not the answer. It is a question.

01

“Too much text at once.”

Michał / mobile

02

“I didn’t understand what the categories were doing.”

Joanna / desktop

03

“I thought the submission was sent — but nothing happened.”

Test users / sending flow

TEST → NOTICE FRICTION → FORM A HYPOTHESIS → CHANGE → TEST AGAIN

Use the second iteration to simplify

A fresh UX perspective can be especially useful after a first real-world version.

FIRST VERSION

- ✗ lots of information on the page
- ✗ many tags / categories
- ✗ complex flow
- ✗ more cognitive load
- ✗ some unclear interactions

SECOND VERSION

- ✓ **simpler flow**
- ✓ **fewer, clearer categories**
- ✓ **local names / locations where useful**
- ✓ **less information shown at once**
- ✓ **clearer path to completion**

Ilona joined for the second iteration with fresh view — and redesigned the flow, not just individual elements.

The tool, screen by screen

dzialaj.lasyobywatele.pl/projekt/buniogrod/ · the live consultation tool for one forest district

01 LANDING PAGE



What is being decided, when is the deadline, and where the documents are — in plain language.

02 CHOOSE ISSUES



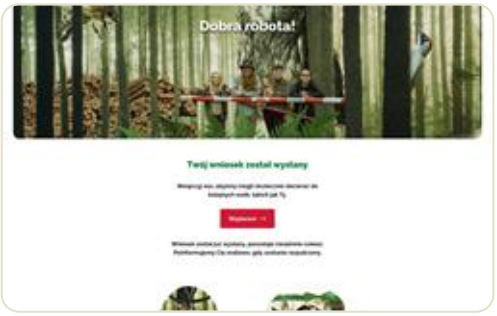
A filtered list of demands written with experts. The user adds only what matters to them.

03 MAKE IT YOURS



Chosen demands appear in the letter, tagged by theme, and can be removed or edited.

04 CONFIRMATION



The site sends the submissions to State Forests and its copies to the users, and encourages sharing and donations.

Key takeaways

Five practical rules for starting civic tech.

01

DIAGNOSE

Start with a real participation problem, not a technology idea.

02

SPECIFY

Write down users, desired social change, must-haves, controls and measures.

03

SKETCH

Draw the whole journey. It exposes missing steps before they become expensive.

04

PROTECT

Define non-negotiables so “simplification” does not erase your mission.

05

TEST

Give prototypes to real users early on. Treat friction as information, not failure.

Your first job is not to build the tool. It is to make sure you are solving the right problem.

- **What social problem in your work could be addressed — at least partially — with an online solution?**
- **What is the biggest barrier for people: finding information, understanding the problem, or taking action?**
- **What would you test first before investing in building a tool?**

Thank you

Hanna · Fundacja Lasy i Obywatele