

New approaches to public consultation

What is the future role of online consultation and can it deliver best practice? asks Penny Norton

The internet revolution presents the development community with huge potential to transform public consultation on planning applications, but this is yet to be fully realised.

Planning authorities are now required to post applications online, local residents discuss and debate development proposals via social media and in blogs, and the media gathers these views to inform news stories. No planning application is without an online presence.

So to what extent can and should online consultation replace traditional consultation?

Since 2010 I have run public consultations online, initially using Facebook and Twitter. This was successful both in reaching new and more extensive audiences, gaining significant support and giving a voice to the 'silent majority'.

But three years later the constraints of social media and the opportunities that Web 2.0 created led me to develop ConsultOnline in 2013. ConsultOnline is a comprehensive website and consultation service which has many features of social media but from a planning perspective, many additional advantages. It uses wide-ranging and innovative tactics to inform and consult; is updated regularly throughout the consultation; is supported and promoted through a social media campaign (47 per cent users of ConsultOnline websites find the consultation websites via social media) and is designed with the primary aim of providing extremely effective monitoring and reporting.

Access and engagement

Currently 12 per cent planning applications fail to gain planning consent because of issues related to consultation and community engagement - frequently because consultations are not sufficiently appealing or interesting.

By targeting residents via their preferred means, the likelihood of widespread engagement and support is increased. Users can take part in an online consultation where they want - at home or on the move (79 per cent ConsultOnline users take part in consultations using smart phones or tablets) and when they want (a large proportion take part in ConsultOnline consultations late at night).

Online consultation has the power to reach new audiences - particularly the young and the time-poor. My analysis reveals that the average age of residents taking part in an online consultation is 35 - 44: typically young parents who work, perhaps commute, and have little time to attend an evening meeting in their local church hall.

A good consultation is accessible in every reasonable way possible. In practical terms, provision is made for the partially-

sighted and translations are provided in communities with a high proportion of non-English speakers. Good consultation is also intellectually accessible: clear, simple and jargon-free, with any complex concepts explained. Online consultation addresses all of these issues by presenting information through various forms, text, images, videos and audio files.

Removing hierarchies

In a busy public meeting, attendees frequently defer to a dominating character or group leader. Online, particularly behind the veil of a username, individuals are more likely to voice their opinions without fear of repercussions.

Above all, effective, wide-ranging and consistent promotion is key to making a consultation accessible: effective PR can make or break a consultation. For this reason, communication via social media, blogs and the local media is a standard inclusion in any ConsultOnline campaign.

Visionary

Working with a community to develop a vision is the basis of consultation but the extent to which the community can determine that vision is debateable. In my view, excellent consultation does not offer a community a blank canvas but manages constructive dialogue. Online consultation can achieve this by consistently communicating a clear statement of the purpose, clarification of the constraints, the statutory policy framework, and the way in which the results will be used. Vision is then developed jointly, with consultees encouraged to



post images and enter into a wide range of discussion forums.

Appropriate selection of tactics

Methodology is vital to an inclusive and accessible consultation. There is no single 'right' method and given the range of stakeholders in any one community, a variety is always beneficial.

The internet has enabled the toolbox of consultation techniques to be expanded considerably. The ConsultOnline service enables users to receive information in the form of text, images, video and weblinks, and to interact through polls, forums, picture boards, posting questions, and commenting on blogs and videos. Above all, ConsultOnline aims to communicate with people in a way that is interactive, enjoyable and user-friendly.

Appropriate timing

Timing is crucial. Timelines should allow for consultees to be informed and respond, and results collated, analysed and considered prior to a decision being made.

Communication online has the advantage of being immediate, but programmes should not be shortened as a result. On the contrary, consultation can only take place when the audience has been effectively targeted and is in receipt of the message. Online communication can potentially spread quickly but only if the message is strong and compelling.

The days of informing the public on a development proposal and collating results at the end of the process is over. Online communication is ongoing, fast and responsive, enabling the consultor to become aware of, to understand, and to correct any misconceptions immediately.

Truthful and transparent

A commitment to honesty and openness is an undisputed quality of all consultation, as is the avoidance of 'spin'. The consultor should ensure that the community has the material required to take an informed view without being inundated.

Confidentiality is an increasingly thorny issue in a world where public information is available at the touch of a button. Because users' responses will form part of the SCI it is important that the need for transparency is clearly stated (for ConsultOnline projects this forms part of the website's User Guide) and it is necessary for the consulting body to register under the Data Protection Act.

ConsultOnline seeks to provide an honest and open service by making content available to all, providing maximum information and contact details. Contributions to forums are not vetted prior to appearing online (unless this is specifically requested by the developer), but are automatically checked for inappropriate language and spam. Residents are free to post questions and all questions (providing they are relevant) are responded to online.

With all ConsultOnline projects to date, specific polls and forums have been made available only to residents within a specific postcode area. The importance of registration is three-fold:

The proposed development will directly impact on local people, and so it is important that these residents are given a priority in shaping the proposals.

The more detailed the information from the local community, the more value it has to the consultation process. If a developer understands not only what the community feels, but where certain views originate geographically, results are more valuable.

>>>



Penny Norton is director of ConsultOnline

The strenuous nature of SCIs requires that all responses can be identified by individuals and by location.

Developers' opinions on the importance of user registration and identification vary and so a selection of options is available to enable differing levels of control.

Reporting, analysis and evaluation

Analysis is perhaps the most important stage of the consultation process: if done well, it will paint a clear picture of the community's reaction to the proposals and enable the consultor to act accordingly.

Every tactic deployed during the consultation should produce results which reflect the depth and breadth of the consultation and so may be available in a range of formats. Ideally, data will be both qualitative and quantitative.

Evaluation is vital: not only does this benefit future consultations, but it serves the important purpose of demonstrating whether the consultation was effective, which may be necessary if the results present anomalies. Online communication can be extremely comprehensive.

Reports produced by ConsultOnline, for example, comprise day-by-day website usage; average session times and bounce rates; analysis of page popularity; demographic information in relation to location, gender, age and interest; analysis of how people are reaching the website; results per poll / forum / survey / blog comment, and maps to depict the location of respondents.

Feedback

The link between the responses received and the decisions

taken should be clear. A consultation website provides an ideal means for communicating this information. ConsultOnline not only posts consultation results online, but also uses its Facebook and Twitter profiles to broadcast the message, directing users to the consultation website. Additionally, a database of those users who requested news updates are altered to the report being posted online.

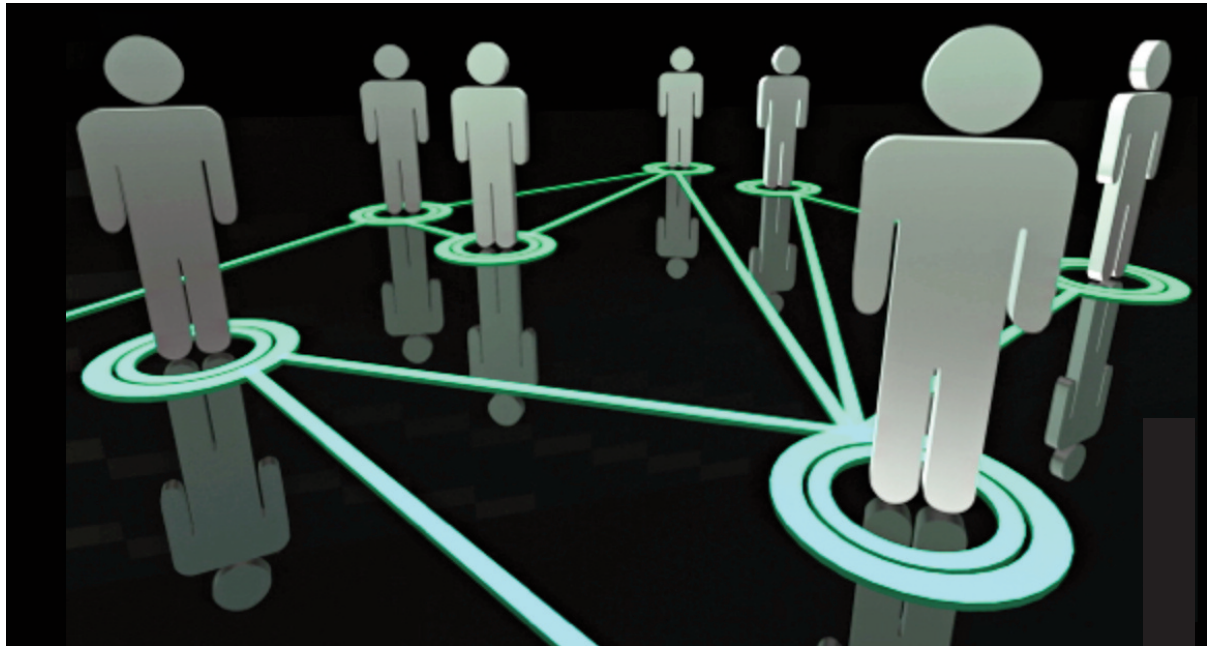
Online consultation: the future

As communication increasingly moves online, so too will consultation. But online consultation cannot replace offline consultation entirely until 100 per cent of any local community is able and confident to communicate online. To some, a screen will never compensate for a human face and for that reason face-to-contact should remain.

However, there are many advantages of online consultation: it increases accessibility, it is time and cost effective, it is clear and uncomplicated, information can be readily available to all and discussions open and visible to all. The opportunities for evaluation are vast and results can be analysed and communicated very effectively.

Using online consultation alongside a traditional consultation can significantly reduce cost and time expenditure as using a website and social media alongside an offline campaign can reduce offline tactics by half.

Ultimately communicating in a way that is more appealing addresses the serious issue of consultation fatigue and in doing so, prevents any planning application from being rejected through lack of engagement. ■



penny@consultonlinewebsites.com