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Online consultation

Despite Localism, despite the NPPF and despite hours spent in pre-app meetings, 12% planning applications fail because of issues related to public consultation, explains Penny Norton, Director of ConsultOnline.

Previously a public meeting and an advert in a local newspaper would suffice. But now it's not enough just to do consultation: how it's done, how effective it is and the results generated are what local authorities are looking for in a Statement of Community Involvement. And while traditional methods still play an important role, online consultation is increasingly seen by local authority planners as enabling truly effective consultation.

According to recent figures from the Office for National Statistics, 76% UK adults now access the internet every day. So it's not surprising that all development proposals have an online presence, whether intended by the applicant or not. Planning applications are posted on local authority websites; community groups and activists discuss and debate proposals on Facebook, Twitter and in blogs, and the local media gathers residents' views to inform online news stories – which results in a further sequence of online engagement.

Thanks to the Web 2.0, the consultation toolbox has expanded considerably to

include online videos, audio, polls, forums, picture boards, blogs, and interactive Q&As and masterplans. Comprehensive monitoring and evaluation can be available at the touch of a button and consultations can be very effectively promoted online.

Developers and planners sometimes express a concern that websites may be overwhelmed by negative comment. I have found the reverse to be true. This increasingly accessible and enjoyable form of communication helps give a voice to the "silent majority" – those who do not object to the proposals, who won't necessarily struggle out to a public meeting on a wet December evening, but would happily give their approval when passed a link by a friend. Analysis by ConsultOnline reveals that highest rates of activity are among the 35-44 age group (typically hard-to-reach working parents and commuters); that most interaction taking place around 10pm, and that no fewer than 78% of those who take part do so via mobile devices.

Online consultation is effectively removing hierarchies. In a busy public

meeting, attendees may defer to a dominating character, figure of authority or group leader. Yet online, particularly behind the veil of a username, individuals are more likely to voice their opinions without fear of repercussion.

Cost is another perceived barrier to online consultation – wrongly so. Using a website, ideally promoted using social media, a developer can halve the cost, so make considerable savings.

A screen will never compensate for a human face and for that reason offline methods should not be abandoned, but online consultation can add considerable value and will continue to do so as more and more people choose to communicate online.

And long term, the impact of good consultation goes beyond planning consent, benefitting community relations and ongoing community engagement – it lays the foundations of a sustainable community.



Penny Norton, Director of PNP Limited, was the first to use social media in consultation and set up ConsultOnline in 2013. Penny has worked with many leading developers in commercial and residential property and has written extensively on the subject of public consultation.

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