

There is significant potential in using online communication tools for planning consultations. **Penny Norton** outlines why.

Online consultation benefits

While the built environment is being transformed by property technology, or proptech, a comparison between most developer-led consultations with those of a couple of decades ago would suggest that little has changed: today's consultations still appear to rely on newsletters, exhibitions and paper surveys. And yet there are innovative and effective communication tools that could revolutionise the process.

Today's young adults have grown up with Facebook, Survey Monkey and 38 Degrees, and as such are effective online communicators. Inspiring them to play a constructive role in planning while keeping up to speed with various interest groups that have an ever-increasing role to play means developers must accept and adopt change enthusiastically. But the absence of accessible best practice in modern methods of communication led me to write *Public Consultation and Community Involvement in Planning: A Twenty-First century Guide*.

Changes in communication

The communications revolution has seen an explosion of data, unparalleled access to information, opportunities to reach millions at the touch of a button, improved dialogue, non-hierarchical communications, more agile research tools and significantly improved analysis.

Internet usage is also increasing annually. In 2016, 99.2% of those 16–24 were recent internet users (<http://bit.ly/2GMmanx>), and although the older population has some way to go before it reaches saturation point it is the fastest-growing group.

The way in which we use the internet also continues to diversify. Sixty-one per cent of adults use social media and 70% regularly access the internet using a mobile phone or smartphone – double the proportion of five years ago. Technological changes have without doubt had the greatest impact on communication this century.

The American University Center for Social Media has identified five categories of internet usage: choice, conversation, curation, creation and collaboration. In a planning context, these behaviours might be described as follows:

- **choice:** seeking information on local plan formation, policies and planning applications through search engines, recommendations, news feeds and niche sites
- **conversation:** discussing proposed schemes on forums, blogs and microblogs; taking conversations into new forums such as special interest groups
- **curation:** selecting and linking to content to form arguments targeted at specific groups; posting and reposting
- **creation:** developing new content such as a film to

communicate a specific point of view

- **collaboration:** building support for a campaign.

As the capabilities of the internet grow, the opportunities for involvement in each of these categories will increase and individuals' behaviour online will become increasingly powerful.

Digital by Default

The internet has had a huge influence on planning, perhaps more so than any piece of legislation. Unlike legislation, the surge in online communication cannot be reversed.

Following the Digital by Default transformation programme and the establishment of the Planning Portal, central government communications on planning are primarily online. Similarly, all local plan and planning application consultations are hosted online by councils, and with the rise of hyperlocal news websites and online campaigning, stakeholder groups affected by planning decisions can communicate effectively by the same means.

Developers opting not to have an online presence or those that install a website with no mechanism for dialogue run the risk of their scheme being debated on closed blogs and Facebook groups, and will consequently be unaware of mounting objections until it becomes too late.

Online benefits

Access and engagement

Currently 12% of planning applications fail to gain consent because of issues related to consultation and community engagement. By contacting residents using their preferred means, developers increase the likelihood of widespread engagement and support. Users can take part in an online consultation where and when they want: 79% of ConsultOnline users take part in consultations using smartphones or tablets, and a large proportion respond late at night.

Online consultation is able to reach new constituencies, particularly the young and the time-poor. The average age of residents taking part in an online consultation is 35–44, and typically comprises young parents who work and perhaps commute, and who have little time to attend evening meetings.



Case studies

ConsultOnline

- A comprehensive website and consultation service that combines the features of social media with additional functionality
 - Uses wide-ranging and innovative tactics to inform and consult
 - Updated regularly throughout the consultation
 - Enables access to polls and forums on the basis of a specific postcode
 - Supported and promoted through social media
 - Provides effective monitoring and reporting
- www.consultonlinewebsites.com

3D modelling

- Users view a computer-generated 3D digital model of both the development site and the surrounding area, updated to incorporate the proposed development.
- Users identify specific locations on a map and view the 3D model from these points.
- The position of the development can be viewed on Google Earth from selected locations, both as an aerial image and in Streetview.

Virtual reality (VU.CITY)

- This is the first ever fully interactive 3D digital model of London.
 - Users can visualise proposed developments in the existing context of the city.
 - Users can embed transport data, overlay sightlines, identify transport links and sunlight paths, which, from street level, helps consultees to understand the proposals in context.
 - The London View Management Framework is used in relation to protected views and can search existing, consented and planned developments.
- www.wagstaffsdesign.co.uk/wagstaffs-vucity

Stickyworld

- This multimedia stakeholder engagement platform enables time-limited consultations and discussion forums to be published.
 - Organisers present information through a variety of media and pose questions, and participants place virtual sticky notes in response.
- www.stickyworld.com

Gaming

- Users develop hypothetical visions of a development area using popular games such as Minecraft and Second Life.

Removing hierarchies

In a busy public meeting, attendees frequently defer to a dominating character or group leader, whereas when responding online, individuals are more likely to voice their opinions without fear of repercussions.

Variety of techniques

There is no single correct method of consultation, and given the range of stakeholders in any one community a variety is always beneficial. The internet has enabled consultation techniques to be expanded considerably.

Appropriate timing

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

Development industry

Among developers that understand the benefits of online consultation, usage generally falls into one of three categories:

- through social media sites, most commonly Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
- using off-the-shelf consultation sites such as Citizen Space, eConsult and Community Tool Box
- using specially developed consultation sites created by the consulting organisation, sometimes as microsites attached to an existing page.

Research and analysis

The internet has enabled research to inform consultation strategies, create an understanding of local communities and ensure that appropriate dialogue methods are selected. Stakeholder mapping allows the power and influence of individuals in a community to be assessed and gauges their likely reaction to specific issues.

A more scientific approach has also been taken towards monitoring, analysis and evaluation. The ConsultOnline model means all data collected, whether from comments in meetings or in responses to online surveys, can be processed through a consultation website, allowing up-to-date reports to be generated at the touch of a button.

It is hard to imagine that the developer would previously have had little knowledge of resident sentiment until the end of the consultation. Today, we have the tools that enable easy identification of emerging themes, possible misapprehensions and potential community ambassadors.

Conclusion

Online consultation cannot replace traditional methods entirely until all individuals in any community are able and willing to communicate online. To some, a screen will never compensate for a human, and for that reason face-to-face contact should remain an option.

However, there are many advantages to online consultation: it is popular and accessible, time- and cost-effective, clear and uncomplicated. Information can be available immediately and discussions are open to all, and evaluation is substantially more sophisticated than it was previously. ●

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<https://bit.ly/2rLf2xi>



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Planning