

## COMMENT



## 21st century community involvement

From the first planning meeting to the placing of the last brick, property development relies heavily on positive communication with the local community. But as the way in which people communicate changes, Penny Norton, director of ConsultOnline ([www.consultonlinewebsites.com](http://www.consultonlinewebsites.com)) asks is the development community keeping up to speed, and are we making the most of the benefits that online communication offers?

The internet and social media are changing communication in every context. Today over 60 million UK individuals use the internet regularly and this is increasing by 1.5 million each year. Over 60 per cent own a smart-phone or tablet and online is increasingly the preferred method of communication for many individuals and community groups.

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. Once the diggers arrive on site, local residents will head straight to Google to get the information that they feel entitled to know.

No new scheme is without an online presence, regardless of the development team's intentions; and rather than allow chat fuelled by speculation and misinformation to dominate the online presence, savvy developers are finding that this is an opportunity to be used to their advantage.

Online communication should not take the place of offline communication, but can complement and enrich it, while also reducing the extent of offline communication and in doing so reduce the overall costs of communication.

In planning, communicating with residents via their preferred means has been shown to significantly increase support. Online consultation has the power to reach new audiences and give a voice to the 'silent majority'. Analysis of my work in this field 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. Users can take part where they want – at home or on the move (78 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).

Large type, translations and text-to-voice technology assist in making consultation physically accessible. And the internet has enabled the

toolbox of consultation techniques to be expanded considerably – with information provided through text, images, video, audio and weblinks, and interaction via polls, forums, picture boards, interactive Q&As, and discussion on blogs and videos. Above all, online consultation is engaging, enjoyable and user-friendly and residents appreciate developers' willingness to involve them using these methods.

So developers need not be apprehensive about the extent of engagement offered through online consultation – especially as risk can be eliminated through the requirement to register, spam filters and regular monitoring and engagement. A commitment to honesty and openness is an undisputed quality of all consultation and online consultation enables a developer to provide an honest and open service by making content available to all, providing maximum information and contact details. In my experience it is not necessary for contributions to forums to be vetted prior to appearing online but such controls can be put in place if necessary.

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 developer to become aware of, to understand, and to correct any misconceptions immediately.

Perhaps most importantly, online consultation can provide extremely thorough results which produces a comprehensive Statement of Community Involvement detailing the methodology, the extent of the consultation and the results produced. This in turn enables the developer to feed back to the community, thanking them for their involvement and explaining how the results will be used. Unsurprisingly, local authorities view online consultation extremely positively and encourage its use.

Local residents will be anxious to know what is to be built, the hours of work on site, the duration of the construction process and the completion date. The start of the build process is another opportunity to make an impression that

is welcoming, informative and constructive, and establishes the new facility in the very heart of the community.

Local residents may be interested to receive regular updates. Simultaneously the contractor may require the contact details of those in the immediate area, to inform them of road closures and major work on site. Again, a dedicated website provides the perfect opportunity.

A typical community relations website (often a consultation website with minor adaptations) may include a timeline, interactive Google maps, Q&As (to which users may contribute), regular updates on construction work and images. Time lapse photography is also very popular, as are CGI fly-throughs. Other useful information might include an introduction to the team with hyperlinks to each organisation's own website – a great opportunity to inform local residents of sustainability initiatives, commitment to using local workers / suppliers and other corporate social responsibility initiatives such as apprenticeship schemes. External links, such as to the Considerate Constructors Scheme are also popular. Finally – but perhaps most importantly – a website offers the opportunity for users to register their interest under a specific subject, be it in relation to construction updates, sales and lettings or employment opportunities.

As communication increasingly moves online, so too will our contact with local residents. 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 communication: it increases accessibility, it is clear and uncomplicated, information can be readily available to all and discussions open and visible. The opportunities for evaluation are vast and results can be analysed and communicated very effectively. And using a website and social media alongside traditional communication can reduce cost and time expenditure by half. It is no surprise that the development industry is increasingly choosing to communicate online.

### News Bytes

Visit [www.hbdonline.co.uk](http://www.hbdonline.co.uk) and enter the reference number for more information

Green light for Wandsworth's first 63 compact starter homes...

Ref: 61181

House prices soar by up to 73 per cent along Crossrail route...

Ref: 80371

Post-recession peak for homebuyer deposits and loans...

Ref: 37324

New homes set to strike the perfect 'balance'...

Ref: 19298