



# ConsultOnline

**New Approaches to Public Consultation**

**Penny Norton**

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# New Approaches to Public Consultation

## By Penny Norton

### The changing environment for public consultation

Public consultation is undergoing rapid change, largely due to the increased popularity, power and availability of the internet. Trends show a steep increase in the public's desire to communicate online, posing the question: to what extent can and should online consultation replace traditional consultation<sup>1</sup>?

This paper will address that question in the context of how best practice in consultation can be achieved through online consultation. Throughout reference will be made to ConsultOnline, a service founded by the author, which is believed to be the most advanced form of online consultation to date.

### The internet and public consultation

The internet and social media are changing the way we communicate at every level, both personally and professionally. This increased significantly in 2004 when Web 2.0 changed enabled substantially more effective two-way communication. Facebook was also established in the UK in 2004 and Twitter followed in 2006. Today 58m individuals in the UK use the internet regularly and this is increasing by 1.5m each year<sup>2</sup>. Additionally, over 60% owns a smart-phone or tablet<sup>3</sup>.



Figure 1: Increased use of the internet among specific demographic groups (ONS statistics)

<sup>1</sup> Traditional consultation can include a wide range of tactics, for example advertising, architects in schools, brainstorming, charettes, citizen advisory groups, citizen juries, citizen panels, community action planning, community meetings, community or neighbourhood forums, community planning events, commuters' surveys, e-petitions, e-voting, exhibitions, roadshows, lobbying/ campaigning, market research, media coverage, open days, public meetings, qualitative research, site visits, workshops and youth forums.

<sup>2</sup> Office for National Statistics. (2014, May 14). [Release: Internet Access Quarterly Update, Q1 2014](#). Retrieved from Office for National Statistics

<sup>3</sup> Davis, B. (2014, August 7). [How do we use the internet and mobile devices in 2014?](#)

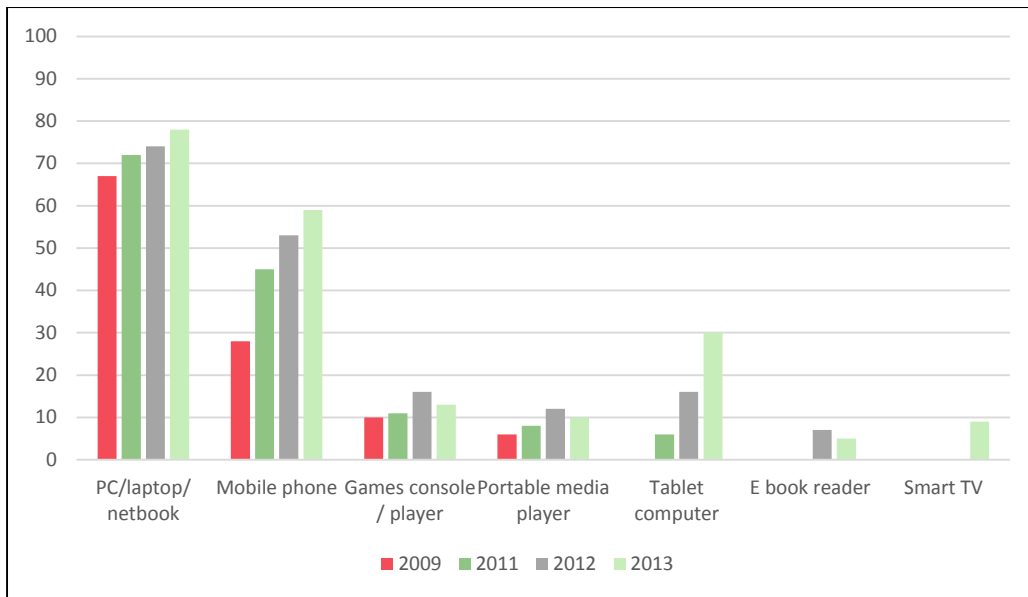


Figure 2: How individuals access the internet (ONS statistics)

In 2005 the Government required that local authorities and other public bodies ‘e-enable’ all services including planning, public engagement and consultation. As local authorities are now obliged to post all planning applications online, local residents can view planning application online. And as community groups and activists discuss and debate development proposals on Facebook, Twitter and in blogs, the local media can quickly gather residents’ views to inform online news stories, which then results in a further sequence of online engagement. Because of this, it is vital that every potential new development has an online presence.

### Consultation and social media

In 2010, I used social media in a public consultation for Brookfield Riverside, a retail scheme in Hertfordshire. The client, Bayfordbury Estates, was keen to engage with young residents and I selected social media as an appropriate way of doing so.

A dedicated community website provided an overview of the proposals; the proposed effects of the regeneration, the masterplan, artists impressions, a Q&A section and information on the consultation process. The website contained a comments box for visitors to submit feedback, links to social media and details of the information phone line.

The [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) pages were live throughout the consultation period, providing a forum for consultees to interact with the consultation team. The team regularly posted updates on the consultation and responded to comments as necessary.

**Ask Brookfield**  
6 October 2010

Show us what you'd like to see at Brookfield Riverside! If you like a particular shopping environment, landscaping, type of street furniture or riverside location, upload some images or post a link so that our design and planning team can consider your views when putting together our planning application. But please act quickly - only one week to go!

Like · Comment · Share 1 9

Pierre Gas likes this.

**Sally-Anne Millard** A decent restaurant and sufficient public restrooms.  
6 October 2010 at 21:39 · Like

**Annette Harrison** Lots of parent and child parking spaces.  
6 October 2010 at 23:28 · Like

**Natasha Mathias** anything to put a bit of life therexxx  
7 October 2010 at 01:01 · Like · 1

**Matt Dixon** Perhaps an area for street performers in the Riverside Plaza? Performers (decent ones) always create a good, lively atmosphere - makes it a bit more welcoming. Covent Garden being a good example.  
7 October 2010 at 14:05 · Like · 3

**Ask Brookfield** Thanks for your comments so far. We couldn't agree more - all of these ideas are within our plans and its great to have your endorsement of them. Please keep your ideas coming!  
8 October 2010 at 13:47 · Like

**Leilani Holmes** It would be nice to see an independent cinema rather than a faceless badly run multiplex which frankly, I've had enough of. Something unique like the Picturehouse group cinemas for instance would be far more pleasant to attend and hold events in.  
13 October 2010 at 15:02 · Like

**Sally-Anne Millard** Probably not feasible, but a Post Office would be handy.  
14 October 2010 at 12:58 · Like

**Jo Hawkins** Needs to be upmarket and defo needs a PIZZA EXPRESS and no pizza hut or rubbish like that. No primark but a H&M, Gap and Zara would be good. John Lewis for sure!!!  
20 January 2011 at 14:17 · Like · 1

**Jeanette Bilton** Some type of Sports Bar with big screens so the men/ husbands/ partners can be happy whilst the women can shop till they drop without having complaining men following behind!!!  
20 January 2011 at 20:25 · Like

Figure 3 Brookfield Riverside: discussion regarding future provision

The website attracted 1,029 visits during the consultation process and 31 questionnaires were completed online. The Facebook page received over 1,900 viewings and 264 individuals gave their support to the page by becoming a “fan”. The average age of the Facebook users was 35 – 44 and 63% of respondents were female. The Twitter feed attracted 106 followers and prompted some lively discussion. Overall, 64% respondents were broadly in favour of the proposals and over 73% of survey respondents supported improved shopping facilities for the Borough.



Figure 4 Brookfield Riverside: correcting misapprehensions

Following the success of Brookfield Riverside, I have continued to run online consultations for retail and residential developers including for Essential Land / Essential Living<sup>4</sup> and Next<sup>5</sup>.

## ConsultOnline

Following the success of these projects, but mindful of the constraints of social media, I set up ConsultOnline in 2013.

ConsultOnline is a comprehensive website and associated consultation service which runs for the duration of the consultation. The website, which includes an innovative selection of tactics to inform and consult, has many features of social media but from a planning perspective, has many additional advantages, specifically in relation to reporting and evaluation. The website is updated regularly throughout the consultation. It is supported and promoted through a social media campaign but aims to provide a platform for all online engagement on the planning application. As such, it is possible for all discussion to be very effectively monitored, feeding into a comprehensive SCI and enabling very responsive communication with consultees.

<sup>4</sup> Langley Court - [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)  
 Archway Tower - [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)  
 Berkshire House - [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)

<sup>5</sup> Handforth Dean - [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)  
 Longwater - [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)  
 Maidstone - [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#)



Figure 5 ConsultOnline: the process

A typical ConsultOnline website has the following contents:

<a href="#">Welcome</a>	Image Introduction to the development Links to key pages News updates Link to poll
<a href="#">The scheme</a>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Background to the scheme</li> </ul>	Masterplan, presented as a series of images Interactive map showing location of the site
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The proposals</li> </ul>	Masterplan, presented as a series of images Text Landscaping plans
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sustainability</li> </ul>	Text, with a links
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design</li> </ul>	Summary of architectural statement Link to architects' website
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The site's history</li> </ul>	Image Text Historic aerial photography
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• FAQs</li> </ul>	Images Series of likely questions on the following topics: background, design, planning, homes, amenity space, commercial space, parking, timing Opportunity for individuals to submit a question
<a href="#">Planning</a>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The planning context</li> </ul>	Text and maps with hyperlinks to key planning documents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Timing</li> </ul>	Text and imagery
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public exhibition</li> </ul>	Text Links to the exhibition boards Links to a blog on the exhibition Downloadable V cards with exhibition information
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Document library</li> </ul>	Planning documents to be uploaded following submission of planning application
<a href="#">Gallery</a>	Images – for example: Planned layout – masterplan and landscaping plan Architects' proposals – series of sketches and plans Historical aerial photographs Audio files Video files
<a href="#">The team</a>	Text, images and hyperlinks in relation to the developer, architect, planning and heritage consultant, environmental consultant, townscape consultant, landscape architect and communications / consultation consultant.
<a href="#">Registration</a>	Explanation as to who may register Registration facility
<a href="#">Discussion</a>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Forums</a></li> </ul>	Examples of forums: <a href="#">Community facilities</a> <a href="#">Cafes and restaurants – your choice</a> <a href="#">Car sharing facility</a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <a href="#">Polls, displaying results on completion</a></li> </ul>	Examples of polls: <a href="#">Would you like to see the redevelopment of The Perfume Factory?</a> <a href="#">Do you broadly agree with these proposals for the redevelopment of The Perfume Factory?</a>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Questionnaire</li> </ul>	
<a href="#">Blog</a>	Examples of blog posts: <a href="#">Welcome</a> <a href="#">The public exhibition</a>
<a href="#">Contact us</a>	Form for questions Opportunity to register for news updates Downloadable V cards with contact information

Specific features of a ConsultOnline website also include:

- A list of Quick Links on each page, which guide the user to relevant pages elsewhere on the website.
- Registration, enabling comment on specific polls and forums to be limited to a specific postcode area. Restrictions may be in place for only selected forum / questionnaires.
- Additional means for limiting usage if required – such as a maximum number of posts per person or a maximum length of post.
- Comprehensive analytics provided both through Google Analytics and monitoring features built into the ConsultOnline template.
- Simple, clear and appropriate reporting, adapted to the developers' requirements and available on an 'as required' basis.

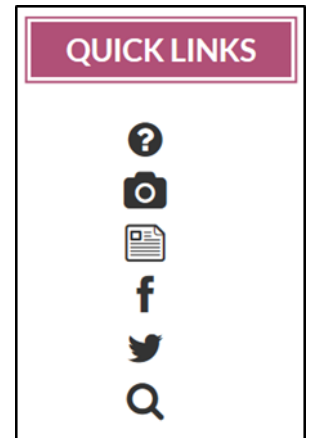


Figure 6 Riverside Retail: quick links

Social media has been found to be an effective way to promote ConsultOnline websites. In a recent project by ConsultOnline, [Scotch Corner Designer Village](#), 47% of users found the website via social media.

A Twitter profile is set up at the start of the consultation. Tweets are both posted in advance and sent out in conjunction with new posts on the website. New followers are welcomed with a personal message and tweets responded to.

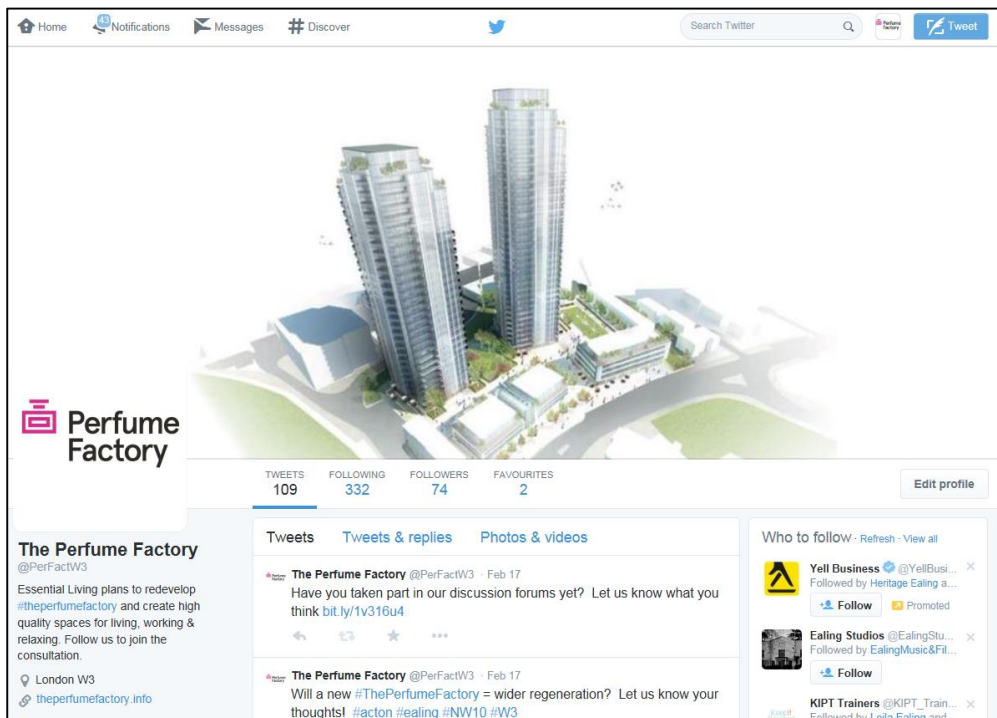


Figure 8 The Perfume Factory: Twitter home page

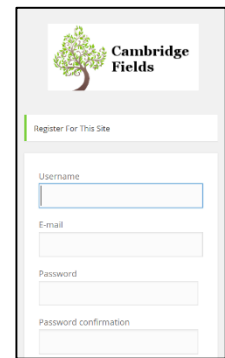


Figure 7 Cambridge Fields: registration



A 'community page' is set up on Facebook and the page advertised to those living in the vicinity of the development.

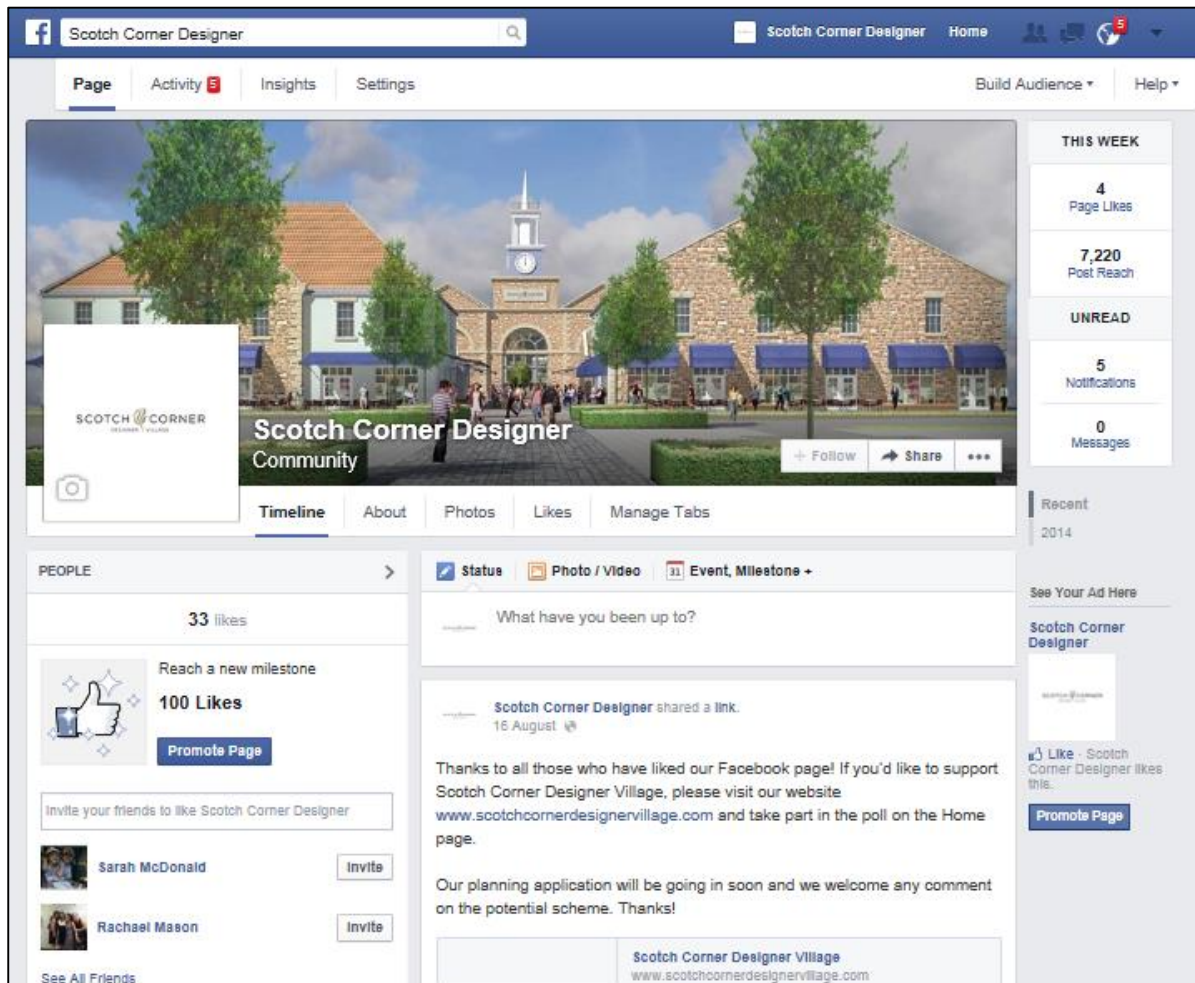


Figure 9 Scotch Corner Designer Village: Facebook page

## The principles of best practice in online consultation

### Access and engagement

It is widely believed that increased accessibility enables greater engagement with the local community, yet 12% planning applications fail to gain planning consent because of issues related to consultation and community engagement.

Online communication is a medium in which many people choose to communicate and by targeting residents via their preferred means, the likelihood of support is increased. Users can take part in an online consultation when and where they want – at home, on the move, while waiting for something / someone. My research so far suggests that many chose to take part in consultations late at night.

Because of its increased accessibility, online consultation has the power to reach new audiences – particularly the young and the time-poor. Local authorities welcome developers' inclination to consult more widely; simultaneously this enables developers to unearth the support of the 'silent majority'.

Engagement via mobile devices is increasingly popular:

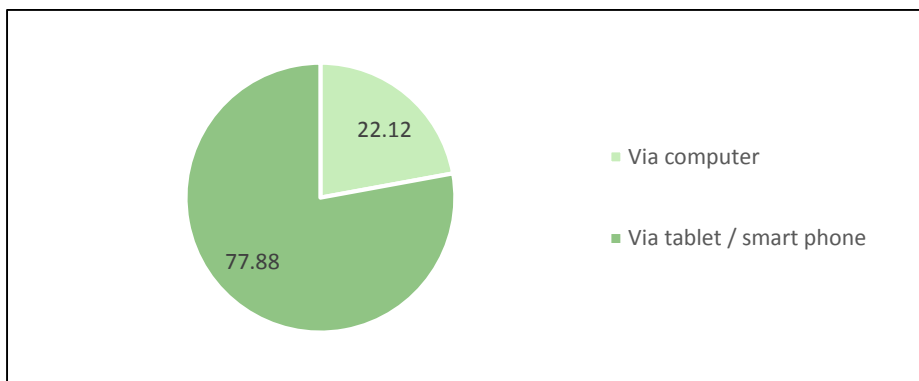


Figure 10 How users access consultation websites: results from ConsultOnline projects to date

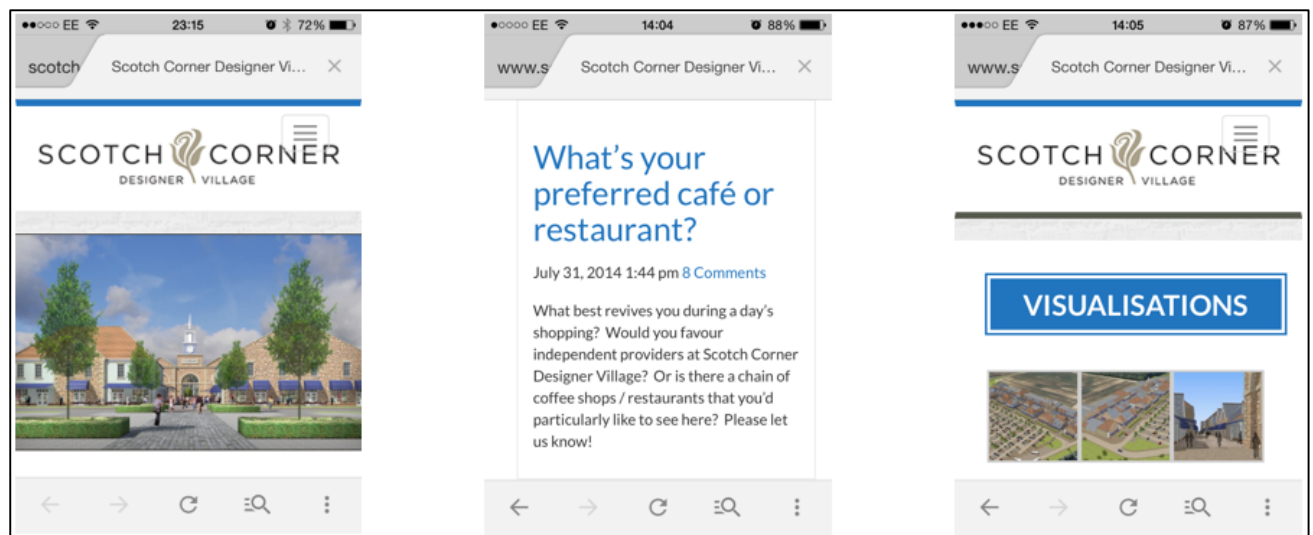


Figure 11 Scotch Corner Designer Village website on an iPhone

Online consultation is particularly popular among younger age groups:

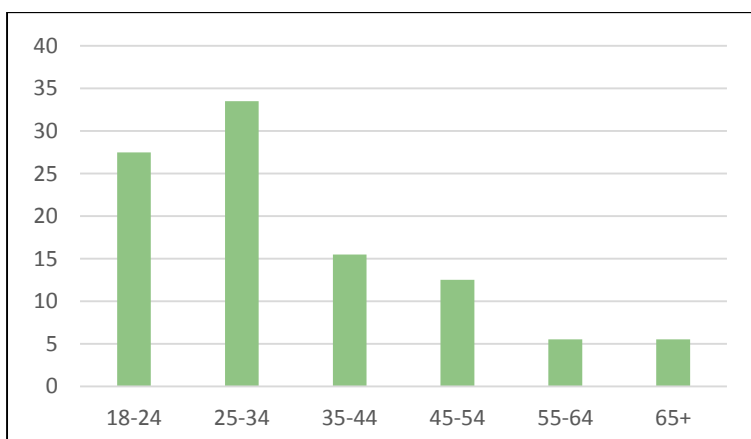


Figure 12 Ages of those taking part: results from ConsultOnline projects to date

Much has been written on the importance of targeting ‘hard to reach groups’<sup>6</sup> and ‘consultation fatigue’ is another common barrier to involvement.

Some traditionally ‘hard-to-reach’ groups can gain access to a consultation best through a website:

*Access to a personal computer has indeed revolutionised the opportunity to contribute to public debate for people who were previously struggling to be heard, and the ability of software to support innovative protocols never ceases to amaze. Text-to speech enables blind people to use the internet and speech-to-text is similarly useful for deaf people. Web designers are themselves urged to meet demanding new accessibility standards to ensure that disabled people can take advantage of these latest forms of communications.*<sup>7</sup>

ConsultOnline developed because it was felt that many people – particularly commuters, families with young children, the elderly and disabled – were not easily able to attend consultation events and provides an alternative accessible means of engagement.

A good consultation is accessible in every reasonable way possible. In practical terms, provision should be made for the partially sighted and translations provided for communities with a high proportion of non-English speakers. Consultation should also be intellectually accessible: language should be clear, simple and jargon-free with any complex concepts explained.

ConsultOnline is accessible in both its language and in the varied ways in which information is presented. ‘Translations’ of complex technical documents are available and the inclusion of email addresses and phone numbers enables users to obtain clarification should they require it.

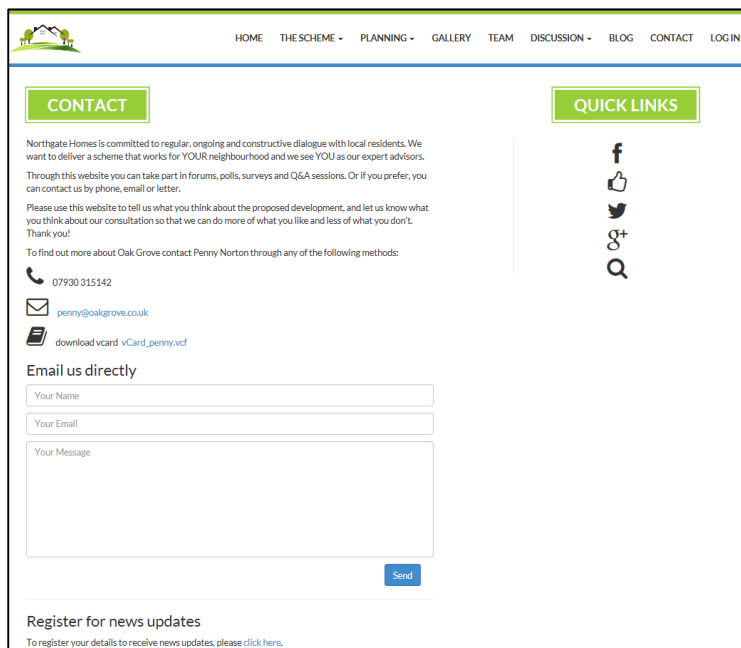


Figure 13 Oak Grove: Contact page

Online consultation is also capable of removing hierarchies. In a busy public meeting, for example, attendees may defer to a dominating character or group leader. Ultimately those members are not adequately represented, despite their presence. Online, and particularly behind the veil of a

<sup>6</sup> These may involve all or some of the following: young people, black and minority ethnic groups, people with disabilities (physical and mental), the elderly, LGBT groups, travellers, drug users, ex-offenders and rural communities. Whereas not normally seen as ‘unfranchised’, women and business people are sometimes included in the hard-to-reach category on the basis that they have little time available for taking part in consultations.

<sup>7</sup> Jones, R. A. (2009). *The Art of Consultation*. London: Biteback Publishing Limited.

username, individuals are more likely to voice their opinions without fear of repercussions, while personal details remain confidential but are accessible to the local authority as a confidential appendix to the SCI.

An excellent consultation should always retain a focus on eliciting responses from key stakeholders: it should not be assumed that simply because response levels are high, the community is adequately represented.

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 – but with clearly communicated aims and objectives**

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. The Community Planning website warns against unrealistic visions:

*Nothing much is likely to be achieved without raising expectations. Yet dwelling entirely on the utopian can be frustrating. Strike a balance between setting visionary utopian goals and being realistic about the practical options available.<sup>8</sup>*

Having run many consultations on behalf of property developers, I would suggest that entrusting the development of a vision to the local community is a step too far on the Ladder of Participation<sup>9</sup>. In development, vision is limited by both planning restrictions (such as density, height, massing and unit size) and economic viability. Excellent consultation does not offer a community a blank canvas on which to create its vision but manages a constructive dialogue: 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.

The importance of professionals, who possess an understanding of long term implications must be carefully balanced against ‘people’ power:

*Councillors and officers will often have to make their own judgement about the weight to be given to one or other of the views expressed. They may also have to consider carefully whether the aspirations and needs of future generations - who will perhaps be most affected by any change - might differ significantly from those of today’s population.<sup>10</sup>*

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<sup>8</sup> [communityplanning.net](http://communityplanning.net). (2014)

<sup>9</sup> Sherry Arnstein’s ‘Ladder of Participation’, originally published in ‘A Ladder of Citizen Participation’, Journal of the American Institute of Planners, vol 35 no. 4 July 1969 (Jones, 2009). The varying degrees of consultation have been described as a ‘ladder’, as follows:

*The Ladder of Participation<sup>9</sup>*

- *citizen control*
- *delegated power*
- *partnership*
- *placation*
- *consultation*
- *informing*
- *therapy*
- *manipulation*

<sup>10</sup> Bristol City Council. (2014, September 26). [Council and democracy > Have your say](#)

Websites are well placed to communicate a vision and to encourage others to share in it. The Home page of a ConsultOnline website shows an inspiring image of the proposed development alongside text designed to engage:

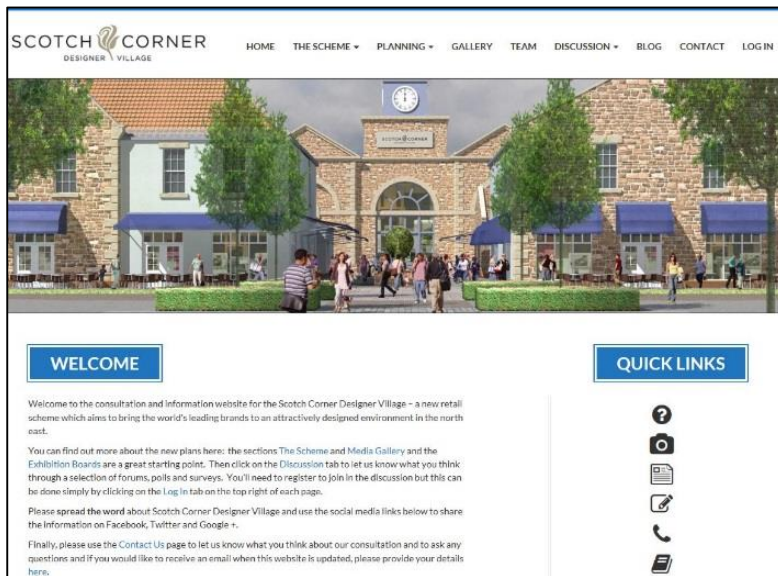


Figure 14 Scotch Corner Designer Village: Home page

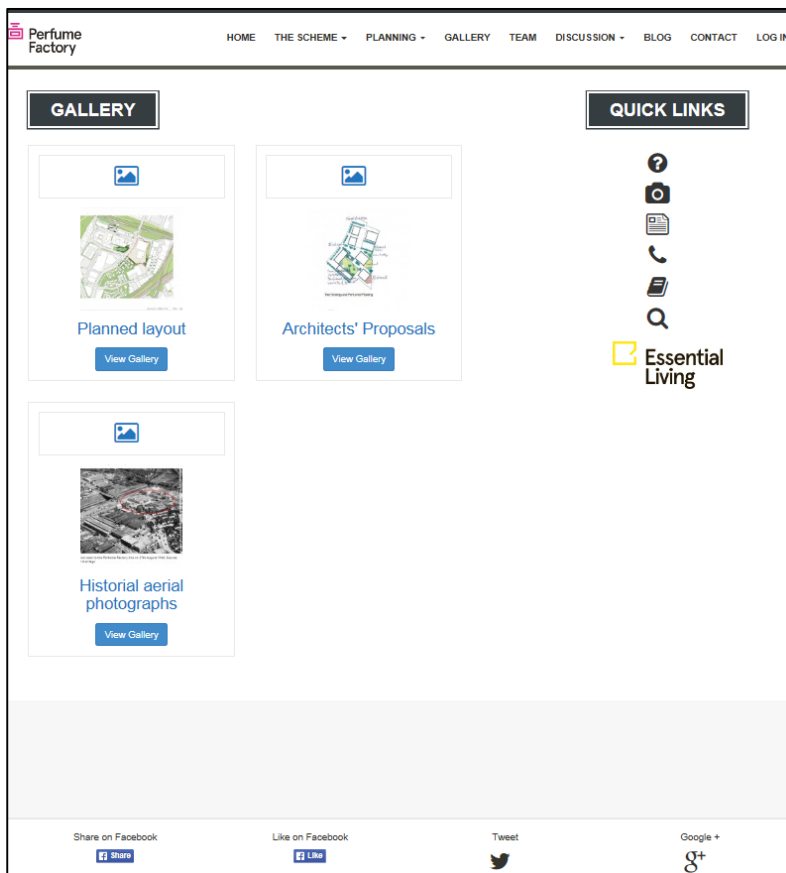


Figure 15 The Perfume Factory: Gallery

The vision is not solely that of the consultant's, however: the consultee is encouraged to post images and enter into a wide range of discussion forums:

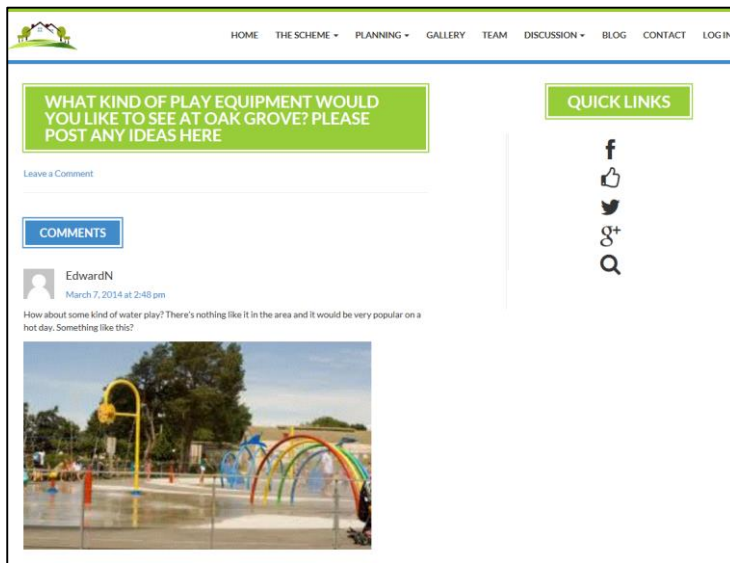


Figure 16 Oak Grove: Picture Boards

### Appropriate selection of tactics

The methods selected are 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 necessary.

With the advent of online communication, the extensive toolbox of consultation techniques has expanded considerably. Excellent consultation should focus on those techniques which elicit the most through responses and produces the most discernible results.

Choosing the most appropriate tactics is at the heart of excellent consultation. It may be suggested that online consultation is a single tactic, but I would dispute this. 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. Beyond the website, the service also enables communication via Facebook, Twitter and. Above all, ConsultOnline aims to communicate with people in a way that is deliberately interactive, enjoyable and user-friendly.

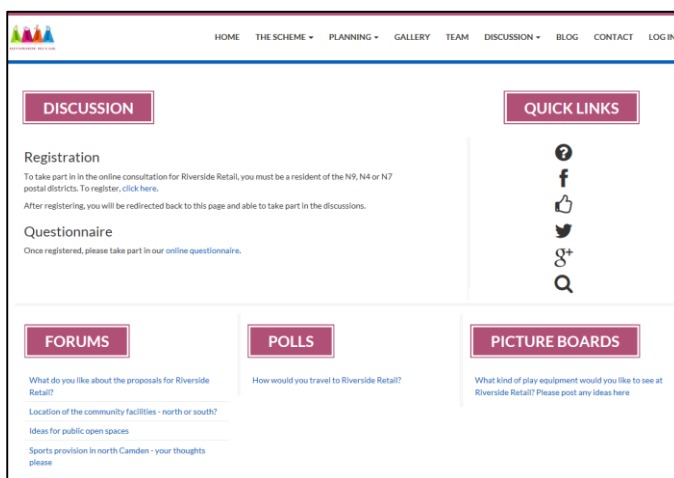


Figure 17 Riverside Retail: Discussion home page

Gammel and Jones support the view that online consultation can attract users' attention because of its innovative nature:

*Part of the problem is that so many of the traditional methods are regarded as passé. They have been done to death and the novelty has worn off. Questionnaires are a case in point. Experienced consultors know that there is far more to consultation than surveys and recognise that quantitative data is frequently less useful than the qualitative variety.<sup>11</sup>*

I do not assume, however, that everyone prefers to communicate online, which is why ConsultOnline has operated alongside meetings with groups, newsletters and public exhibitions.

### **Appropriate timing**

As with any strategically planned communication, timing is crucial:

*Establishing an honest relationship with a community takes time. The earlier the engagement takes place, the more effective this can be. It goes without saying that local people need to be involved at the very start of the process to gain a real sense of ownership.<sup>12</sup>*

Consultation should be planned within timescales that allow for consultees to be informed and respond, and results collated, analysed and considered prior to a decision being made. Consultors should avoid times when people are likely to be away such as during school and religious holidays.

This news story demonstrates that consultations can be deficient in both the time of day and the notice given:

*OnTheWight has been informed that residents in Gunville are furious that a planning consultation meeting is planned to be held during the working day, when many residents are unable to attend. Planning notices have been placed on lampposts in the Gunville area for a proposed development at the rear of Alvington Manor View and a meeting has been called for today, Monday 15th September, between 12-2pm (at Gunville Methodist Hall).<sup>13</sup>*

The duration of a consultation will depend upon the nature and impact of the proposal, the diversity of interested parties, the complexity of the issue, and external events. Four weeks is regarded as a minimum period for a comprehensive consultation.

Communication online has the advantage of being immediate: information can be posted and responded to in minutes. But consultation timelines should not be shortened as a result. On the contrary, immediate communication can only take place if the audience has been targeted and is in receipt of the message. Online communication can potentially spread quickly but only if the message is strong and compelling. As has been discussed, ConsultOnline invests considerable amounts of time in targeting stakeholders, both initially and throughout the process.

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<sup>11</sup> Jones, R. A. (2009). *The Art of Consultation*. London: Biteback Publishing Limited.

<sup>12</sup> Holden, T. (2009). *New Techniques for Risk Management in Planning and Public Consultation*. London: Field Fisher Waterhouse

<sup>13</sup> Perry, S. (2014, September 15). Retrieved from [onthewight.com](http://onthewight.com)

## Truthful and transparent

A commitment to honesty and openness is an undisputed and eternal quality of consultation and integral to this is the avoidance of 'spin'. This very clear advice, from an architect in the 1980s, is more relevant today than ever: *Beware of the best-put-case, eclipsing the best-case*<sup>14</sup>. The consultor should always ensure that the community is equipped with the material required to take an informed view and information should be managed to ensure that the consultee is not inundated. For this reason, ConsultOnline presents information in a number of different ways and uses a variety of means by which to consult.

Confidentiality is an increasingly thorny issue in a world where public information is available at the touch of a button. All parties must be aware of the need to satisfy a public interest test. In the case of the development industry, this now takes the form of a Statement of Community Involvement (SCI)<sup>15</sup>. Stating the need for transparency and the duty on local authorities to make documents publically available under the Freedom of Information Act is necessary.

ConsultOnline provides an honest and open service. It does so through making the content of its website available to all, providing maximum information<sup>16</sup> and contact details. Contributions to forums are not vetted prior to appearing online, but are automatically checked for inappropriate language and spam. Residents are free to post questions on the Frequently Asked Questions pages and all questions (providing they are relevant) are responded to online.

The screenshot shows the Perfume Factory website's FAQ page. The navigation menu at the top includes: HOME, THE SCHEME, PLANNING, GALLERY, TEAM, DISCUSSION, BLOG, CONTACT, and LOG IN. The main content area is split into two columns. The left column, titled 'FAQS', contains a heading 'Have a question you would like answering?' with a link 'Post your question here'. Below this is a 'Background' section with two Q&A pairs. The first Q&A asks 'What is currently on site?' and the answer states the site is occupied by buildings totaling approximately 79,000 sq ft and incorporating offices, storage space, and showrooms, with surface level car parking providing approximately 220 spaces. The second Q&A asks 'Why is The Perfume Factory being changed?' and the answer states that both the Mayor of London and Ealing Council have identified important opportunities to regenerate the area, known as the Southern Gateway, in which the Perfume Factory is located. The right column, titled 'QUICK LINKS', contains a vertical stack of icons: a question mark, a camera, a document, a phone, and a magnifying glass. At the bottom right of this column is the 'Essential Living' logo.

Figure 18 The Perfume Factory: FAQs

<sup>14</sup> Sadek, J. (2009). *New Techniques for Risk Management in Planning and Public Consultation*. London: Field Fisher Waterhouse

<sup>15</sup> Introduced in 2004 as part of the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, SCIs now form a key part of any substantial planning application. As such, these documents are available online and a brief Google search can often identify individuals' views and contact details.

<sup>16</sup> Whether as text, images, videos, technical documents, maps or links.



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

- The proposed development will have a greater impact on those in a specific local area, and so it is important that local 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 valid.
- The strenuous nature of SCIs requires that all responses can be identified by individual and location.

Developers' opinions on the importance of user registration and identification vary and so a selection of options is available<sup>17</sup>.

### **Responsive**

The day of informing the public on a development proposal and collecting in results at the end of the process is over. Today's consultations are all about ongoing engagement. Online communication is fast and responsive, enabling the consultor to become aware of, to understand, and to correct any misconceptions immediately.

A ConsultOnline website can be in place within just five working days and changes to the website text can be made immediately. All posts are immediately received by ConsultOnline in an email, enabling a rapid response. In addition to a programme of posts being agreed with the developer in advance, forums are frequently posted at the request of members of the community.

### **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. These should reflect the depth and breadth of the consultation and so may be available in a range of formats. Ideally, they will be both qualitative and quantitative.

Gammel and Jones question the accuracy of online communication:

*Not long after the new Scottish Parliament opened, we were shown around and during the visits introduced to several innovations, one of which was the eDiscussion forum. What had been the most intense debate? we asked. Proudly we were told that the subject of wind farms had attracted 400-plus postings, a source of considerable satisfaction to shoe who had managed this process. Suitably impressed, we enquired whether this was 200 people who had each posted twice, or maybe only twenty who had posted twenty times each. Alas, no-one knew.<sup>18</sup>*

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<sup>17</sup> The options available are as follows:

- Users must register to take part in some but not all forums and polls; registration is open to anyone
- Users must register to take part in *all* forums and polls; registration is open to anyone
- Users must register to take part in *some* forums and polls; only those in a specific postcode area are eligible to register
- Users must register to take part in *all* forums and polls; only those in a specific postcode area are eligible to register

<sup>18</sup> Jones, R. A. (2009). *The Art of Consultation*. London: Biteback Publishing Limited.

From a legal perspective, David Naylor voices a similar concern:

*Various issues need to be considered regarding the management of participation. For example, can anyone who is interested participate? Or is there a need to restrict participation – for example only to those who can show that they fall within a category of persons affected by the proposals? If so, how does the developer or local authority vet / administer a scheme designed to ensure that only permitted participants participate? And how do they ensure that appropriate weight is attributed to people’s input?<sup>19</sup>*

The same is true of offline communication, however, and the techniques deployed by ConsultOnline ensure, to the greatest possible extent, that all contributions are legitimate. It does this by requesting full contact details of all respondents and using Google Analytics to provide geographic and demographic data.

Five years after these comments were made, I believe that online consultation has a considerable advantage over offline consultation because of its ability to analyse results quickly, regularly, efficiently and accurately. The standard report details statistical information on website usage, user demographics, an analysis of the means by which users reached the website, specific devices / platforms used, the way in which the website has been used, reports from polls and forums and FAQs received, and an analysis of interaction via social media.

As with any strategic communication, effective evaluation is vital in public consultation. Not only does this benefit future, or ongoing 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 very effectively monitored and evaluated. Reporting is of an extremely high standard, comprising day-by-day website usage; average session times and bounce rates; analysis of the most popular pages; 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; maps to depict the location of respondents.

ConsultOnline collates statistical information both for feedback to the client and also for comparison with other project to benefit product development.

### **Communicate feedback effectively**

According to the ONS, *If you asked experienced consultees to name the single most unsatisfactory aspect to their experience of public sector consultations, they would reply in one word – ‘feedback’. We suspect that private sector exercises would suffer a similar fate<sup>20</sup>.*

Feedback to consultees (and in some cases, regulatory bodies) is vital and the link between the feedback received and the decisions taken should be clear.

Not only should feedback deliver the results of the consultation but is the perfect vehicle to demonstrate the success of the consultation, to publically thank the consultees and to reinforce the consultor’s commitment excellent consultation.

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<sup>19</sup> Naylor, D. (2009). *New Techniques for Risk Management in Planning and Public Consultation*. London: Field Fisher Waterhouse.

<sup>20</sup> Office for National Statistics. (2014, May 14). [Release: Internet Access Quarterly Update, Q1 2014](#)

Communicating feedback, and in particular the decisions taken as a result of that information, is crucial but is frequently over-looked.

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 database of those users who requested an alert when the consultation website was updated are alerted to the report being posted online.

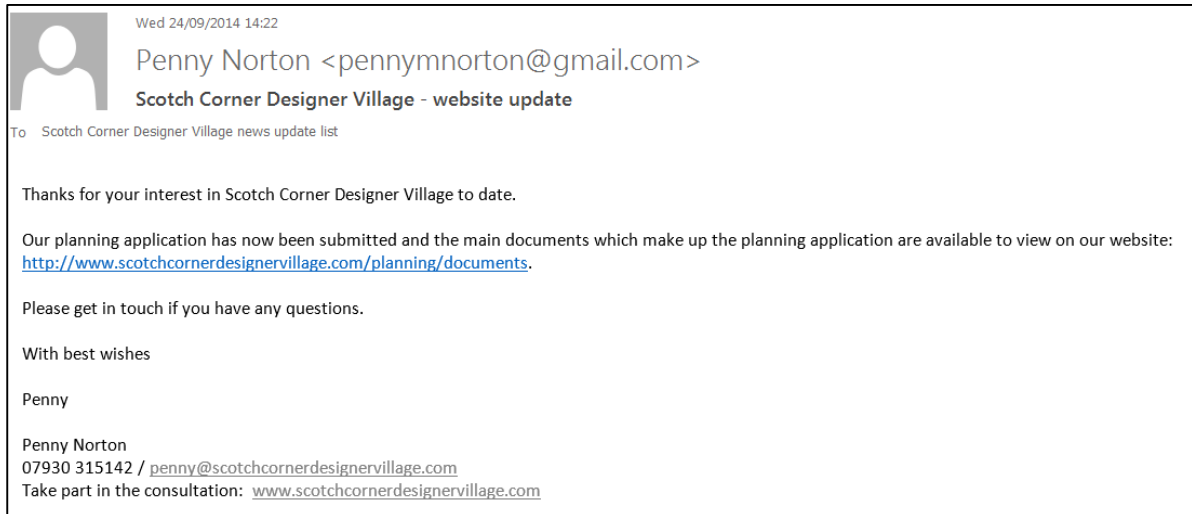


Figure 19 Email to registered users of Scotch Corner Designer Village

### Cost efficiency

From a developer’s perspective, cost is a major factor. Due to the ConsultOnline template approach, a four month programme together with the comprehensive website and promotion on and off-line can be considerably cheaper than the cost of a dedicated website alone. An online consultation is roughly 1/3 the cost of an offline consultation. A consultation which uses an online consultation package and 1/2 of the offline consultation that might have been used previously is just 48% the price of an offline-only consultation.

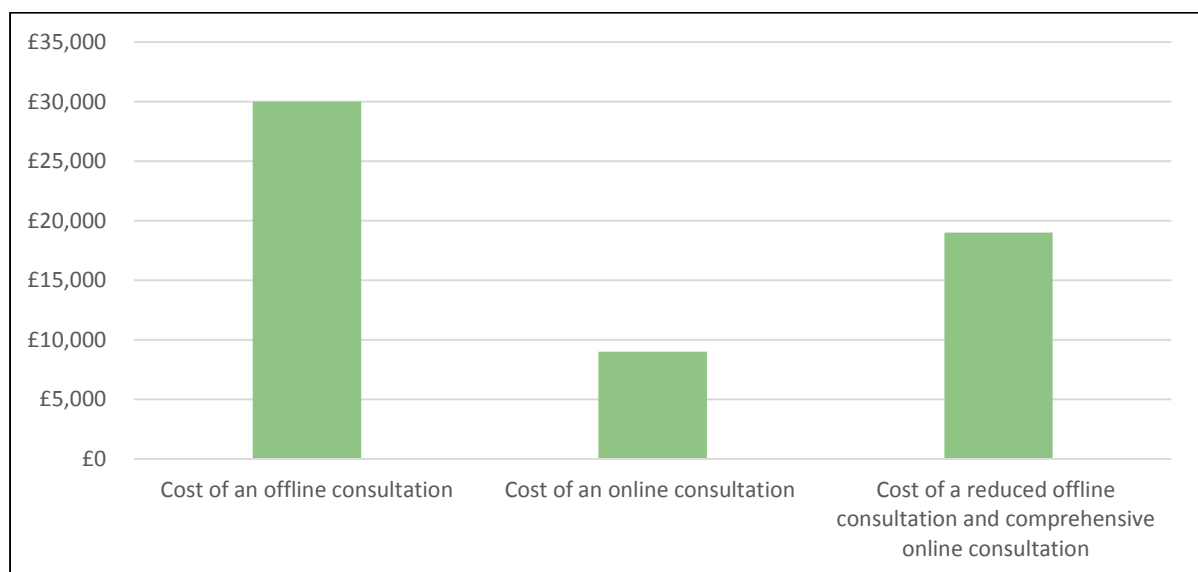


Figure 20 Online or off-line? Costs comparison

## Online consultation: the future

The communications theorist Grunig defined excellence in communication as that which promotes the use of research, dialogue and consultation to manage conflict, improve understanding and build constructive relationships with a wide range of publics. Online consultation is capable of addressing these principles:

- The internet is by far the most powerful research resource. A substantial proportion of information that is required in researching stakeholder groups and necessary background information is freely and readily available.
- Online consultation allows for real-time dialogue and consultation through a variety of means. Voice recognition, for example, is breaking down barriers and enabling people to communicate online in the way in which suits them best.
- Conflict, or crisis / issues management is frequently managed online. There many instances in which this process moves offline but the internet is probably the single most important tool in managing conflict.
- Creating a constructive relationship is based initially on knowledge, which is best sourced online; similarly relationships can be formed and developed entirely online.
- A wide range of publics is best identified online – initially. The internet may supply up to 90% of the stakeholder information required for a consultation, but the remaining (and very important) element is often best addressed through personal contact.

As communication increasingly moves online, so too will consultation move online, and ConsultOnline projects to date show that online consultation can be successful in practice as well as in theory.

Online consultation cannot replace offline consultation entirely until 100% 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 not be fully abandoned. However, there are many advantages that online consultation has over offline consultation: in many cases it is easier for people to take part, 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.

Ultimately the online consultation can help make consultation fun, and potentially address the serious issue of consultation fatigue.