

3

Online consultation is changing the game

Penny Norton
is director of
ConsultOnline



The legal obligation to consult on a planning application has existed for many years and following the 2004 Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act, reporting on the methodology, results and impact of a consultation has become a specific requirement. And localism and neighbourhood planning have pushed community engagement up the public agenda.

Yet, according to the planning press in 2014, 12 per cent of applications are delayed or rejected because of inadequate public consultation. What are the issues affecting consultation and how can they be overcome?

Consultation ranges from a 'tick-box' exercise to a process whereby the community instigates its own vision. The former is less likely to gain the support of the planning authority, but the latter is only successful if the correct balance is struck; successful consultations do not offer a blank canvas but manage a constructive dialogue by communicating the purpose, the limitations, the statutory policy framework and the way in which the results will be used.

Traditionally, consultation attracts older people in the community and those who hold a strong view. But the best consultations elicit responses from a broad representation and give a

voice to the 'silent majority'.

Responding to the way in which people increasingly choose to communicate, and enabling residents to take part in consultation when and where they wish, online consultation is becoming popular. Analysis of all ConsultOnline projects to date shows that 79 per cent access consultation by smartphone or iPad.

The time-poor are considered hard to reach and so it is unsurprising that 50 per cent of those taking part in ConsultOnline consultation are aged 18 to 34.

Another problem with older methods of engagement is the dominance of a specific character or group. Online, behind a username, people are more likely to give opinions without fear of repercussion. Online consultation also allows the consultor to correct any misconceptions immediately.

There is no doubt that the internet has expanded the tool-

box, enabling more accessible, timely, and balanced consultations with the potential for comprehensive analysis. As communication increasingly moves online, so too will consultation. But to some, a screen will never compensate for a human face and successful consultations will use the best of both online and offline tactics.

"THE BEST CONSULTATIONS ELICIT RESPONSES FROM A BROAD REPRESENTATION AND GIVE A VOICE TO THE 'SILENT MAJORITY' "