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**Virtual consultation:** developers turn to online engagement as COVID-19 restrictions threaten lengthy project delays

COMMUNICATION THAT DELIVERS. RESULTS THAT MATTER.

Stakeholder engagement and public consultation for major infrastructure projects has experienced a significant transformation over the last decade. Driven from the top by the NSIPs (Nationally Significant Infrastructure Projects) regime, which placed effective consultation right at the heart of the development process, strategies involving robust engagement and consultation that used to be seen as ‘best practice’, have started to become the new normal.

Risk-averse developers that once shied away from opening up their plans to public scrutiny have risen to the challenge, and now consult earlier and more robustly than ever. Many developers are pushing the boundaries of what is ‘required’ and are exploring new and more sophisticated ways to engage with the public, explain the intricacies of their schemes and analyse the feedback they receive from different stakeholder audiences.

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Freshwater’s sister company, Waterfront, has organised the UK’s annual *Consultation and Stakeholder Engagement for Infrastructure* conference since 2013, an event that explores the latest strategies and techniques employed by developers to deliver effective consultations. The role played by digital technology, including channels like social media, has become a much more prominent theme in recent years and reflects a clear shift in the number of project promoters that are now beginning to embrace online consultation. Then there was coronavirus.

Online consultation had been growing in popularity well before anyone had heard of COVID-19 and the impact of social distancing measures brought planning and development, like many other sectors, to a near standstill. As project promoters and planning authorities continue to grapple with the restrictions they now find themselves under, and try to determine how best to get things back on track when the government’s ‘exit strategy’ kicks in, the spotlight has been thrown firmly back on online consultation and digital engagement.

# BUT WHAT DOES THAT MEAN IN PRACTICE?

Planning authorities are responding to the coronavirus crisis in different ways, but at UK Government level, the wide-ranging *Coronavirus Act* does include legislative changes to support the convening of 'virtual planning committees' and the increase of some delegated powers. From an applicant's perspective, this could have a number of knock-on implications, not least the need to ensure that the robustness and transparency of any consultation process they choose to undertake is not compromised.

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or delay the project

We know that face-to-face engagement is no longer possible (for now at least). In the event that a phased approach is adopted to lifting the current lockdown, certain members of a community likely to be affected by a potential development scheme could be a harder to reach for some time. So, this gives developers two choices – go digital or delay the project. For project promoters with some experience of running online consultations this may be a no-brainer, but even for those who haven't, the decision to 'mothball' an important project for an undetermined length of time could be equally unpalatable.

One of the key things to remember when planning an online-led engagement and consultation programme, is that the underlying principles that should be driving your approach remain the same:-

*Are you engaging with the right audiences?; are you giving people the right information?; are you providing an adequate platform for effective two-way dialogue?; and are you giving sufficient consideration to the feedback you receive from consultation audiences?*

# DELIVERING ONLINE ENGAGEMENT

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Depending on the profile and the nature of the scheme, an online consultation can generate literally thousands of responses. However, it is important for promoters to be able to demonstrate quality of responses, as well as quantity. Has your programme reached out to the most important consultees, including those who are most likely to be impacted by the scheme, or those who have the best knowledge base from which to comment on the issues involved? Have you done enough to engage the *hard to reach or seldom heard* groups – some of which may be wary of engaging directly through digital platforms that are unfamiliar to them.

Critics of online engagement often cite the risk of disenfranchising the elderly and ignoring those who don't have access to the internet. Although this number is falling, recent Ofcom research suggests that 33% of 65-74s and 48% of over 75s still don't go online, so programmes need to take this into account. But 'hard to reach' doesn't always mean the elderly, as commuters, families with young children and the disabled are all less likely to attend face-to-face consultation events, whereas online consultation can provide an alternative, accessible means of engagement.

Once an assessment has been made of the audiences that need to be reached, the focus turns to engagement. Although some traditional channels will still be relevant, posters in local libraries and village halls are replaced by digital engagement – whether through email, social media or other forms of online publicity – to ensure that as many people are aware of the proposals and how they can get involved. Relying on PR and social media posts alone is unlikely to deliver the engagement required, which is why most online programmes feature some element of paid-for promotion. On some digital channels this can also be highly targeted.

Choosing the best tools for delivering an online consultation can be challenging. As the popularity of digital engagement has increased, the market has responded with a host of different software 'solutions', some of which compete with and other than can complement each other. The Consultation Institute (tCI), a not-for-profit organisation that champions best practice in public engagement and consultation, has long been an advocate of online methods. In 2019, tCI reviewed a range different resources and platforms designed to aid online engagement and produced a guide to *Technology for Participation* that can be found [here](#).

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In most cases, a project promoter will need to use a combination of tools and methods in order to run an effective online engagement programme. This could include a consultation website or microsite; video conferencing for online meetings with key stakeholders or webinars for presentations larger online audiences; telephone hotlines, chatrooms and even LiveChat facilities. Some may need to alter or enhance their approach to social media, by setting up project-specific feeds or increasing the level of resource dedicated to these channels, while another dilemma is how best to deploy their development team and make use of their specialist expertise during an online consultation.

One area that technology has proved a useful ally already is in the effective communication of scheme proposals. The ability to deliver interactive, 3D fly-throughs, showcase state-of-the art energy solutions or environmental measures and bring normally inaccessible research data or predictive models to life can be a game-changer, especially for non-technical audiences. Online platforms can be used to make information available in a user-friendly way, allowing consultees to browse at their leisure, ask questions if necessary, and respond with considered feedback.

Effective collation and analysis of consultation feedback is arguably one of the biggest challenges of running an online consultation and, unsurprisingly, one area in which technology is also playing an important role. Not only is this analysis important in

informing decision making around technical or design changes to the proposals themselves, it can also be essential in demonstrating to planning authorities and political decision makers that a consultation has been carried out effectively and robustly. The best consultation feedback will not only provide evidence that a wide range of consultees have been engaged, but also that they have been provided with adequate information, had a good understanding of the 'rules of engagement' and, at the end of the process, feel that their contribution has been properly considered by the applicant.

# THE FUTURE OF ONLINE CONSULTATION

As time goes on, and life begins to return to normal, planning authorities and politicians are likely come under increasing pressure to demonstrate that standards have been maintained and that the public can continue to have confidence in the decision-making process. Project promoters – and the way they handle their own engagement and consultation programmes over the coming months – will also come under scrutiny and will need to ensure their programmes are fit for purpose.

It will also be interesting to see how much changes after coronavirus. Despite recent advances, online engagement is still viewed as an “add on” to traditional consultation but, just as the owners and managers of other businesses are finding themselves re-assessing the pros and cons of remote working, the next few months could be a catalyst for a real ‘step change’ in the use of online engagement and virtual public consultation.

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