

## **Best Practice Guide: how to get the best out of online consultation**

Initiating community or stakeholder engagement activities online makes the consultation process more accessible, interactive, inclusive and auditable. It gives people the opportunity to take part in decision-making in their own time and from any computer; and give feedback or ask questions away from the influence of others. Here are some guidelines that will help to ensure your online consultation is a success:

### **1. Information is easy to understand**

Proposal details must be broken down into digestible chunks and use clear language – a format expected when reading information anywhere on the web. However, the option for participants to read or download full technical documents must also be available.

### **2. It is easy for people to take part**

It is important that you ask people to register if they wish to comment on proposals or ask questions so that feedback can be analysed appropriately and participants can be contacted if required. However, the registration process must be short and simple, with minimal yet useful personal details collected i.e. name, email address and postcode.

### **3. Content and participants are kept up-to-date**

As online consultation can be accessed at any time, it is vital that all proposal details remain completely up-to-date. Adopt a system which allows you to update all areas yourself. Also, give participants the option to sign up for email updates, so that each time you make a change to the content you can contact them and invite feedback on new information.

### **4. Questions are monitored and responded to promptly**

The dynamic and interactive nature of online consultation means that users will expect a response to any queries they submit fairly swiftly. Set a timeframe for answering questions and try to group them together into categories to enable you to send a bulk yet relevant response within this timeframe.

### **5. The opportunity is promoted well**

By running an online consultation, you are providing an accessible and modern way for people to get involved in planning in their area. It is vital that the right people are aware of this opportunity, so use local media and community websites to encourage people to take part. Good PR is free and is a great way to publicise all your consultation activities.

### **6. Key people are invited to get engaged**

To encourage key people such as stakeholders to get involved in your online consultation, send them an email invitation with a username and password so they don't have to go through the registration process. This will also allow you to see who has declined your invitation. Better still, adopt a system that, when they log in with the details you have sent them, takes them directly to the information you wish them to comment on.

### **7. It is run alongside other engagement activities**

Online consultation isn't going to suit everyone. Make sure you run more traditional community engagement activities alongside, such as focus groups, exhibitions and postal questionnaires, to ensure inclusive consultation. Awareness of your online consultation can be promoted through these activities too.