

A step-by-step guide to successful online consultation

Identify your target participants

Who do you want to engage with? Busy families, young people, groups who already take an active role in the community? Knowing who you need to reach is vital to setting up an online consultation that gets the right people involved.

Decide on a timeframe for consultation

Choose a timeframe that will enable as many people as possible to take part (this timeframe needs to be obvious to your target participants). Launch your consultation as early as possible in order to maximise the responses and enable proposals to evolve according to feedback.

Decide how to present the information

What is the best way to break the proposal(s) down into succinct, easy-to-understand sections? Will interactive maps or plans be useful? Can full, technical documents be made available for download?

Decide what you want to get from your consultation data

You may want to analyse the results of your consultation by total responses but also be able to split them by postcode areas; or you may want to group responses according to a set of defined issues. This decision is essential to ensure that your online consultation is built to reflect your needs and will help you to...

Choose your consultation methods

Your methods need to suit your target participants e.g. questionnaire about the proposal(s), a comments box, a public forum, an area to ask questions, a map to annotate with ideas etc.

Design and build your online consultation

Keep it simple and easy to navigate, and make it instantly clear how to register to take part in consultation. Make sure you consider all your target participants when deciding on a design.

Promote your online consultation

Use the best methods to inform your target participants about what you are doing i.e. local radio, leaflets, letters to residents, advertising; and make sure the web address is included on all other consultation materials i.e. exhibition stands, brochures etc. And you should continue to promote your online consultation throughout its life.

Monitor visitor numbers and response rates

If your online consultation isn't attracting as many visitors as you'd hoped, assess what you can do to encourage more people to get involved. And if only a handful of your visitors are registering, are you making it unclear or too difficult for people to register, or are you promoting the consultation to people it isn't really relevant to?

Monitor responses received and questions asked

All questions submitted via your online consultation will need responding to after a short period. Decide on a timescale for answering queries and set up an automated email to let participants know when they can expect to hear back from you. If the same question is being asked regularly, send a bulk reply and add more information on the subject to the site.

Communicate with your consultees

Send them regular updates about the proposal(s) and the consultation, plus any other associated activities or events, throughout the consultation period.

When your consultation period is complete inform participants of the outcomes

Let participants know what is being done with their responses and what decisions they have helped to make. You could continue to use your online consultation site to communicate news and project developments, keeping people up-to-date at all times and keeping the channel of communication open.

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For more information on online consultation, or for a demonstration of our system, Open Debate, please contact Jessica Topham at Consense on 01473 627100 / jessica.topham@consense.co.uk or visit www.consense.co.uk