

Online engagement

1. Introduction: similarities and differences to conventional engagement methods

Using online engagement is not really so different to using conventional methods, but the following five points are useful to remember when you are planning any form of online consultation.

1. Being absolutely clear about what you want to achieve is even more important than usual because if your potential participants are at all uncertain they will move on immediately.
2. This means that the language you use needs to be short and sharp for the same reason: there is little patience in the online world.
3. The online world is highly visual: pictures and graphics keep people engaged; blocks of text are a turn-off.
4. Not everyone likes using the Internet for tasks that need thought and reflection. Always make it clear that there are offline alternatives for those who prefer them.
5. People expect speed and transparency. If you are collecting opinions online, for example, then people expect to see what others have said and feedback on their views within days, if possible, but certainly within weeks rather than months.

2. Online methods and the three phases of consultation

Phase 1: Developmental/scoping engagement

In the first phase of consultation online methods can be used for everything from generating interest in an issue to gathering preliminary opinions about it. This can include focusing on particular groups, such as technical experts, or arousing the interest of a wide range of potential participants, such as young people, local communities or the wider public.

There are many ways to use the Internet but during this phase websites can:

- convey important background information or provide an overview of options. Interactive maps, video clips and interviews with local stakeholders, for example, can explain a complex issue much more effectively and engagingly than a simple text-bound description

- generate useful data to build an evidence base using online surveys and questionnaires
- blogs and forums can provide opportunities for people to add comment, pictures and film footage.

All these approaches can help to create interest at the early stages of any engagement process and, importantly, to build a database of interested individuals who you can contact later in the process. They should NEVER, of course, be used except in tandem with other engagement methods.

Phase 2: Formal/written consultation on options

Formal consultation should always be done online. This does not remove the need for printed documents for those without access to the Internet or who prefer not to use it, but online consultation should become the norm within the Environment Agency and the default method because it saves time, money and paper and facilitates openness and transparency.

For participants, the ability to see that their responses have been received and recorded also adds to the credibility of consultation processes. For the Environment Agency, online review of consultation documents means responses can be quickly and easily collated and summarised.

Good practice suggests that during the consultation period (usually 12 weeks) web-based consultation should be regarded as the 'hub' of your engagement processes. The other methods you are likely to use during a formal consultation process, such as workshops, public meetings, drop-ins and exhibitions, can be used to encourage individuals and organisations to participate online. The web-based consultation pages should also provide information and reports from face-to-face events.

Phase 3: Feedback and implementation phase

Feedback from both informal and formal consultation is vital. Using e-consultation enables results to be collated and displayed back to participants within a few days of a consultation process ending, adding considerably to the efficiency and transparency of the process.

It is important that online and offline responses are treated equally. While processing offline responses may take more time and resources than online responses, they should not receive less consideration simply because they are more difficult to analyse or display back to participants.

Generally, feedback from online consultations should take the form of:

- full submissions (with or without attribution)
- summary of findings

- a response document stating how the Environment Agency will address the issues raised in the consultation.

3. Online methods

How to choose the right online method

While each of the types of online methods described below has its own advantages and disadvantages, you need to start not by choosing the method, but by being clear about what you want to achieve by using it.

Think about:

- The purpose: what are you trying to achieve at this stage of the overall engagement process?
- The outputs: what sort of responses do you want? New information? New ideas? Local opinion?
- Who it is aimed at: who are you trying to attract by using an online method? All possible stakeholders? Particular groups? The public at large?
- The process: are you trying mainly to provide information, seek evidence or views or responses to your ideas or proposals?

All these factors will affect your choice of online method.

Overview of online methods

In the last few years web-based consultation and engagement processes have begun to be widely used. They offer a number of advantages: people can participate without having to travel to meetings; they save paper; they enable people to focus on the issues that particularly interest them and not have to wade through things that do not; and they work well for people who feel intimidated by speaking in public or for whom writing English is easier than speaking it.

One point to remember is that people will not find their way to such methods by chance: they need to be coupled with up-to-date lists of potential participants and marketing to encourage people to 'visit' and respond.

The methods are divided here into three main types.

Type 1 – Informal methods such as threaded forums, blogs or wikis

A topic or series of topics is introduced, or a blog is set up, and people can comment on what is said or respond to other people's comments. There is little formal structure, so it is rather like the discussion during the coffee break

in a meeting. These methods can be either moderated or left unmoderated: a virtual free-for-all.

The best forums tend to be those set up and run by people with common interests; on the whole they are not very satisfactory as a top down consultation method.

These methods are best for generating interest and surfacing people's interests and concerns. It can be difficult to create systematic reports from such unstructured responses, but the lack of constraints can persuade people to say things they might not say in other settings.

These methods are useful both in the Phase 1 for scoping engagement and in Phase 3 for ongoing contact during implementation.

Type 2 – Online questionnaires and surveys

A well-designed online questionnaire or survey can be very easy to complete and can make analysis of results very cost effective. There are a number of points that need to be considered:

- *Can it be anonymous?* How much information do you need about the respondents? If you want to analyse results by age, gender, ethnicity, or postcode, for example, you will need to gather that data. Unfortunately the more you ask the less likely people are to respond, so only ask questions you really need to know the answers to.
- *How long will it take?* A tick-box questionnaire with 10 questions will take about five minutes to fill in; 10 open questions could take over half an hour. If you want people to take the time to complete a long questionnaire, make sure they can log in and return to the site so they don't have to do it all in one sitting.
- *How much information do you want people to read?* Too much information can be a real deterrent, but an online questionnaire does allow layers of information. For example, you can provide a couple of sentences to introduce a question, and links that open up more in-depth information.

The big advantage of online questionnaires is that you can gather lots of data and analyse it quickly, but actually getting people to the website can take as much if not more effort than using a paper questionnaire.

Other than the points above, the advantages and disadvantages of online surveys and questionnaires are much the same as for their paper cousins. Particularly important is asking questions in the right way: in the online world people tend to be less tolerant of what they cannot immediately understand. See below for some generic advice on online language.

Online surveys and questionnaires are valuable in Phase 1 for scoping engagement, but they should not normally be used where there is a polarisation of attitudes and face-to-face contact is essential.

The issue of representativeness should also not be forgotten. As with paper-based research processes, making questionnaires publicly available to anyone who wants to fill them in will not provide you with representative results, however many responses you get, because the participants will be self-selecting. One (resource intensive) option is to recruit a representative cross section of people to use as a control group; the results can then be compared with those of the open consultation.

Type 3 – Online consultation documents

Online consultation documents mimic conventional ones by providing the full text, only with the questions followed by boxes into which people type their responses. The responses are collated and analysed, and then posted on a public website so anyone can navigate through all the results and review both responses. The Agency's response can be posted as a separate document.

The main advantage is that many hundreds or thousands of people can respond in the same structured way, allowing their responses to be compared easily. This method does require a reasonable time commitment from participants, but it is excellent for gathering responses and comments on complex issues.

This method should become the norm for formal consultation in Phase 2.

4. *DOs* and *DON'Ts* of online consultation

DO

- Do try to keep consultation questions as short as possible and use straightforward words: people will not answer questions they don't immediately understand.
- Do group together questions covering similar themes, but make sure each question requires a distinct answer.
- Do think about how you will respond to the answers to the questions you are asking, and avoid asking questions if the responses will make no difference to your decisions.
- If you are using tick boxes, do vary the question format so that people have to think about each response rather than just ticking the same box throughout. You should also alert people to the fact that the format changes.
- If you give people a scale on which to score something, do make it absolutely clear which end is high and which low.

- Do avoid 'closed' questions (those expecting yes/no answers) unless you want yes/no answers.
- Do provide guidance on how long an online survey, questionnaire or document review process should take, and provide a meter so people can see their progress.
- Do make sure people can return to the consultation and edit or complete their responses at any time while it remains live.
- Do make sure web pages are fully accessible for blind browsers or non mouse users; the use of graphics, movies or static images can add hugely to the usability of your consultation for most people, but ensure you always provide an accessible alternative. The Environment Agency web team can provide support on accessibility.

DON'T

- Don't ask for personal information if you do not need it.
- Don't phrase questions in such a way that they reflect your own presuppositions or biases.
- Don't lead people in particular directions either through the wording of questions or through any examples you use.
- Don't use composite questions, such as "What are the advantages and disadvantages of public transport?" to avoid receiving confusing responses.
- Don't use questions including words that need defining, such as 'regularly' or 'often'.
- Don't use questions that are likely to have predictable answers. For example, "Is a cleaner environment important to you?"

REMEMBER

- That people have a choice: they don't have to respond to you and by doing so they are giving you their time and attention - respect it.
- To tell people why you are asking for their help and how it will be used.
- To tell them how much of their time you need.

5. Following-up online consultation

One of the aspects of public consultation that most enrages the public is the lack of response when people have bothered to participate. Too often people complain about being ignored or that their carefully composed comments have disappeared into a black hole.

There is a particular danger of this in relation to online consultation, and it becomes acute when a consultation process generates thousands of responses. It is therefore essential that thought is given in advance to how responses will be analysed and interpreted and the results presented back to participants. This needs to be made clear to participants at the outset of a consultation.

Presenting quantitative and qualitative consultation results

Websites are also ideal for ensuring the fullest possible transparency. Very large numbers of qualitative responses can be structured and presented in ways that allow those interested to surf around the results.

When you are reporting quantitative results online, remember that many people find statistics difficult to grasp, so try to avoid jargon or endless tables of figures and instead use charts, diagrams and pictures. While they may not show all the detail, they are more likely to communicate conclusions in a way that people will understand and remember.

Respecting your participants

Two additional points to remember:

- At the outset of the consultation you should establish some ground rules for participation covering matter such as acceptable language and whether responses will be publicly attributed. The Agency should reserve the right to reject responses that are deemed offensive, and the decision about attribution, or not, should be made at the outset, communicated clearly and rigorously adhered to.
- Every individual who responds should be sent a personalised 'thank you' by return, an indication of when the results will be available for review, and an indication of when the Agency will make a formal response to the comments it receives.