On-line Engagement Tools in response to COVID-19

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During this unprecedented time changes have had to be made to how we engage with communities. It is no longer possible or safe to meet together and while on-line engagement is no substitute for face-face engagement at the moment we have no alternative. Local communities care about their local areas and are eager to shape, improve and safeguard their neighbourhoods. It is essential that they continue to have the opportunity to have a meaningful say and input into shaping local places and supporting quality sustainable development in their local communities, city centres, towns and villages.

On behalf of the team at Community Places we hope that you stay safe and well in the difficult times which we are currently facing together.

Below we have presented some useful tips to help you plan and deliver effective on-line engagement and to ensure that communities continue to have the opportunity to respond to and share their comments and ideas about development in their neighbourhoods.

Universal Tips for Effective On-line Engagement

- Use more visuals than text to grab and retain attention
- Use videos, image galleries and PowerPoint presentations to present the site and development proposal
- Use Plain English and avoid jargon and overly technical language
- Break information into bite-size content
- Include a Comments and Questions and Answer function
- Include Text Aids for the visually impaired
- Consider whether information needs to be provided in different languages or enable Google Translate functionality
- Your response will be better if you promote your on-line engagement through the Council website, Facebook Community Groups and their networks or Apps such as Nextdoor
- Include a named contact and telephone number and email for those who want to find out more
- Let people know how their responses and comments will be used
- Thank people for the contributions they make
- Follow up with people to share engagement findings, consultation reports and how their comments have enhanced the development proposal. This helps to build transparency, trust and ownership of the process
- Adhere to GDPR

Web-based Engagement

There are a variety of web-based engagement processes to choose from such as online discussion forums and blogs, webinars, online surveys, social networking, Citizens Space, Open Active Voting, Poll maker, digital interactive TV, Apps like Nextdoor and Facebook Groups.

Videos, image galleries and PowerPoint Presentations can be used to illustrate and animate site proposals or development briefs. Web based activities enable people to choose where, when and for how long they want to participate.

Strengths	Weaknesses
☑ People can choose a convenient time and place to participate	☒ Some techniques may require a moderator to manage comments, this can be expensive and time consuming
☑ Particularly useful for those who may be homebound e.g. carers, elderly people, parents with young children	☒ Excludes those without access to the internet
☑ Can create debate and exchange of views	☒ Needs to be publicised to generate interest
☑ Cost Effective	☒ Some people may feel intimidated
☑ Can reach large numbers of people	
☑ People can vote and decide how resources are allocated	

Appropriateness

Web based techniques can be useful tools to raise awareness of your engagement process or campaign. Images and videos can be used to present design proposals and site context. Question and Answer and Comment functions should be added to enable people to interact, share their views and comments, ask for information and provide feed-back.

Tips for effective Web-based Engagement

- Use more visuals than text to grab attention
- Create video content
- Keep questions short and focused
- Use text aids for the visual impaired
- Include a Question and Answer or Comments function
- Consider moderating comments
- Utilise your networks to raise awareness and signpost people to the website

Social Media

Social Media has become a very popular method to distribute information on-line to a large number of people. There are many different forms of social media including Twitter, Facebook, You Tube, Pintrest, LinkedIn and Instagram to name a few.

It is very important to have a clear and concise message and it is useful to use images along with text to draw people's attention and interest.

Strengths	Weaknesses
☑ Can reach a large audience	☒ Difficult to know if you are reaching your target audience
☑ Relatively Inexpensive	☒ Broadband can be slow in some areas or people may not have online access
☑ Can raise awareness or promote an issue or change to a service	☒ Difficult to measure outcomes
☑ Good for engaging with younger people or those who are house bound	☒ Limited feedback
☑ Can generate on-line discussion and debate	☒ You may need to consider moderating comments which are posted
☑ You can track how and when people are participating	☒ Some people may feel excluded or nervous about using online tools

Appropriateness

Social Media is often used to complement other engagement techniques; to raise the awareness of a particular issue or theme and to direct or signpost people to more detailed information. Social media can be used effectively to develop networks and virtual communities of interest.

Tips for effective Social Media

- Agree a clear and concise message
- Use a range of social media formats
- Use free tools such as Hootsuite.com or Bufferapp.com to manage your social media accounts
- Always include details of your social media on relevant information leaflets, websites etc.
- Build and develop your social media networks and contacts

On-line Information Sheets and Newsletters

Information sheets and Newsletters are a good way of regularly sharing information with the public or for targeting particular interest groups. They can be used to inform people about an issue, development proposal, changes to a service or a new programme or activity. You should think about how you will distribute the information sheet or newsletter. For example, you could, send it out via e-mail or place it on a Council or Partners' website.

Strengths	Weaknesses
☑ Information can be distributed to a large number of people	☒ You may exclude some groups e.g. non-English speakers, blind or partially sighted people
☑ You can target particular groups or interests	☒ Information Overload
☑ You can explore an issue in depth	☒ Communication is one way with limited feedback
☑ If used on a regular basis they can provide useful updates	

Appropriateness

Information sheets and newsletters can be a useful tool to use when you need to let a large number of people know about something for example, a new development or changes or improvements to an area.

Tips for effective Information Sheets and Newsletters

- Use plain, jargon free language
- Use creative designs to engage people
- Use a consistent layout and branding to enable people to become familiar with your communications
- Always include a name and contact information so that people can get in touch with you
- Ask network organisations and the local Council in the area to signpost your information sheet or newsletter to their members or contacts

On-Line Community Surveys

Community surveys can be undertaken to identify the needs and views of a large number of people in a standard format. It is often best to use a short and concise survey where people's views on an issue are being sought. There are a number of on-line survey tools to help you create, analyse and promote your survey for example, Surveymonkey, Mail Chimp and Citizens Space. Use images and visual data to retain interest.

Strengths	Weaknesses
☑ Can gain the views of a large number of people	☒ Need to be well designed and coded to get 'usable' answers
☑ Useful for obtaining quantitative data	☒ Information may be limited
☑ Gives people time to consider their response	☒ Do not provide an opportunity for people to exchange views
☑ In principle data can be compared over time or with results from elsewhere	☒ Typical response rates are between 10-20%
☑ Useful for identifying and evidencing need	

Appropriateness

Surveys are best used as part of a programme of other methods- by themselves they can be limited in scope and provide little meaningful community engagement. Increasingly email and SMS (text) are being used to provide a variety of ways for people to engage. These work best when a small number of questions are used and when views on a specific proposal or issue are being sought.

Tips for effective Community Surveys

- Keep surveys short and concise
- Think about the survey layout and design
- Use plain language and avoid jargon or buzz words
- Avoid leading questions
- Use surveys along with other methods of engagement
- Utilise online survey tools to help you create, distribute and analyse your survey
- If required, ask for personal information at the end of the survey

For more information or support to help you engage with communities contact Community Places on 028 9023 9444 or by email info@communityplaces.info