

Young people are more pro-development - but you won't find them at a public consultation

By Richard Douglas | 21 January 2019

If you want to engage a pre-retirement demographic you need to understand how young people communicate, says Richard Douglas



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Lord Henry Wotton in Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* says: "The only people to whose opinions I listen now with any respect are people much younger than myself. They seem in front of me. Life has revealed to them her latest wonder."

Listening to younger people is something that the construction industry often does badly. This is not because younger people don't engage in public or political processes. The [2016 EU Referendum saw 64% of 18- to 24-year-olds voting](#), a higher percentage than at any general election since 1992.

We are living, however, in a time when there has been a seismic shift in the ways in which younger people engage in public life. Put simply, they are major consumers of social media and we need to understand and use these popular platforms to reach them.

The current situation

As architects, we should consider early on how our designs engage with the public. The National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) states that applications which "*demonstrate early, pro-active and effective engagement with the community*" should be looked on more favourably. Community engagement tends to use tried-and-tested methods, including public exhibitions, mail drops and workshops. The problem with these traditional approaches is that all too often they

don't engage with the whole population.

At the firm of architects, planners and urban designers I work for, Pro Vision, we analyse in detail consultation events we hold. For one event, set in a village hall and advertised via mail drop, we had around 1,000 visitors to our consultation web page. Analysing this traffic revealed that 66% were aged over 55. However, in the local geographical area, over-55s only

accounted for 36% of the actual population. Also, shockingly, not one person under 35 viewed the site. The implication is stark, the views of older people were roughly twice as represented relative to their make-up within the local population, and the views of those between 18 and 35 who made up 18% of the population were completely unrepresented. These statistics were reasonably consistent across many of the traditional consultations we had data for.

Based on the NPPF's requirements, therefore, traditional forms of engagement are clearly not "effective". Conversely, the benefits of potentially reaching a younger target market could be significant. Younger people, under 35, are generally more pro-development and through engagement they can gain an effective stake in the planning process and their community. Local authorities can gain a more representative view of the whole community and the prospects of securing planning consents for clients can potentially increase.

The solution

One way to achieve better engagement is more effective use of social media and the internet. Social media gives a platform for anyone from Donald Trump to your average 20-something to share opinions on anything from Middle East politics to their favourite contestant in Bake Off. Younger people who happily stare at a phone for hours are typically less likely to come to a church hall on a rainy Wednesday evening to look at boards about a proposal for 60 new homes.

Engaging with the public on our designs is important for all architects and does not have to be solely the remit of planning or PR consultants. So how can younger people be better engaged?

Firstly, make sure that any content that is available physically is also available online. This content must be formatted and suitable for viewing on a phone and tablet. Trying to view an A1 PDF download on a 6" phone screen doesn't work.

Secondly, people need to know about this content. This can be done through targeted social media advertising. Facebook and other platforms can very effectively target advertising to people in particular demographics and geographic areas. These adverts can then drive people to bespoke consultation websites.

Thirdly, you need to provide interactive and engaging content on your consultation website. Ensure content is highly visual and that the language is tailored to your target demographic. Consider an FAQ section, live-chat features where you can answer people's questions, or automated chat-bots.

Fourthly, you need to capture some feedback. You can do this through online surveys accessed within the consultation website. This can enable you to gather far more immediate and representative feedback to better inform the design.

Moving forward

This is not to suggest social media consultations should replace traditional consultations, but that they enhance them as a significant, new means of communication.

Architects who work with clients and other consultants can advise them of the benefits of using these new channels. These include potentially improving the prospects of planning success, consulting more effectively and reaching a lost demographic in a digital age.

Postscript

Richard Douglas is an architect and associate director of Pro Vision