

Story: engaging through digital in Newcastle

In 2011, Newcastle City Council wanted to give residents more of a voice in deciding council priorities. As part of this they created a consultation website, Let's Talk Newcastle Online. The aim was to enable local residents and other key stakeholders to give their views about how the council should allocate resources and spend money online.

The site uses a range of digital tools to better enable the council to hear people's views. These tools include online surveys and topic walls, as well as information about offline events. Users do not need to register to take part if they do not want, but if they do then they can receive updates about other consultations of relevance to them.

To support this, Newcastle City Council uses its social media feeds, including twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, to publicise consultations. The authority does this by creating shareable content such as videos.

The council has also recently begun using Commonplace, a consultation app which can be downloaded to phones and tablets. It allows users to engage with an interactive map, leaving real-time comments which can be acted upon by the council – such as, for example, complaints about a particular junction, or comments on a new development. Other users are then able to respond to these comments, enabling a dialogue to emerge which the council can respond to.

Another tool the council has used is an online budget simulator, the People's Budget. Residents are provided with information about the council's available funds, legal responsibilities, and the consequences of changing levels of spending on various services. They are then asked to try to set the council's budget for a year. While not binding, feedback from the simulator is used to inform council decisions.

In 2019, the authority will upgrade Let's talk Newcastle Online to take advantage of developments in digital tools and how people use them. Having gained a better understanding, over time, of how the system is being used, the adjustments will reflect how people want to interact with the council online.

Among other changes, the upgrade will make it easier for users to share details about the council's engagement work on social media. It will also introduce elements of 'gamification', giving users feedback on how many consultations they have taken part in, and what the outcomes have been.

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Which hat are
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