
THE COMMUNITY FORUM...

Where Everyone Has A Voice

The Roman Forum was the marketplace at the heart of the city where citizens gathered to exchange not only goods and services but also ideas and opinions.

For 2,500 years, the forum has been associated with deliberation, debate, decision and above all democracy.

A guide to organising a Community Forum

A Community Forum provides an effective, enjoyable and inclusive means of bringing local people together to discuss the issues which matter to them. It provides an opportunity for them to meet, share information and skills, express and exchange opinions and insights, identify priorities and, when appropriate, agree a plan of action.

A Community Forum is not just for activists but for all, irrespective of age, background or experience. It gives everyone the opportunity to participate by using processes which encourage and enable less confident members of the community to make their contribution.

It can be a 'one-off' event, organised to discuss an important new opportunity, need or problem. It could launch an initiative, such as a community transport scheme, or lobby for more affordable housing for local people, or perhaps oppose an unwelcome development. Or it can be a regular event which gives everyone the opportunity to discuss local issues as and when necessary.

Importantly, it can also help provide a strong and democratic 'community voice' with which to influence the policies and decisions which impact on local life, whether they're made by the Parish or County Council or by a service provider such as the local Primary Care Trust or a telecoms or water company.

What might a Community Forum look like?

Community Forums can be designed to suit local circumstances. Here are some approaches which might be helpful.

Setting up the room

Meetings should be as informal as possible. That doesn't mean that they can't be well organised and purposeful. But the people who participate are the most important ingredient of a Community Forum and if the event is to attract maximum numbers and get the best out of them, it should be relaxed, sociable and enjoyable. So, large or small, if you can offer a cup of coffee and a custard cream, you'll set the right tone.

We believe it's best to avoid intimidating platforms and formal theatre style seating. There are two main layouts which we recommend. People can sit:

1. around small tables - where possible with no more than six people around each - because small groups make it easier for the less confident to speak up.

It often helps if you cover the tables with paper tablecloths to create a relaxed café feel – and asking people to scribble their thoughts on the tablecloths can provide an informal way to record the conversation.



2. in one or more concentric circles. A single circle is suitable for small numbers but for larger groups, 7/8 people sit in the inner circle while everyone else sits around them, also in circles.

The people in the inner circle start a discussion. After a while, anyone from the audience who wants to join in comes forward and the moderator asks one of the inner circle to give up their seat and retire to the audience. The discussion carries on and the participants continue to evolve so that, in the course of the meeting, everyone gets a chance to make their point.

Make sure you have all the stationery you need, and check that you can stick flipcharts etc. on the walls if needs be. If you can't, think about other ways to display them by, for example, laying them on tables or even the floor.

Introductions

Someone should welcome people, introduce the event, explain its purpose and run through the agenda so that everyone gets a feel for what is going to happen.

A set of guidelines or ground rules can be used to set the tone along the following lines:

- everyone's opinion matters
- everyone will have a chance to speak
- listening is as important as speaking
- the object is to find common ground – but also to respect and learn from alternative views.

Getting People Talking

There are many ways to get the discussion under way. Here are just two.

In plenary session – everyone takes part in the same conversation. If the group is small enough (say 5 – 15 people) it often helps to go round the room giving everyone the chance to say something right at the beginning. This can help prevent the more confident people from dominating.

Small group conversations – sometimes it helps to break larger meetings down into a series of smaller ones, either all discussing the same issue or perhaps focusing on a particular aspect of it. This is easiest if people are at small tables. Often participants are asked to take on different roles such as discussion leader, timekeeper, note-taker and reporter for their group.



It's good to follow small group conversations with short reports in plenary. As an alternative, each small group could prepare a flipchart summarising its conclusions. This avoids the need to listen to lots of reports and encourages groups to identify their key conclusions. The plenary can then seek to agree a set of conclusions and, if necessary, an action plan arising from them.

Action planning

In some meetings participants will be seeking to agree shared objectives and start planning to achieve them. Here are a few approaches which may help:

1. Prioritise actions



List the actions on a flipchart, with two columns against each headed *Desirable* and *Feasible*.

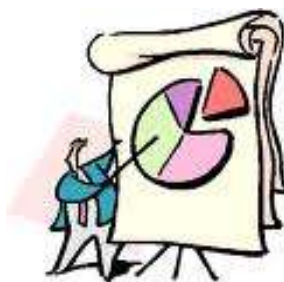
Subdivide each column into three: H for High, M for Medium and L for Low. Get everyone to put a tick in one of the three *Desirable* columns and one of the three *Feasible* columns. Now you can prioritise the actions which score High on both *Desirable* and *Feasible*.

2. Identify the people who want to work on each issue

People hold up a sheet showing the action they want to work on and others who want to help join them. This ensures that each task is tackled by people with the energy for it. It also provides visual evidence of how many people are able to work on each task and where additional help is needed.

3. Work out whether you can undertake an action by yourselves or need help – if so, whose?

List the actions. Next to them have a series of columns marked, *We can do this: by ourselves; with advice; with volunteers; with the help of an outside body; with funding* etc. and tick the relevant columns for each action.



4. An Action Plan

Draw up a timetable, showing what needs to be done, by whom and by when and agree a date for a follow-up meeting at the appropriate time.

Evaluation

It helps to find out how people felt about the meeting and how the next one could be improved. There are various ways of doing this. You could just go round the room and ask for comments at the end of the event. But if you're unsure whether everyone would be comfortable doing this, ask them to jot down their likes and dislikes on a post-it note and stick it on a flip-chart as they leave.

Planning and running a Community Forum - Checklists

If you are organising a Community Forum, here's a checklist which might help with your planning before, during and after the event.

1. Preparation

Purpose of the Forum and title:

You need to be clear about what you're trying to achieve and ensure that others agree, so start by asking yourselves "what do we want to happen?" This makes it a lot easier to find a title for your event which should be succinct and eye-catching while clearly indicating its aims.

Who will chair/facilitate the event?

This can be a sensitive issue. But it's important to find someone who is good at bringing people together and experienced in running a meeting. This may not always be the 'usual suspect'!

Who do you need to attend this event?

Approximately how many people would you want / do you expect to attend? Will they be from all sectors of the community or certain sectors only? What's the best way to contact them?

Do you need speakers and/or panel members?

If so, check their availability right at the start of your planning – but remember that some people might be reluctant to participate if they think they're going to be talked at or if they feel that they don't know as much as the 'experts'.

On the other hand, someone from a similar community which has successfully addressed the issue you're discussing can often provide the ideas and the confidence you need to get you going.

Will you need display stands, equipment for presentations or films?

If so, where will you get them and how will you set them up?

What would be the best timing for such an event?

If you get the timing right you maximise the chance of attracting participants. So you'll need to consider

- weekday or weekend?
- one hour, two hours, half day, morning or afternoon, whole day?
- working hours, school hours or evening?

You may also need to take into account guest availability, the availability of childcare, your community's life style, events which might clash with (or support) yours and, not least, what's on TV!

What kind of event will best help achieve your aims?

Even if a structured event is necessary, the first part should be informal and give people a chance to socialise, enjoy refreshments, look at exhibitions and, especially if they can't stay, leave a comment.

While it's important that the format is flexible, it's very easy to let discussion run on and find that people have to leave before the end. So if you want 'next actions' to be agreed before the close, whoever is facilitating the meeting will need to be fair but firm about sticking to a timetable.

What size / type of venue will you need to meet your needs?

Once you have an idea of how many people you hope to attract, you can identify appropriate venues – though you may have to design your event to fit the space available.

For bigger events, you should consider:

- is the venue easy to get to for people without their own transport (if not, would it be appropriate to organise car share etc?)
- are there enough parking spaces or will you have to make special arrangements?
- what about disability access?
- are the kitchen and toilet facilities adequate?
- Is there a play area and/or do you need to lay on a crèche or children's entertainment?

'Carrots'

Is there something extra which might encourage people to attend your event e.g. activities for children, a raffle, entertainment?

Refreshments

Normally tea, coffee and biscuits will suffice. But if you want to go further, who will provide the food and will you charge for it? Also, will you need to provide crockery and cutlery?

Funding

Costs may be minimal but you may have to pay for venue hire, refreshments etc. So you need to consider whether there are obvious sources of in-kind or financial funding available, perhaps from the Parish, District or County Council or perhaps a local business or employer. It is also worth establishing whether there are any local charitable funds on which you may be able to draw. The National Association for Voluntary and Community Action website may be able to provide useful guidance (at <http://webdb.navca.org.uk/home.aspx>).

Publicity

You need to get people to your event. Networking and word-of mouth are important but if you have access to an email address list, so much the better. You may also want to consider:

- Information on relevant local websites, such as the local Parish Council's if it has one
- posters on notice boards and in local shops
- leaflets through letterboxes
- an article in the parish newsletter
- a news story in the local paper.

So you may need to identify someone with the skills and/or contacts to design materials and contact the local media. If you are delivering leaflets, you will need a small but reliable team.



2. On the Day

What needs to be done and who will do it?

Here are some basic tasks:

- keys - getting in and locking up
- setting and clearing up the venue
- ensuring all the necessary equipment is available
- preparing and serving refreshments
- registering attendees (essential if you want to put together a contact list)
- taking photographs (important if you want to produce a newsletter or a website or let the local paper know about your event)
- organising transport if necessary.

3. Follow-Up

A successful meeting can be just the beginning. The organisers and any volunteers who have come forward will need to get together as soon as possible for a 'debrief' and a discussion of what happens next. This might include:

- providing a 'report back' to participants
- letting the community know what's been achieved/decided, perhaps via a leaflet, a press report, a website
- coordinating an action plan and/or the working groups which may have been set up to achieve it
- contacting third party organisations or individuals who may have a role to play in achieving the agreed objectives.

And Finally

Does all this sound daunting? It shouldn't. All you need is a small team prepared to invest a little time in organising an event. But if it succeeds in harnessing the ideas, energies and goodwill of those who attend – including perhaps neighbours you've never met before – the benefit to your community will be more than worth the effort.

**This guide has been prepared by
Speakers' Corner Trust (SCT) and
The New Economics Foundation (nef)**

Speakers' Corner Trust

SCT is a registered charity which promotes free expression, public debate and active citizenship.

Its approach is based on the belief that association between citizens and the free, face-to-face exchange of ideas, information and opinions - with each other as well as with the decision-takers among them - is a key to rebuilding trust and participation in Britain's civil society.

The New Economics Foundation

nef is an independent think-and-do tank which aims to improve quality of life by promoting innovative solutions that challenge mainstream thinking on economic, environment and social issues.

It combines rigorous analysis and policy debate with practical solutions on the ground, often run and designed with the help of local people. It also creates new ways of measuring progress towards increased well-being and environmental sustainability.



SPEAKERS' CORNER TRUST



Further reading and other successful formats

On meetings in general:

Barry Creasey, *Public Meetings*, Consultation Institute, 2008 (see www.consultationinstitute.org/services/publications-for-sale/)

On participatory methods in general:

People and Participation - www.peopleandparticipation.net

Although this website is mainly aimed at people who are professionally involved in planning, running or commissioning public participation activities, it provides useful information, advice, and case studies.

Two popular approaches

The World Café - www.theworldcafe.com (sometimes referred to as *People's Café* or *Café Conversations*) - a participative process which enables people to have creative conversations while sitting cafe-style around small tables.

Open Space Technology – a powerful tool for engaging large numbers of people. It can be used with groups of anything between 10 and 1000 people to discuss and explore particular questions and issues.

For a practical guide – www.transitionculture.org/2--8/03/21/12-tools-for-transition-no10-how-to-run-an-open-space-event.

For the history of OST and examples of how it has been used worldwide - www.openspaceworld.com.

About SCT and nef

Speakers' Corner Trust - www.speakerscornertrust.org

New Economics Foundation - www.neweconomics.org.