

Organising a public meeting

Holding a public meeting can be a really good way of building a campaign or getting more people involved in your group. Here are a few ideas to help you organise a meeting that is interesting, accessible and run smoothly.

Keep it simple

Running a discussion with members of the public, particularly if a lot of people show up, can be a bit daunting. It is important not to be too ambitious about what to include in the meeting.

A public meeting is not the place to have complicated discussions about the structure of your group or the nitty gritty of your everyday organising. Instead, use it as a way to share basic information about your group or campaign, encourage others to share their opinions and ideas, and gain contact details of people who may wish to be involved in the future.

Publicise it well

The design of your publicity material is important. You need to think about who you are hoping to attract to the meeting, and make sure your poster or leaflet will catch their eye and give them a reason to come along to your meeting. Make sure the date, time and place of the meeting are clearly shown on the leaflet, and that it's very clear what the meeting is about. Just as the plan for your meeting should be simple, the topic that you publicise should be simple and clear too.

If your meeting is going to be a large one, with as many people involved as possible, you will need to do as much publicity as you can. You could use:

- ♦ flyers through letterboxes
- ♦ posters in shop windows or on community noticeboards
- ♦ leaflets in places where the people you want to reach are likely to go
- ♦ a letter or advert in a community newsletter
- ♦ a piece in the local paper
- ♦ an announcement on the local radio
- ♦ a Facebook event
- ♦ a page on your website, if you have one
- ♦ regular Twitter announcements, especially in the day or two before the event

If you are aiming the meeting at quite a small group of people, (for example residents of a single block of flats or street), it is worth speaking to people directly by You can design and print your publicity at the Resource Centre. We have an information sheet on *Writing a News Release*. We also have some good books on publicity in our reference library.

Offer an incentive

Not many people enjoy meetings, and for some it is a big effort to arrange childcare or transport, so it's a good idea to offer an extra attraction. This could simply be free refreshments, or perhaps a video or speaker about something to do with the group's aims or activity.

Think about the venue and facilities

Make your event as accessible as possible. Try your best to make sure it is accessible to wheelchair users, and that people who have a hearing impairment will be able to take part by using a PA system or induction loop. (You can hire these from the Resource Centre). If you think your event will be inaccessible to some people, you should say so on your publicity.

Think about any other equipment or resources you'll need on the day.

Should you put up signs directing people to the right room when they arrive?

Will you need to organise a crèche or offer help with childcare costs? We have an information sheet on *Running a Crèche*.

Might you need a sign language interpreter? We have some contact details for interpreters on our website.¹

If you have a speaker, will they need a data projector? You can hire one from the Resource Centre.

Think about the agenda

If people take the time to come along to a public meeting, it is because they really care about the topic being discussed. It is your job to make sure that the meeting sticks to the topic. Although it is important to give people a chance to have their say, it is also important not to allow the discussion to go off on a tangent that is different from the subject people have come along to talk about.

A good way of doing this is to prepare an agenda in advance. What you include in this will depend on the purpose and expected size of the meeting, but here are some ideas you could use:

- ♦ Welcome and introductions
- ♦ Introduce the chair, explain who called the meeting and why
- ♦ Aims of the meeting
- ♦ Outline why the meeting has been called, e.g. to build a campaign
- ♦ Speakers

¹ <http://www.resourcecentre.org.uk/service/interpreting-and-translating/>

- ♦ You may choose to have a couple of people who know a lot about the topic to begin the meeting by sharing some information and their opinions. Make sure you introduce them so that everyone knows who they are.
- ♦ Opportunity for people to share information and opinions.
- ♦ It is important to give people an opportunity to share their thoughts about the topic. If there are too many people wishing to speak than there is time for, make sure you choose a range of people, including people who are not members of your group or who have not been involved in your campaign before
- ♦ Planning
 - ♦ Public meetings can be good opportunities to come up with initial ideas about action that could be taken on the issue in future. Allow some opportunity for people to share their ideas, but don't allow the meeting to get bogged down in nitty gritty details. Make a note of people's ideas.
- ♦ What will happen next
 - ♦ Summarise the ideas that have been raised.
 - ♦ If the meeting is quite small, this might be an opportunity to reach decisions about what action is actually going to be taken. Be sure to include discussion of what practical tasks need to be done, and who is going to do them.
 - ♦ If the meeting is large this won't be possible. Instead, make sure people's ideas have been noted down, and that you have a plan about when the next meeting will be so that people can come and get involved with the detailed planning stage later.

You may find our information sheet *The Agenda* useful. It goes into more detail about planning an agenda for a meeting.

Chairing the meeting

If you have called the meeting, people will be expecting you to act as chair. If it's going to be a large meeting and you are not confident in this role, it may be worth asking someone else to chair the meeting. Be careful that your choice of chair is not going to cause controversy in the meeting.

Our information sheet *Chairing meetings* has some useful tips.

Involve everyone in the discussion

While it's important to appear well-organised, you also want to let people know that their contribution is needed and valuable, so make sure you don't close off discussion too quickly. The people who have come along to the meeting are the future members of the group, and you need to make sure the atmosphere of this meeting is as welcoming and open as possible.

Take minutes

Decide who will be taking minutes before the meeting. It is hard to take minutes and chair, so these roles should be done by different people. The minutes of your meeting don't have to be very detailed, but they should include a clear note of any decisions made at the meeting, and in particular who has agreed to take on which jobs.

We have an information sheet on *Taking Minutes* with some useful pointers.

Gather names and addresses

Make sure you take contact details from everyone who wants to be kept in touch with the group – prepare a sheet in advance which you can pass round the meeting or have on a table at the door.

Have a plan for your next meeting

Make sure you have already fixed a date and venue for your group's next meeting, and that you advertise this so that people can come along if they want to. It is useful to print some fliers with these details on, and your contact details, for people to take away.