

LET'S HAVE A PUBLIC MEETING

Some general points about Public Meetings

Public meeting is a generic term for any gathering of people brought together by an issue of common interest or concern, and while they can be used as a starting point, on their own, they are often a poor approach to consultation.

Rather than being a forum for discussion, so that all stakeholders can understand the issues, see other points of views and collectively be involved in the outcome, Public Meetings can often turn into just one big argument or protest.

Public meetings are likely to engage people more and lead to better outcomes if they include provision for group work, preferably with the support of a skilled facilitator, and possibly some of the other approaches (eg, follow-up surveys, referenda, PA methods).

Selecting a convenient and comfortable venue and suitable timing for the meeting can make a big difference. Thought should be given to the layout of the meeting room. Arranging chairs in theatre style and having a speakers table or platform at one end can often inhibit participation. It is usually better to arrange people in a circle, around a table (or tables) or in a semi-circle so as to reduce the social distance between participants.

Advance publicity (eg in the local press or local radio and through public notices or leaflets) is critical to attracting a good attendance, as is a carefully thought-through programme and line-up of speakers (who should reflect a good balance or presentation of viewpoints or interests). Some follow-up publicity or published report may also be desirable.

The success of the meeting will also depend on it being well-chaired, preferably by someone everyone concerned can relate to and who is seen as taking a neutral / even handed stance on the issues involved.

Main uses

- to raise public awareness or understanding of some important issue
- to provide the public with an opportunity to debate issues with key policy or decision makers
- to allow the public to raise concerns of their own, make their preferences known, or work out possible solutions to problems
- possible preliminary to or outcome of other approaches and methods for involving people

Strengths

- often a good rough and ready way of gauging community concern about an issue
- potential capacity to bring diverse sections of the community together, possibly at short notice

- participative techniques can be built into proceedings
- potential media interest

Limitations

- poor attendance
- potential for the proceedings to be dominated by unrepresentative sections of the community
- possible lack of clear focus or outcome if not properly planned for or facilitated
- risk of meeting becoming polarised or collapsing altogether as a result of failure to reach common understanding or agreement on key issues

