



Forums

A Forum is an organised group of interested parties such as local business or political organisations, conservationists, religious or social groups who agree to meet regularly to discuss issues of mutual concern. Participants are generally representatives of a stakeholder organisation or group. A Forum is often useful in maintaining awareness of issues that concern local people and in stimulating discussion of potential solutions that include local priorities. The purpose, role and level of participation should be made clear to the participants. A Forum can be divided into subgroups which explore the issues in more depth. Using workshop techniques is another way to enable people to contribute more. It is advisable to use a facilitator when the issues are very complex.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- Personal communication skills are essential.
- Active listening skills are important.

Equipment

- Flexible facilities are needed for regular meetings.
- Useful meeting equipment may include microphones and tape recorders.

Time

- Meeting intervals can be flexible, e.g. once a month or once a quarter.
- Time limits should be set for contributions to the meetings to give everyone the opportunity to speak.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Community participation in Local Agenda 21. J. Bishop (1994). LGMB, London.
- The guide to effective participation. D. Wilcox (1994). Partnerships Books, London.

Web

- The guide to effective participation by David Wilcox: www.partnerships.org.uk

Training

- Facilitation courses are provided by The Environment Council: tel. 020 7632 0103 or www.the-environment-council.org.uk

Level of engagement

INFORMING:

CONSULTING: ★★

INVOLVING: ★★

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- A Forum is a good method for information sharing and generating new ideas.
- Because of the long-term time frame, it provides an opportunity to develop trust and in-depth discussions on issues.
- It helps to stimulate contacts and networking.
- It is relatively cheap to organise.
- Over time, a Forum is able to generate trust, ideas and increase understanding.

Weaknesses

- A Forum is not usually good for generating actions to resolve issues.
- The role of the Forum often remains unclear and this can reduce the number of attendees in the course of the process.
- Small membership may not necessarily represent the wider views of the specific group or community.
- Long-term commitment is usually needed from the organisers if the initiative for the Forum is theirs.



A forest Forum at work (New Forest Forest District).

This toolbox is designed to assist Forestry Commission staff when they are considering which tools they could use to involve the public in the forest and woodland planning process. For more information please visit the website at: www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox