



Small informal meetings

In Small informal meetings the number of participants is kept low, often between 5 and 20, to maximise the effectiveness. These meetings can be targeted at a certain interest group or can involve people who represent diverse interests. When contentious issues are being discussed, it is advisable to address the meeting to a particular interest group, as there is less potential for conflict. They may be meetings at existing groups or informal meetings arranged in a private home, in a library meeting room or in some other suitable public facility. The location should be convenient and central. Alternatively, they can be arranged in conjunction with another event. This type of meeting is a good at encouraging a co-operative approach to identifying and solving problems, and can provide a forum for decision-making by consensus. They can also promote activities and enable participants to share experiences. In order to avoid confrontation, the meeting can cover several issues instead of focusing on one specific theme. On some occasions, a third party facilitator may be used to ease the discussions. Comments generated in the meeting may be recorded or summarised and sent to participants.



Participants in a Small informal planning meeting (Clinkham Woods, The Mersey Forest).

Resources and requirements

Skills

- Good overall communication and facilitation skills are necessary to make the meeting go smoothly.
- Polite and appreciative conduct is essential.

Level of engagement

INFORMING: ★★

CONSULTING: ★★★

INVOLVING: ★

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- A Small informal meeting is usually quick and fairly inexpensive to run.
- It can help to reach interaction and encourage a co-operative approach to identifying and solving problems.
- Small informal meetings usually provide a good opportunity for in-depth information exchange.
- Participating people feel that their perceptions are taken into consideration in the process.
- Regular meetings provide a forum for decision-making by consensus.

Weaknesses

- The format is not normally suited to debate and decision-making.
- The meetings may take considerable time to arrange.
- Sometimes small group meetings may be too selective and leave out important groups.

Equipment

- A flexible meeting facility which is suitable for discussion(s) is necessary.
- Providing refreshments for participants is worth considering.

Time

- Normally a fairly limited time is needed for preparation and holding the meeting.
- Before the meeting, it is useful to spend a short time writing down topic-related questions and ideas.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Public Involvement Guide – A desk guide to Public Involvement. USDA Forest Service (1998). Northern Region, Public and Governmental Relations.
- Public involvement in environmental permits: a reference guide. US Environmental Protection Agency (2000). Available from: www.epa.gov

Web

- The community's toolbox by David D'Arcy: www.fao.org
- The International Association for Public Participation: www.iap2.org

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