

## Forums

**This section includes:**

- A) Neighbourhood and Area Forums**
- B) Issue and Special Interest Forums**
- C) User Groups**

### **A) Neighbourhood and Area Forums**

#### **What are ... Neighbourhood and Area Forums**

Groups that meet on a regular basis to provide a forum for the discussion, evaluation and analysis of issues, plans and topics. They are united by the neighbourhood they live in or a geographically defined area. Membership can be fixed or open. The members can include officers, agency representatives, community representatives and Councillors.

The responsibility for servicing such groups often lies with local authorities.

#### **Why use this technique?**

Allows for the exploration of the views, motives, desires, aspirations, ambitions and values of people living and working in or for a particular area. The outcomes of the group are also linked to the needs of the neighbourhood they serve. They are useful for establishing regular means of communication, although one cannot guarantee that the forums are representative. They may have an input into political structures or general policy development.

## **When should you use it?**

Forums should be used when:

- looking for qualitative feedback on proposals
- seeking to establish strong and lasting links with a particular group or community
- planning large-scale changes in a particular area
- trying to involve the community in the decision-making process
- wishing to influence opinion-formers

## **What type of information does it produce?**

Qualitative. The small size of the group means that the forums are unlikely to generate meaningful statistical data.

## **What are the advantages?**

- There may already be forums in existence that you can access which can keep costs low
- It may be a method for involving groups or interests who are traditionally under-represented or hard to reach.
- It encourages a high degree of participation
- You can reach key service providers in a particular area
- Once the structure has been established, it can be used regularly
- It can be led by council members, and provides a useful link between members and local people

## **What are the disadvantages?**

- Small numbers mean that it will not be truly representative of the whole population
- It is not statistically reliable
- There is the danger that one or two members may influence the group
- It is time-consuming
- There may be a possible political dimension to area forums if chaired by elected members.
- It is difficult to ensure attendees are truly representative of the local community
- It is more difficult to run successfully in areas where there is no clearly identifiable neighbourhood

### **What are the costs?**

- Costs will be low if you can tap into an existing forum; otherwise the costs are likely to be quite high with the requirements for recruitment, venues and meeting support.

### **What are the practicalities?**

- be clear about the purpose of consulting this group
- ensure all involved know the possible outcomes of participation
- be wary of forums being hijacked
- Requires officers skilled in handling community meetings to attend.

## **B) Issue and Special Interest Forums**

### **What are... Issue and Special Interest Forums?**

Groups that meet on a regular basis to provide a forum for the discussion, evaluation and analysis of issues, plans and topics. Interest forums concentrate on the needs of a particular citizen group e.g. young people, minority ethnic groups, etc. Issue forums concentrate on a particular issue e.g. community safety or health promotion.

### **Why use this technique?**

Allows for the exploration of particular group's views, motives, desires, aspirations, ambitions and values. They are useful for establishing regular means of communication, although one cannot guarantee that the forum is representative.

### **When should you use it?**

These forums can be used when:

- looking for qualitative feedback on proposals
- seeking to establish strong and lasting links with a particular group or special interest forum
- trying to involve the community in the decision-making process
- wishing to influence opinion-formers



### **What type of information does it produce?**

Qualitative. The small size of the group means that they are unlikely to generate meaningful statistical data.

### **What are the advantages?**

- there may already be forums in existence that you can access
- can keep costs low
- may be a method of involving groups or interests who are traditionally under-represented
- encourages a high degree of participation
- reach key service users in a particular area
- provide broad views and opinions


### **What are the disadvantages?**

- small numbers mean you cannot extrapolate results to the whole population
- not statistically reliable
- danger of one or two members influencing the group
- time-consuming

### **What are the costs?**

- Costs will be low if you can tap into an existing forum otherwise the costs are likely to be quite high with the requirements for recruitment, venues, meeting support and so on.

### **What are the practicalities?**

- be clear about what the purpose of consulting this group is
  - ensure all involved know the possible outcomes of participation exercise
  - be wary of forums being hijacked
  - refer to existing forums on the Intranet
  - Requires officers skilled in handling community meetings and liaison.
- 

## **C) User Groups**

### **What are User Groups?**

User groups and forums are made up of a small group of between 8-12 people who are users of a particular service who meet periodically to discuss, with or without Council officers, current service delivery issues and ideas for service improvement. Groups may have set or open membership.

### **Why use this technique?**

User groups can provide a regular stream of feedback about current service issues and act as a sounding board for ideas and plans. They are relatively easy and cheap to convene. Their personnel need to be changed regularly to keep them fresh.

Can provide insight into the contextual issues surrounding service provision and “dip-stick” tests for policies or ideas (e.g. sheltered housing, PRO’s).

Take regular soundings of opinions of service users from panels or open meetings.

### **When should you use it?**

User groups should be used when:

- looking for qualitative feedback on proposals and new ideas
- attempting to pick up on emerging issues
- seeking some quick informed feedback

### **What type of information does it produce?**

Qualitative. The small size of the group means that they are unlikely to be representative of any given population.

### **What are the advantages?**

- useful for feedback on particular aspects of service delivery
- provide quick feedback
- can maintain a continuity of dialogue
- provides you with a user's perspective
- relatively cheap to establish and maintain

### **What are the disadvantages?**

- danger of it becoming too comfortable
- officers viewing it as their only form of consultation
- people may feel uncomfortable expressing opinions in a group
- panel members may become assimilated into the organisation and get too close
- Consideration needs to be given to whom the individuals are actually representing and whether their role is that of representative or that of informed individual.
- Care needs to be taken so that the views of traditionally excluded groups are considered, as by their very nature they are often non-users.

### **What are the costs?**

- can use internal resources to set them up
- users are normally easily accessible and easy to recruit
- need low-level maintenance

### **What are the practicalities?**

- need to have clearly identified objectives
- Selection of panel members needs to be handled as a recruitment exercise in its own right with consideration given to skills, attributes etc.
- need to keep membership fresh
- must make sure they do not become too close to the service
- need to provide venues, refreshments and support
- clarify the role officers are going to play
- ensure members have a named contact officer