



**Friends of
the Earth**

How to: hold a public meeting

Public meetings are a great way of putting ideas into the public domain, finding allies and securing support for a campaign. Organising one is a big commitment, but as long as you plan ahead you don't need to feel daunted. Fiona Roberts, Local Campaigner, discusses her tops tips

Public meeting

These two words may instill fear in many campaigners. But banish those images of big draughty halls from your mind and instead picture a full and comfortable venue; the speakers are dynamic and the audience is engaged in a lively debate. At the

end of the evening you leave, glowing with the knowledge that your MP is backing your campaign and you'll be meeting with new local allies to take things forward in just one month. Follow the steps outlined below and a public meeting can give a huge boost to group morale and the power of your campaign.

Checklist

- * **Your objectives**
What do you hope to get out of it? What will people take away/do as a result?
- * **Audience**
Who do you hope to attract? What are the levels of interest out there?
- * **Timing**
Is this meeting time-critical?
- * **Time**
Do you have time to arrange it?
- * **Venue**
Where will you hold the meeting? When is this venue available?
- * **Speakers**
What can they contribute to the meeting?
Will they attract an audience?
- * **Format**
What will work best to build controversy – or consensus?
- * **Publicity**
What can you do to promote the meeting?
How can you use the event to promote your messages?

Why hold a public meeting?

Of all the questions you need to ask yourself about your meeting, this is the most important. You need to be clear about where it fits into your campaign and what you want to get out of it. Break it up into smaller questions:

1. Are there enough people in your area sufficiently interested in the issue to turn up?

Experience shows that public meetings work best when the issue is both timely and local. The experiences of Hackney Friends of the Earth illustrate this well (see next page) and provide ideas for determining what issues will lead to successful public meetings.

2. Is a public meeting the best way to spread Friends of the Earth's ideas?

Bearing in mind your objectives, you may decide that you could create just as much or more impact by attending other people's meetings as a speaker, organising more informal visits to your campaign targets or running a much smaller discussion evening. You may decide to use all three tactics to prepare the ground for a public meeting before you commit to it.

How to...Pull-out section

Top tips for a great public meeting

- cover a timely issue with local relevance
- be clear what you want your audience and speakers to do as a result of the meeting
- get an experienced and assertive chairperson
- target key people and personally address their invites
- start publicity early and go for local radio and press coverage
- incorporate plenty of time for questions and comments to engage the audience.

3. What kind of action do you want people to take as a result of the meeting?

Apart from listening and hopefully agreeing with your campaign, what do you want participants to do? Don't let people walk out of the meeting without trying to engage them in some positive way, so you can build a base of contacts and support.

Here are some types of action to think about:

- Do you have a key demand or policy you want everyone to sign up to?
- How will you encourage the key decision-makers and special guests to sign up to your campaign? Perhaps they could write to decision-makers higher up the 'food chain', or express their support in the relevant media. You could offer to mention them in your press release.
- Collect contact details from everyone who shows an interest in being involved – either now or in the future.
- If your aim is to set up an action network, schedule a time for a future meeting there and then with those attendees who express most desire to be involved.
- Have an information stall at the back of the hall for those who prefer to get involved at their own pace.

Case study: Hackney Friends of the Earth

"Hackney Friends of the Earth was involved in a successful public meeting on mobile phone masts," says group member Claire Wilton. "It worked because it was a topical issue that meant something to local people. Our target audience was residents on the local estate where a base station had been put up, so we held the meeting in their local community hall. The local MP came, the council union and an 'expert' from Oxford. Afterwards, a lot of people signed up to help the campaign. Stoke Newington Against Mobile Masts (SNAP'M) was launched following the meeting.

"In contrast, we held a poorly attended public meeting on the energy conservation bill (Warm Homes). Charles Secrett, Alan Simpson MP and a leading light in conservation were speakers – good names! So why didn't it work? It didn't mean much to local people, and because there was no local focus it was hard to reach the right audience. Where we managed to reach professionals (such as Age Concern's helpline) they came along, but other organisations and academics were impossible to find."

4. Do you have enough people in your group to help, and enough time to do everything to make this meeting a success?

This isn't a job for one person. Public meetings need good preparation. Within your group, agree who'll be involved, then set out a timetable of jobs to do, when and who will do them. Do some initial research and find a venue; make a rough estimate of what your costs are likely to be and work out how you'll cover them. If you're confident you've got enough time, money and resources to run a successful meeting – go ahead. The Local Groups Support Fund (application details on the back of this issue) may be able to help.

If you have good relations with other campaigning groups you could organise the meeting together. Before you become 'formal' allies, however, be clear you share the same priorities on this particular issue.

Case study from Northamptonshire Friends of the Earth

“ **Something magical occurs when competing politicians meet a hall full of potential voters. The competitive atmosphere can lead to all sorts of unexpected statements of support** ”
says Parliamentary Coordinator Martyn Williams

In the lead up to the last General Election, Northamptonshire Friends of the Earth ran an extremely successful public meeting for the Green X Code Campaign. The majority of candidates who attended signed up to all five of Friends of the Earth's pledges. Attendance was high: a series of photo stunts secured press coverage during the month before the meeting and there were hourly radio adverts on the day. Each candidate had been asked to give a speech to declare their level of support. In addition, a matrix on a big board was drawn up, containing all five pledges and candidate names. Over the break, candidates were asked to tick those they agreed with. As a couple of candidates ticked all five, others, who hadn't, returned to match them! All candidates had made an indisputable record of support, over which they could be called to account if they took office.

How to hold a public meeting

1. Format

Once you are confident that holding a public meeting is the way forward for your campaign, you can start to think about its format. The conventional one is to have a panel of three or four speakers, including a comment or endorsement from a local decision-maker, with questions and comment from the audience, and a call for action.

You could inject a note of challenge or controversy by inviting speakers who represent opposing points of view. A 'Question Time' format with short, punchy presentations addressing a sequence of questions, followed by debate between panel members with contributions from the audience can work well and keeps the audience engaged. Avoid long set-piece speeches and make sure you have an experienced and assertive chairperson, who is impartial and gives the audience plenty of air time as well.

2. What's in a name?

Give the meeting a title that clearly indicates the nature of the discussion. Add a hint of controversy and make it punchy if you can. Often questions and invitations work better than statements. The public meeting on GMOs for example, invited people to "Come and find out what's really in your food".

3. Speakers

Invite a mix of speakers who will appeal to a broad spectrum; it will help to attract the audience if at least some of the speakers have a local profile or are known beyond their immediate circle. A local 'celebrity' can make a crowd-pulling chairperson if you can find one.

Brief your speakers in advance about the nature, format, likely audience and objectives of the meeting and confirm both the brief and practical arrangements in advance. Send them a map, confirm whether you can cover their expenses, whether refreshments are provided, and what the transport arrangements are. Also check whether they need any audio-visual aids.

If you want to mention speakers in a press release, get a quote from them or arrange for a media interview – discuss this with your speakers in advance.

4. Venue

You need a venue that is central, easy to find and close to public transport. Town-centre hotels are good, with large rooms, but will be expensive. You should also consider local community centres, schools, village halls, pub function rooms, church halls. If you are not sure how big to make it, go for slightly smaller rather than larger, but make sure there is space for display materials and refreshments. You must check out the venue yourself before you confirm – you don't want any nasty surprises.

Local media coverage

- use for advance publicity and post-meeting coverage
- try and generate a debate on the subject in the letters page of your paper or chat show on your local radio station in the week before the meeting
- if your MP is supportive you could organise a photo call in the lead-up to the event – having it in advance means it can take place during ‘working hours’
- ask the press to run a question and answer feature with your panel of speakers
- invite the press to the event
- write a follow-up letter to the letters page
- press-release key outcomes (such as your MP declaring his/her support).

5. Invites

Although it involves a lot of research, sending invitations to named individuals will pay dividends. If you don't have the resources to check all the names of your potential invitees, it's still worth sending invitations to specific organisations. Be selective: you can't reach everyone so target those people you really want to show up.

6. Publicity

Sell the event at every possible opportunity using posters, flyers, notice boards, word of mouth, email, radio, TV, press, ads in local papers. Drill the date and time of the meeting into people's minds and highlight the interesting bits. By making it sound slightly controversial, you'll get people talking about it.

Afterwards

Firstly, congratulate yourself and your group! Then, think about how closely the meeting fulfilled your objectives. Were there any key learning points or positive but unexpected outcomes you could share with other groups?

Some practical tasks will be:

- write to thank the chairperson and speakers
- let the Local Campaigner in the Local Campaigns Department at Friends of the Earth know about your meeting and key outcomes, so that we can share intelligence across the network
- plan your next step.

How to...Pull-out section

Checklist for the day

- make sure you have enough helpers on the day. You will need at least three, and perhaps eight for a large meeting. Make sure one of you is confident in using technical equipment
- arrive at the venue at least an hour early
- set out chairs, put leaflets on seats, set up the information stall (staffed before and after the event), check the stage and PA, put up signs for the venue and Friends of the Earth branding
- provide basic refreshments before and after the meeting and during breaks, to encourage people to mingle and talk
- welcome the speakers, introduce them to each other and reiterate the brief
- greet the public at the door and sign them in, if appropriate
- encourage people to sign up to your campaign and collect contact details
- circulate follow-up forms for those who are very committed to taking future action
- make sure you have enough people allocated to these sign-up tasks so people don't have to wait
- shake a bucket: don't be afraid to ask for donations
- if you are confident you will hold a follow-up meeting, schedule a date so people can put it in their diary straight away.

Keep things moving

What will you do with your new-found allies to maintain their interest and ensure they are around to support your campaigns in the future?

If an action group is your proposed way forward what will be your first aims?

The answers will depend on your particular situation. A public meeting is a great catalyst for positive change. You will have identified and created new allies. The next step is all about keeping up the momentum.

Call 020 7490 1555 for a copy of *How to win: a guide to successful community campaigning*



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