

Community forums

A community forum is like a public meeting, where members of the community come together at a central location to share their ideas, opinions and concerns [97, 98]. A forum is a way of consulting members of the community and is part of the community engagement process.

A community forum provides the opportunity to:

- › provide a two-way flow of information eg. the organiser provides an overview of an issue and members of the community respond [98]
- › gather large amounts of information in a short period of time at a relatively low cost [97]
- › raise awareness of the issue [97]
- › collect the community's ideas, beliefs, suggestions or responses [97, 98]
- › select a course of action supported by the community [97]
- › formalise and endorse an approach [97]
- › identify new stakeholders, leaders, champions and advocates [97].

Organising a community forum

A community forum can be organised in a number of ways depending on the type of information that needs to be collected from the community. There are two main formats:

- › a speaker presents background information about the issue to the community, followed by open discussion
- › guest speakers present on various aspects of the issue, followed by small group sessions where questions and issues relating to the topic are discussed (all small groups then present a summary of the issues raised to the full forum).

For example, at a falls forum, guest speakers may discuss the following topics:

- › **physical activity** – small groups may discuss issues such as access, transport, availability of activities and what type of exercise they would participate in.
- › **attitudes to falls** – small groups may discuss their own attitudes and attitudes of others including health professional, carers, family and friends
- › **marketing campaigns** – small groups may discuss campaigns they have found effective, key messages, what images would be appropriate, what style, the tone and the type of music.

For a successful community forum, you will need to develop a communication plan that details how to market the forum, who to communicate with and how you will communicate the messages. For more information, visit:

- › Phase Three Materials: Preparing a communication plan

[Link to Phase Three Materials: Preparing a communication plan](#)

Tips for organising a community forum

Before the event

- › Hold the forum at a time that does not clash with other major events or work commitments [98].
- › Book a venue that has appropriate seating capacity, has universal access (eg. ramps and handrails at entrances), is easy to find, and is accessible by car and public transport [98]. Confirm insurance (eg. public liability) is included in the venue hire charge. Book audio equipment lectern, speakers and microphones.
- › Confirm guest speakers.
- › Select a facilitator who is respected, neutral, a good listener, can summarise information quickly to clarify points, and can keep the meeting moving [98].
- › Arrange for additional assistance including scribe/s to write down people's comments, a person to welcome community members and a person to assist with technology. Before the forum, hold a training workshop for these support people (if necessary).
- › Develop a marketing plan to promote the event through the local newspaper, community group newsletters, radio announcements, flyers and direct invitations to community groups.

At the event

- › Collect attendance information such as age, gender, addresses (mail and email) and how they found out about the event. Ask if attendees want to be included on a mailing list or web forum.
- › Set ground rules before commencing eg. respect the opinion of others, everyone gets a chance to comment and keep responses short [98].
- › Develop a series of questions to generate discussion.
- › Have a suggestion box in case someone feels they are not able share their views publicly.
- › If possible, serve refreshments [98].

After the event

- › Complete a report on the key issues raised at the forum and share the results with the community.

Web forums

Another way to hold a community forum is by using the Internet. A web forum (otherwise known as an online forum or discussion) is where people can contribute their point of view by typing comments onto a web-based discussion page. These comments are then displayed for others to read and reply to. There are an increasing number of older people who are active users of the Internet.

Web forums provide an opportunity to reach a wider group of people as they:

- › allow people to participate in their own time and at a place where they feel comfortable [99]
- › reach a large number of people [99]
- › reduce the amount work required to write comments into a report [99]
- › allow for participant contributions to be valued on their merit, as gender, ethnicity or social status are less obvious online [99]
- › can be monitored and tracked [99]
- › can be a good way for people who are less mobile to feel connected to others
- › provide ongoing feedback on issues as they evolve.