



Open house

An Open house can be held on site, in a building managed by the staff or in some easily accessible public space, simply as a 'get-to-know-you' event. It provides community members with a chance to meet the staff, learn about what they do and raise questions or issues about management activities. The atmosphere is usually very informal. The event should be held in a large, open space. Displays should be set up on the site/ around the space, describing activities connected with the forest or woodland, and refreshments should be provided. As many staff as possible should be present at the event. Staff should take discreet notes to help remember the comments and suggestions of attendees, and they should arrange a follow-up meeting to compare notes. Participants should also be asked to fill out a comment sheet.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- Skills in graphic design and personal communication are needed for the direct interactions.
- Professional display designers can be used if available.

Equipment

- Equipment for preparing and/or serving food is required.
- A meeting space that is large enough for displays and visitors is essential.

Time

- The event is best run at evenings or weekends when most people are not at work, but this can demand what would normally be off-duty hours from several staff.
- Several weeks of lead-in time are necessary to plan and publicise an effective Open house event.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Community planning handbook. N. Wates ed. (2000). Earthscan Publications. London.
- Public involvement in environmental permits: a reference guide. US Environmental Protection Agency (2000). Available from: www.epa.gov

Web

- The International Association for Public Participation: www.iap2.org

Level of engagement

INFORMING: ★★

CONSULTING: ★★★

INVOLVING:

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- Small group and one-to-one conversations can turn into detailed discussions of issues.
- Open dialogue and 'putting a human face' on the staff can improve credibility.
- Participants may request information and comment on a proposal or plan.
- The event can help to improve public understanding of planning issues.
- Different members of the forest or woodland team can help each other to answer difficult questions.

Weaknesses

- Public comments may be difficult to record and document.
- Considerable demands can be made of staff time.
- Costs of organising and running the event can be high.
- The event needs to be used in conjunction with other opportunities for the public to voice their opinions since not everyone will be able to attend or feel able to speak.
- Careful advanced planning and significant preparations are required.

- Public involvement techniques for transportation decision-making by United States Department of Transportation: www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/openhous.htm

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