



Public hearings

A Public hearing provides a formal opportunity for representatives of the public to comment on a proposed plan or decisions already made. The organiser may start by presenting relevant information on the planning process. Predetermined speakers then announce official positions of interest groups following a scheduled timetable. Speeches are generally prepared beforehand and deal with decisions already reached. The Public hearing is often carried out in a similar way to a juridical process. Comments made during a Public hearing will become part of the planning record but they are normally non-binding. Hearings often provide a time period during which written comments may be received. However, when the purpose of the meeting is to discuss issues and gather public views more broadly, it is advisable to organise a workshop or small informal meetings instead of a Public Hearing.

Resources and requirements

Equipment

- Good meeting facilities located on a neutral site are necessary.
- Microphones may be needed.
- A moderator may be needed.

Time

- Time is required for contacting stakeholders and identifying speakers, scheduling a suitable venue and organising the hearing itself.
- A Public hearing usually has a predetermined time frame of between two and five hours.
- The event should be publicised early, preferably one month in advance.
- To allow maximum attendance, it is advisable to arrange the event for an evening or at a weekend.

Useful sources of information

Books

- Participatory approach to natural resource management: a guide book. T. Loikkanen (1999). Forest and Park Service, Finland.
- Public involvement in environmental permits: a reference guide. US Environmental Protection Agency (2000). Available from: www.epa.gov
- Public participation in environmental decisions: an evaluation framework using social goals. T. C. Beierle (1998). Resources for the Future, Washington, DC.

Level of engagement

INFORMING: ★★

CONSULTING: ★

INVOLVING:

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- This type of hearing meets legal requirements in formal planning situations.
- Recorded comments provide useful information for planning.

Weaknesses

- There is little opportunity for effective interaction and dialogue.
- There is the risk of creating an open conflict situation if participants feel they do not have an actual chance to influence the decisions.
- Sometimes an 'us versus them' feeling may be created among the audience.
- There may be an insufficient level of public involvement when a Public hearing is held at the end of a process and not accompanied by other opportunities to participate.

Web

- The International Association for Public Participation: www.iap2.org
- Public involvement techniques for transportation decision-making by United States Department of Transportation: www.fhwa.dot.gov/reports/pittd/pubmeet.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