

information sheet 2.7

Organising a conference or workshop

From day-to-day meetings and workshops to annual general meetings and major conferences, staging events is a regular and important activity for the voluntary sector

Five questions need to be asked when organising any event – what, who, where, when and how. Depending upon the size of your group, these questions could be answered in an event working group or by yourself.

What?

- What is the purpose of the event - why do we need it?
- What will we get out of the event?

Answering these questions should help you develop clear objectives for the event. If you can't answer all these questions, it possibly means that you shouldn't hold it! Clear objectives will give you a focus for planning the event and should hopefully make it easier. This will also help you decide if the event has been a success (or not).

Who?

- Who will you invite?
- Who will be interested in coming?
- Who do you want to influence?
- Who do you want to inform?

You should be clear about your target audience before you plan any more of the event. This may be easy to find out or you may need to do some research.

Knowing who you want to invite will help you plan a programme that will be interesting to them.

Where?

- Can people get to your event?
- Is the venue comfortable and accessible?
- Can you afford it?

It is crucial to get this right as it is one of the first impressions people will get when they arrive. You should think about whether people can get to the venue and will they be comfortable – both these will affect how people feel about the event.

When?

You should check that the date of your event doesn't clash with another event that your target audience will want to go to. You should also check that it doesn't clash with any important religious or cultural festivals or national holidays.

How?

You will need to think about how you are going to plan, organise and manage the event. Who will organise it – one person or a group? Who will the lead person be? Have you left enough time to organise it? An action plan will be a valuable tool, and should stop something being missed. The plan should include all the tasks you need to do, who will do them and when. The plan should be regularly updated and sent to everyone on the planning group.

Programme of the day

You should make sure that the programme meets all the objectives you've set for the event, and is suitable for the people you've invited. You should think about the following

- how long will the event last?
- variety – a good mix of formal discussions, networking, workshops, relaxation and plenary sessions (eg a presentation to the whole event)
- timing – short, focussed sessions are best with breaks carefully allocated to stop people feeling overwhelmed and rushed
- continuity – an opening and closing session is vital, with sessions in between that link into each other
- order – a general rule is that the more important a session is, the nearer it should be to the start of the event
- speakers – should be interesting and lively, and well briefed before the event
- presentation
- chair or facilitator – should be efficient, interested and firm
- breaks – one hour for lunch and 15-20 minutes for refreshment breaks
- after lunch – people are often tired after lunch so you should make sure that the item in this slot is interesting and up-beat

Budgeting

Number of people attending

To help work out budgets, you should first think about the number of people you estimate will attend the event.

This will help you work out some of the costs because they will be charged per person, such as catering. Also, if you intend to charge people to attend, you'll be able to work out how much money you'll get in.

Expenditure

What the event will cost. This should include

- venue costs – this may be per person
- facilitation costs
- catering costs – check that they include refreshments not just the main meal
- travel expenses and fees for contributors – agreed in writing before the event
- support costs - such as personal assistants, childcare, carers, translators and interpreters
- material and equipment expenses – pens, flip chart paper
- printing expenses – publicity material plus delegate packs
- admin expenses including postage
- planning costs including briefing meeting for all facilitators
- insurance – to cover cancellation and public liability
- follow up - conference report and thank you letters

Income

- How are we going to fund the event? Can we apply for a grant or will it be funded by charging people to attend?
- Do we want to break-even or make money from the event?

- What is the maximum fee people will pay to attend it?

These questions should be answered at the start of the planning process and will help you decide the type of event to hold.

Venues

You should make sure the venue

- is accessible to all delegates
- will accommodate your anticipated audience comfortably
- is comfortable – seating and temperature
- has good acoustics and lighting
- has adequate parking for those travelling by car
- is accessible by public transport
- can provide the equipment and catering you need, if not what other arrangements do you need to make

You should visit your potential venue(s) to make sure it is suitable for your event, and that they meet all the above requirements. You should book your venue as soon as possible. You should confirm your booking in writing; you should also ask the venue to do the same. You should send an event programme and any other special requirements to the venue contact. It is worth checking if you can get into the venue the before the event starts - the evening before or early in the morning - to put up displays and other preparation work.

Accessibility

Accessibility is not just about getting in and out of places. It is about how easy things are to make use of and how easy situations are to participate in, including whether people can get to and from the venue by a range of means easily.

Every event you organise should provide good access to all. Your booking form should ask people if they need any additional help to fully participate.

You should check

- that access for wheelchair users is open and isn't through the kitchens!
- the accessible toilets are truly accessible
- all the rooms you use are on one level or are accessible by a lift.
- the venue's acoustics will not make it more difficult for people with hearing impairments to hear
- if people need a loop system
- you provide information in a range of community languages so people whose first language isn't English can participate
- that the venue is well lit and warm enough
- that the venue has enough accessible parking spaces
- if there is a crèche available

Extra support to help people attend

Are you able to help people attend your event in any other ways? This could be expenses to cover travel costs, childcare, personal assistance and carers costs.

Catering and refreshments

Tea, coffee, water and soft drinks should be available on arrival. If it's a full day event you should provide refreshment and comfort breaks mid-morning and in the afternoon.

Lunch is an important part of the day – a good spread will make the event much more enjoyable for your delegates. If you are planning a half-day event you should think about whether you'll provide a light snack.

You should check people's dietary needs on the booking form and make sure those needs are communicated to your caterers. You should ask your caterer to fully label the food so people know what is vegetarian, vegan or halal. You should ask your caterer not to mix different foods together eg vegetarian and meat or halal and non-halal meats.

Timing

You should think carefully about when your event will start and finish as this will seriously affect whether people will come or not. A full day event should start after 9.30am and finish before 3.00pm to allow people with children to take them to school or people reliant on care staff to get ready. It will also give people time to travel to your event.

Information and publicity

Good publicity is vital when organising an event and can often mean the difference between success and failure. You will probably design your publicity materials differently for different audiences eg young people and community groups. The design should be attractive and interesting but not too fussy. You should try to write in plain English and avoid jargon. This makes your information accessible to more people and easier to understand.

Your publicity or flyer should include the following information

- date of event with day of the week
- time – start and finish
- title and or theme
- full address of venue
- cost and what it covers
- purpose of event
- who is contributing on the day

- programme for the day
- contact details to find out more information
- deadline for return of booking forms

You should send your publicity out in enough time for people to respond. The longer the event is, the sooner you should send it out as it is more difficult to squeeze a full day event into a full diary than a two hour briefing session. Depending upon the type of event, you should think about promoting it wider. You could send the information to the local paper or radio station for their *What's on* sections or display it in community venues, libraries, GP surgeries and so on. This will reach a wider audience than your mailing list.

Accessible information – you should try to produce your publicity in a range of different formats to be able to reach as many people as possible. This could include large print, audio tape or CD or community languages. You should be able to include these costs in any funding bids you may make to fund your event.

Administering the day

If your group is small, one person may do all the tasks around organising the conference. But, if your group is bigger and more than one person will be involved, the person providing the majority of admin support should attend all planning meetings. This will ensure that they will know everything about the event.

Conference file

A conference file should be set up. This will keep everything together, and will be useful when planning future events. It should include the following

- letters and response to all speakers/trainers/facilitators
- workshop information
- venue information including catering
- costs
- reception details

Schedule

- **Before sending the programme out** - check that the speakers/trainers/facilitators have confirmed their attendance and send them the draft programme
- **After sending the programme out** – acknowledge receipts of registration forms, confirm booking and issue invoices or receipts to participants as required
- **Two to three weeks before the event** – send relevant papers to participants, including map of venue. If you're providing papers on the day in the delegate pack, you can miss this stage out and send the map with confirmation of booking
- **One week before the event**
 - prepare a final list of participants
 - make a list of workshops or discussion groups
 - prepare instructions on workshops or discussion groups for facilitators, including housekeeping from venue
 - prepare badges
 - prepare conference box containing sellotape, drawing pins, blu tack, pens, paper, scissors, flipcharts, etc

- check that enough support will be available on the day, such as registration and go-fors

- **One day before the event** – make a final check and do any last minute jobs
- **On the day** – arrive well before the event starts to set up. Registration should be staffed before the event starts to catch those people who arrive early. You should make a final check that everything is ready and workshops and other rooms are clearly signposted. You should direct speakers/trainers/facilitators to their positions and ensure they have any briefing notes they might need.
- **After the event** – send thank you letters and fees to speakers/trainers/facilitators; follow up any comments; and write the report and send it to people who attended or anyone else who would need to see it

Event evaluation

You should make sure that every event is evaluated. A form should be drafted and included in delegate packs. At the end of the event you should remind participants to fill it in. The evaluation could cover how the event was organised, venue, food, speakers, workshops and space for other comments.

Other resources

Organising an event by SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations) available from www.scvo.org.uk/events/organising_event/index.htm

Effective and accessible events: a guide for the voluntary sector by SCVO from www.scvo.org.uk/equalities/resource_base/disability/accessible_events/index.htm

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