

Practical guidance on setting up events

Venues and catering

There are certain tasks to be done, pieces of information to be gathered, and procedures to follow that will make setting up an event as stress-free as possible. We have highlighted a few of the basics below.

First of all, we're assuming you will use local community venues, such as parish or church halls. But don't be afraid to ask local businesses (including hotels and conference centres) if they are willing to host your event at a reduced rate, or even for free; they could be keen to support what you are doing. You should also contact your local authority and town or parish council to see if you can use a room in the town hall or main council offices. Don't forget to ask for a discounted rate.

Before you book a venue you need to have a reasonable idea of the maximum number of people you hope to get, and what sort of activities you will be doing – a lot of our suggested participatory exercises require the audience to be split into groups, so it might be easier to have the venue set up with a series of tables with 4-8 chairs around them in advance.

Make sure you have a contact name, landline and mobile number, and email address for your key contact person at the venue.

Questions to ask about the venue

- How many attendees can the room accommodate, and in what layout (see box below)?
- Does this leave space for other tables you might need in the room – for refreshments, signing-in or displaying materials?
- What is the availability of projection equipment – projector and screen (or blank wall)?
- Is there any audio equipment available?
- Are flipcharts, flipchart paper and marker pens provided?
- If the venue provides equipment such as flipcharts and projectors, will they charge extra for them?
- How far is it from the train station/bus station?
- Are there bike racks or parking spaces available?
- Is it well-lit outside and easy to find (very important for evening events – you may wish to put up extra

direction signs from the main street)?

- Are there pillars or other obstructions in the room?
- Can the blinds be shut during the day, to make projection possible on sunny days?
- What are the facilities and access like for disabled people?
- Do they have a useful 'how to get here' map that they can let you have?

Catering

Whatever the length of your event, you'll need to provide tea, coffee and water and/or juice and some biscuits. It's a good idea to have these set up at the beginning and then available again at the break time(s). Tell people to keep their cups near them as in smaller venues you can run out of cups if people use several each.

If your event includes lunch or a light supper (which helps keep the energy levels in the room high), then you will need to provide catering. Always prepare 50% of the food so that it's suitable for vegetarians as it's unlikely you will know dietary requirements in advance.

As a community group it's perfectly acceptable for you to ask for donations towards the cost of running the event and providing the catering. Take an old biscuit tin with you and keep it where the refreshments are with a clear sign asking for donations.

Getting in and setting up

If you are using a hotel or a local authority conference room, there's a good chance that they will set the room up for you, in whatever layout you wish. But it's still worth getting in there early to make any adjustments you need to. Village halls and community centres are less likely to have the staff available, so you will need to assume that you do the set-up yourself.

You want to be confident that you are ready before people come trickling in, and we recommend you arrive at your venue at least one hour before your event starts (so make sure that when you book the venue you check that you can do this). While the venue contact person is there, make sure that they show you where the important things are:

- Fire exits and extinguishers
- Toilets
- Heating and lighting controls
- Any keys for windows and doors
- Tea making facilities, plates and cups
- Washing up facilities (if you are to do this yourselves at the end)
- Where the rubbish goes

It's not a bad idea to take washing up liquid, tea towels and some bin bags with you to smaller venues.

If the entrance to the venue is not immediately obvious, or if your room is in the bowels of a bigger building, then make some signs with A4 paper in plastic wallets to blu-tac to the walls in various places outside, to guide people in. Always set up any equipment first – it's less stressful to have to hand out papers after people have arrived than it is to be fiddling with a stubborn projector!

Set up a registration table inside the door, and wherever possible, make sure it is manned by someone the whole time. If you have used a pre-registration procedure, make sure you have a printed attendee list, alphabetically by surname, where people can tick themselves off. Add lots of spare lines for those who have not pre-registered.

On the registration table, also have a few sheets of sticky labels and some marker pens, and ask people to write themselves a name badge as they arrive.

Room layouts

Venue managers will ask you what layout you would like, if they are setting up the room for you. Standard layouts include:

- Theatre style (cinema style): all seats lined up facing the front, no individual tables
- Classroom style (lecture hall): small tables facing the front with one or two chairs at each
- Boardroom: large table in the middle with seats all around
- Cabaret: lots of (usually round) tables with seats all around (make sure you check whether there is room for them to face the front during presentation sections)
- U-shape or horseshoe: Tables arranged in a U-shape with seats all around the outside

When some venues state their maximum capacity it refers to theatre style, but a room that takes 50 people theatre style may only take 20 people cabaret style. Make sure you check.

Kicking off the event

Make sure that early on in your introduction to the event that you inform people when they will get breaks and refreshments, especially important if it's an event where they are expecting lunch or supper, and use this announcement as a time to remind them that you would welcome donations towards the cost of providing the catering. This is a good time to also deal with the standard announcements – there are the fire escapes, there are the toilets, and please turn off your mobile phones etc.

During the breaks, be vigilant about the time and give 3-minute and 1-minute warnings to call people back to their seats, and get straight into what you are doing on time, even if they have not all returned; people who have been caught out once don't tend to do it again, and over-running breaks can be the death of an otherwise well-run event.

Conclusion

We hope this section has provided some useful guidance on the reasons for running public events, the skills you will need to develop and the practicalities that you will need to deal with. Being the public face of an event is not something everyone will feel comfortable doing. However, there are plenty of other roles that need to be played that are less 'visible' but equally important. Whoever your group is, you probably already have the skills and the characters to fill most of these roles – and practice makes perfect!