

how to...

# Put on a public event

Activism guide • October 2016

Events are a great way to raise awareness about an issue and get people involved in taking action. They're also essential for maintaining the local profile of your group and drawing in new people. They bring people together and can spark new ideas. A good event will feel useful and people will leave glad that they had been there and energised about the issue you are campaigning on.

The key to a great event is having clear aims and good planning. The first thing to do is work out what you are trying to achieve and what you want people to get out of it. There are lots of different types of events you can organise which will be suited to different formats, venues and timings.



## What kind of event?

Think about why you are organising your event and what you want to get out of it. Are you trying to get people interested in campaigning on a particular issue? Are you trying to mobilise people for a specific event or action? Think about an event you've been to that was really inspiring or exciting. What made it so good?

Different types of events include: a film screening and talk; a speaker event followed by a discussion; a skillshare or training event; a networking event; a walking tour and a social gathering.

## Who are you trying to attract?

Who do you want to come to your event? How can you make your event relevant to as many people as possible? How can it be a useful event if only a few people turn up?

## An organising timeline

Some events need to be planned further in advance than others, but a straightforward speaker event should look something like:

- **Six weeks in advance:** Venue and main speaker(s) (if relevant) should be booked by this point.
- **Four weeks in advance:** Put your publicity plan together. Have your leaflet prepared and start promotion.
- **Three weeks in advance:** Organise whatever campaign materials and equipment you might need for the event.
- **The week before:** Send reminders out. Key organisers agree roles for the event itself and what will happen.

## What are you asking people to do?

What kind of action do you want people to take as a result of the event? As well as listening and hopefully agreeing with your campaign, what do you want them to do? Whether it's telling more people about the campaign issue; signing a petition; or coming to a future event or action.

## Can you make your event timely?

Can you hook it onto a key moment or in the context of a big national event or action?

## Joint events

Are there any other local campaign groups who might want to organise the event with you or co-host it? Organising joint events is a great way of extending your reach and the number of people who will find out about it.

## Logistics

### Date and time

Should it be during the week or at the weekend? Some days are better than others (e.g. people tend to have plans on Friday nights; and Sundays and Mondays can lack energy). Try to avoid clashing with other similar events.

### Venue

Different types of events are suited to different spaces. Ideally you will have a fully accessible venue with good public transport links.

Things to think about in choosing a venue:

- How many people you are expecting will come? You want a space that will be big enough but not so big that it will feel empty if you don't have enough people.
- Do you need any equipment for example a projector, speakers or wifi connection?
- Do you need catering facilities for making tea and coffee or providing food?
- Can you decorate the space? Banners, photos and props are great for this.
- Is the venue free or do you have to pay to hire the space? Can you cover it with your group's funds; donations on the night or help from a bigger organisation?
- Is the venue wheelchair accessible? Is there a lift? Is there a hearing loop available?

## Time for conversations

The time before and after the event is also really important, for example if people arrive early or stay talking after the event. These can be moments where you engage people on an individual basis and might be what encourages them to get more involved with your group or campaign.

Announcing a pub that people can go to where conversations can continue can lead to people meeting each other; building relationships and coming up with ideas and inspiration for future actions and events.

## Publicity

You can never do too much publicity for an event. The key is to get across why people should come and what they're going to get out of it. Put some thought in to your event title as it's one of the main things that will get people there. It can often help to reference something people have already heard of, but also to make it sound intriguing, compelling or fun.

Think about who you are hoping to attract and how you can reach them. Make a promotion plan as a group and work out who is going to contact who. Leave enough time for the publicity to cascade out and be passed on.

## Websites and email

Put your event on your group's website or blog if you have one. You can also ask any local listings sites to list the event.

After sending the event to your group's email list:

- Email friends you think might be interested; especially if they are involved in other groups that they could share the event with.
- Email information about your event to different local groups and ask them to share it with their members. You can edit the invitation to the event so it is relevant to a particular group.
- National organisations you are affiliated to may be able to send it to their supporters in your area.

## Posters and flyers

Make a poster and some leaflets. You might be able to put them up in local shops, leisure and community centres and libraries. You can also

## Thinking outside the room

### Film screenings on location

Liverpool Campaign Against Arms Trade organised an outdoor film screening by projecting short films onto the side of an arms company building. It was organised jointly with a local film co-op as part of an international cinema month. As well as raising awareness about the arms trade, the event mobilised people to get involved with protests against a major arms fair in London. It reclaimed an urban space for the evening and brought people together in a more powerful way than if they had shown the films in a hired venue.

### Building an action into your event

Global Justice Now groups in the north-west of England organised a regional skillshare to

meet each other and share tips and ideas on what works well with local campaigning. At lunchtime, most attendees carried out an action at the local branch of HSBC to protest its investments in dirty energy. The protest energised people and helped make the rest of the day dynamic.

### Giving a talk that's really moving

Occupy London Tours is a collective which uses physical exploration of the City of London to educate people about the financial industry and its impact on the world. But you don't have to have a major financial centre on your doorstep to use a walking tour. Some local history and theatrical interventions could help illustrate your campaign issue even around your town centre.

hand them out at demonstrations and take them along to meetings and other events you might attend. Get your friends to distribute or display your publicity at their workplace, school or university and through any campaigning or other social groups they belong to. Have flyers for your event on any stalls you are running.

## Facebook

Creating an event on Facebook can help get people there, but only if members of your group already have a network of friends based in the area who might be interested and who they might invite. If you do use Facebook:

- Keep the event page fresh by posting relevant news, updates about the event and reminders.
- Post the link to your event on other local groups; community centres and relevant campaigning Facebook pages and ask them to share it

But remember, if people say they're coming on Facebook, it doesn't mean they actually are! To get an estimate of numbers, cut the number of people 'attending' in half and ignore the people who are 'interested'.

## Twitter

If your group has a Twitter account, you can try and amplify the effect of tweeting about the event yourselves by tweeting 'at' people who might retweet it. This could include other campaign

groups, local councillors, local media and very relevant national organisations.

## Word of mouth

Don't underestimate the effectiveness of word of mouth for getting people to events. Send a message and remind your friends and networks about the event. If you know people involved in other local groups or campaigns give them a quick ring to let them know about the event and ask them to share it with their networks.

## Local media

Contact your local newspaper and radio station about your event as they may be interested in covering it. They may include your event in their listings or come along on the day to report on the event. The best way to get local media along to your event is to write a press release.

## Running an engaging event

- Instead of arranging rows of chairs to face a panel, you could put the chairs into groups of small semi-circles or at an angle in rows. This can make the room feel more participatory. If you are including group discussion, you could have people sitting round tables 'cabaret' style.
- Instead of going straight into a question and answer session after the talk; you can get people

to have a short discussion in groups about some of the points that have been raised and any questions they may have. You can then ask for one question or comment from each group. This gives more people a chance to share their thoughts and can generate a lively discussion.

- You can liven up an event by showing a short video at the start or having music playing as people arrive
- Refreshments can help motivate people to come to your event and are good for mingling and informal networking.

## On the day of your event

- Arrive in plenty of time to set up the venue and any equipment. At least an hour is advisable so you can be relaxed as people arrive.
- If you have invited an external speaker, have water available for them
- Welcome people to the event and introduce it (for example, why it's been organised; what's going to happen and how long it will run for)
- Have someone taking photos during the event and sharing them on social media.
- Have something people can get involved with or come to straight away – for example an upcoming action, meeting or another event
- Flip chart paper is great for capturing ideas. You might want to have some on-hand with flip chart pens and blu-tak.
- Circulate a sign-up sheet so people can join your mailing list.
- Do a head count and make a note of how many people attended. This will be useful for writing up the event and planning future events.
- A quick and easy way for people to evaluate your event is to give two post-its to each person and get them to write something they liked and something they would change on each one. Have two pieces of flipchart on the way out where people can put up their post-its.



Photo: James Nisbet / iStockphoto.com

Giving people a chance to have discussions in small groups is an easy way of making an event more participatory and engaging.

## Chairing your meeting

How your event is chaired can be crucial to what you get out of it. But while chairing is a skill that you develop with practice, there are some easy rules you can follow to ensure your meeting runs smoothly.

See our 'How to chair a public meeting' guide to get yourself off to a flying start.

## Follow up

- Get in touch with people who came to the event, thank them for coming and let them know about upcoming meetings, events or actions they can get involved with.
- Upload photos from the event to your Facebook page or website
- Write up your event for the local media, your website and a national campaigning organisation if relevant.
- Evaluate your event as a group: what came out of it? What follow up do you need to make it happen? What went well? What will you do differently next time?