

Somebody Ought To Do Something

"Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world, indeed it is the only thing that ever has"

Margaret Mead, Social Anthropologist

Chapter Three Organising a Public Meeting



CASE is an education group that campaigns for only the best for all children and relies entirely on membership fees and donations.

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CASE

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Chapter Three - Organising a Public Meeting

A well organised, informative and well attended public meeting can get your campaign off to a flying start.

1. Deciding on the purpose of the meeting

Is the purpose of the meeting to give information, gather support for action or to open a public debate? You may have several aims. Consider whether a press conference or press release would be more effective.

2. Making Practical Arrangements

Fixing a date

If you are publicising the meeting through local newspapers and school newsletters, allow plenty of time to meet their deadlines. You might need to plan a term in advance for big meetings. Avoid school holidays and half terms.

Arranging speakers

You need to match the speakers to the topic and the time available. Decide if you want a “star attraction” or a panel of speakers.

If you go for a single or main speaker, make sure that you have a back-up from amongst your supporters in case the main speaker fails to arrive.

If you opt for a panel, it is helpful to have speakers representing different points of view but don't let them speak for too long. A topic which is likely to attract a lively audience must have plenty of time for questions.

To help the chairperson prepare introductions, try to get some background information about the speakers beforehand.

Before booking them, check with the speakers about their expenses. You should at least be prepared to reimburse travel costs.

Confirm in writing what you are asking your speakers to talk about and for how long. Check if they need any visual aids such as an overhead projector or PowerPoint.

Finding a suitable venue

Accessibility

Think about your expected audience and the size and location of the venue. Does it have good links to public transport and/or parking? Does it feel safe at night in that area? Is it accessible for wheelchair users and people with mobility problems?

If it is a venue that you have never used before, arrange a prior visit when you can view the layout of the building and discuss the layout of chairs and tables and decide on microphones/public address system if necessary so that you can be sure that your audience can hear.

If there is a hall secretary/warden on duty make sure they know when you will need to get into the building.

If you are using a large building, consider how your audience will find the right room and how you can be sure it is well-signposted.

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Paying for it

Be sure that you can pay for the venue promptly and in full – they may need the money as much as you do! Establish how much it will cost and whether a deposit is required in advance.

Very few venues are free nowadays, but some organisations vary their charges according to the users' means. Ask if there is a discounted letting arrangement – the person you are speaking to may need to get authority to grant it.

Make sure that you are ready to collect donations at the meeting.

3. Organising the publicity

Well-targeted publicity is crucial. Try to arrange posters in public places that clearly show the date, time and place, but remember that “fly-posting” is illegal and can annoy residents! If the venue is little-known include a simple map.

In the days before the meeting try to hand out leaflets at places such as primary schools, shopping centres and stations when they are busy. It is also a good idea to hand out leaflets on the preceding Saturday in a nearby shopping centre. If you want to encourage people from a particular area to attend you can deliver leaflets door-to-door.

Supporters who are willing to display posters in their windows can be very helpful as are shops, community centres, schools etc. Choose an eye-catching colour or design and put up large versions at the venue.

If you have the funds, take out adverts in the local press. Ask if your event can be included in their “What's On” column. Send out a press release or invitation to the local press and radio well in advance of the meeting (see the section on Dealing with the Media).

Phone them the day before to encourage them to come and invite them to send a photographer to a photo call at the beginning of the meeting – providing you know what you want them to include in the picture!

Send individual invitations to anyone you particularly want to come such as councillors, governors, church leaders, teachers, community groups or your local MP.

Finally, use all your contacts! Ask Parent Teacher Associations and governor associations to announce it and put it in their newsletters. Get it announced at other, prior meetings. Talk to trade union representatives and community groups to ask them to put out information through their networks.

4. On the day

Preparation

- Make sure that someone is in charge of any money, cheques and receipt books needed to pay, say, the speakers' expenses.
- Agree who will take notes so that a report can be written at the end.
- Get someone capable to bring a camera as back-up.
- Arrive early in case there are snags. Check that the microphones, projectors etc are working if needed and that speakers are shown the arrangements. Provide water for the speakers.
- Put up direction signs (with Blu-Tak, not sticky tape!) to enable people to find the room easily.
- For smaller meetings, rearrange the seating into a more

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informal semicircle to allow freer discussion.

- Try to get the speakers together for a photo call 15 minutes before the meeting. If the newspapers have not arrived, take your own photographs during the meeting and send it afterwards with your report.
- Take the opportunity to introduce everyone and run through the order of the meeting, time limits and arrangements for questions. Make sure you have the right details for introducing the speakers.
- Decide how you are going to run question sessions and how much time you are going to give people to make their own points, especially if it is a big meeting. It is often best to focus on questions and answers after all the speakers have finished.
- If the campaign wants particular questions asked of one of the speakers, identify supporters prepared to ask them and make sure the Chair knows to call them. Also have some questions ready in case there is an awkward silence.
- Bring some handouts (and CASE membership forms!) to put on the chairs so that the audience can take away information and ideas for further action.
- Make sure you have a volunteer with a clipboard so you can take down the contact details of any new supporters and note any help they can offer.

Running the meeting

You need someone cool headed, cheerful, firm and friendly to chair the meeting. If it is a big meeting ideally you should ask someone from the campaign with experience of chairing meetings.

The role of the chair is to run the meeting and they need to focus on this and not getting involved with the debate. They need to stay calm if tempers start to run high, and make sure everyone gets a fair hearing. It is important that they know how to intervene if racist, sexist, homophobic or other objectionable language is used.

The chair should welcome people, explain the reason for the meeting and the running order. They should introduce speakers and keep them to time by advising them if they are over-running and, if necessary, politely stop them.

After the opening speaker, it may go quiet or there may be a lot of people trying to speak. The Chair should try to ensure that a representative cross section of people have an opportunity to speak.

If there are a lot hands raised, ask for short questions or comments and take two or three at a time. The Chair should keep a note of what has been asked and make sure all the questions get answered. If the meeting is lively and feelings are strong the chair may need to be very assertive.

Sometimes individuals will attend who have their own agenda. The Chair and organisers should decide how to respond to this and make sure that your meeting is not hi-jacked.

Closing the meeting.

The Chair should keep an eye on the time and ensure that there is a concise summing up before the scheduled end of the meeting. Try to finish on time to avoid people drifting out and feeling the meeting has been inconclusive.

The Chair should close by thanking everyone for coming, reminding them to join the campaign and asking for donations -

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however small. Station supporters at the doors with buckets to gather donations. If audience-members come up to talk to the speakers at the end of the meeting, try to enlist them as active supporters.

5. After the meeting

- Make sure the report of the meeting gets properly written up and agreed as accurate. This is particularly important if another speaker (e.g. a councillor or local authority representative) has said things that might be useful to your campaign in future.
- Send out reports to the press and thanks to the speakers.
- Agree how you could improve on the meeting arrangements for next time.

6. Speaking in Public

At some point you will be asked to speak about your campaign, if you want it to push forward.

Planning

If you have been invited to speak make sure you know what is expected of you. In your planning make sure you are clear about –

- who are you speaking to
- how long you have to speak
- whether anyone else is speaking at the same meeting
- the ideas you want to get across.

Visual aids such as an overhead projector, PowerPoint presentation or flip chart with your main headings might be useful. If you are not familiar with using them, practice before or don't use them. A handout summarising the main points is often appreciated, but wait until the end of your talk to hand it out.

Before the meeting starts, check you can work the microphone and any other aids you want to use.

Preparing a speech

It is worth getting together with others in your campaign to prepare a speaker's briefing. Include a brief background, the current situation and the next steps which you might want your audience to consider.

Write down the key points of your speech using large print, colours and more spaces than usual so it catches your eye easily. Staple the sheets together to avoid dropping them or losing your place.

Run through your notes beforehand preferably with a sympathetic critic. It is better not to read your speech if you can avoid it. If you feel you need to read out the whole speech, then practice before the meeting so you know it more or less by heart or you will turn off the audience by reading your speech rather than addressing them.

Getting the message across

Bear in mind that the audience's attention span is often less than you may think. Ten minutes is usually enough for a campaign speech. Try to finish while everyone is still interested, leaving time for more points to emerge through questions.

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Speak clearly and vary the pitch, tone and rhythm of your speech to suit the content. Don't speak too quickly and try to "project" your voice to the audience if there are no microphones. Check at the start that everyone can hear you properly. Choose the right words for your audience so that they do not feel excluded by jargon or patronised.

Don't fiddle with your glasses or wave your arms about. Try to look relaxed, make regular eye contact with your audience and smile occasionally. If you feel strongly about what you are saying, let your conviction show.

Without too much repetition try to summarise your main points briefly at the end.

A good maxim for public speaking is:

- Tell them what you're going to tell them
- Tell them
- Tell them what you've told them!

Remember, it will get easier with practice!

Encouraging a debate

Make sure you allow time for questions and encourage the audience to participate. Allowing the audience to comment will help to initiate a debate within the audience which can make the issue clearer.

However, questions can sometimes be hostile. If they are, don't allow yourself to become emotional or take it personally. Stay calm, don't be rude and don't shout back if someone shouts at you! Always consider how it looks to the audience that you are trying to win over.

If you are asked a long question with several parts or several questions make notes as they arise.

While it is still fresh in your mind make a note of what you have learned. Ask someone who will give you a candid opinion of how you performed. Don't dwell on the things you thought went wrong - you will improve with practice. You may even learn to enjoy it!

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