

Tool – Types of engagement – open house events

What is an open house event?

An 'open house' event is a form of engagement that allows members of the public to 'drop in' and learn about a particular project or policy in an informal, spontaneous way. They are typically hosted in accessible public places and include a display of relevant project material.

Unlike more formal engagement events, such as workshops or forums, open house events enable people to stay for as long as they like or need. Members of the community are given the opportunity to ask questions, discuss issues of importance and provide feedback.

Open house events emphasise one-on-one interactions, although they can also foster small group discussions between like-minded individuals who wish to explore a particular issue further.

Benefits of hosting an open house

Open house events are a useful way to inform and consult members of the public on matters of community importance because they provide:

- an informal, low-key setting for members of the community to learn about a particular subject, register their interest in being involved further and ask their burning questions
- an opportunity to generate Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) that can be published on your website
- a less intimidating platform than public meetings or workshops to obtain community feedback
- a flexible approach to engagement whereby members of the community can come at a time that suits them and spend as long as they need at the event
- an opportunity to co-locate the engagement alongside the location where the project is being undertaken
- a one-on-one approach to engagement that allows staff to receive direct feedback from the community, correct misinformation, and address misplaced fear or concern
- an opportunity to build public confidence in a new project or policy.

When to use the open house approach

Open house events work best when:

- you are seeking feedback from a particular community, such as residents from a certain suburb or council area (as opposed to seeking feedback from industry experts, when a workshop might be more appropriate)
- you are seeking early input to inform a new proposal or shape a draft proposal
- you have clear questions you want to ask the community.

How to run a successful open house event

To run a successful open house event, you first need to establish exactly what you want to gain from it. For example, do you want to know how people currently use or would like to use an area? Do you want to get an understanding of how people feel about certain types of built form? These questions will shape the structure of your open house event, and you may decide to set up different activity stations themed around your questions.

A successful open house event will also require:

- sufficient staff to facilitate and record all feedback
- subject experts to answer specific questions on the project topic (e.g. transport, housing design, heritage, stormwater, landscaping, social infrastructure etc)
- considerable and appropriate stationery material to enable participants to respond to your questions in a range of different ways, e.g. post-it notes, rating scale on a wall chart, etc
- a suitable venue that is (1) accessible to people of all abilities; (2) sufficiently large to host numerous participants and allows them to move freely between activity stations; (3) safe and well-lit at night (if the open house is being held in the evening); and (4) protected from adverse weather conditions
- refreshments for participants (water, tea, coffee, non-caffeinated drinks, biscuits and fruit should be provided at a minimum)
- an activity area for children, ideally themed around the project being consulted on, so that children in the community can also make a contribution to their preferred future.

Potential risks and how to minimise them

When planning an open house event, it is important to consider the follow risks and responses:

Risk #1: The open house format does not necessarily provide an opportunity for individuals to hear the views of others and so the potential for constructive “debate” is limited.

Response: If you know that your topic is likely to be controversial, then you could consider holding a forum with a panel of speakers who represent a range of views. Alternatively, you could host a facilitated workshop to better accommodate the exchange of different views.

Risk #2: People may not find out about the event or may be unsure about how to participate in an open house.

Response: Disseminate information about your event through diverse channels including social media, email, postcard drop/s, signage, brochure displays at community venues, and/or direct contact with community organisations. Information about your event needs to describe the open house format and how participants can contribute.

Risk #3: Staff who have been involved in the development of a draft policy or proposal may become defensive if their rationale is challenged by members of the public.

Response: Staff will need to be effectively briefed and supported with training to help them manage confronting one-on-one interactions with the public. In some situations it may be more appropriate for staff to attend as subject experts only, and not facilitators. In this case, the facilitator role may be assumed by an objective third party.

Risk #4: Community members who are living with a disability or for whom English is not their first language may feel excluded from the engagement process.

Response: Find out about your community and their needs in advance and if necessary, engage an interpreter and/or support person to help those individuals who require additional assistance. Remember to promote the availability of this support in all of your event collateral.