

Planning engagement events

Practical tips on the best ways to share research findings through events

An engagement event is an event that directly engages research users, participants, interested parties and/or beneficiaries. Events such as workshops, roundtable discussions and seminars can enable researchers to actively involve people in their findings.

Why hold engagement events?

Once researchers have subjected their findings to peer review or another form of critical appraisal, they may wish to engage wider audiences in their findings.

The benefits of hosting a discussion event about interim or full findings can include the following.

- sense-checking the findings: whether you involve policymakers, health providers, other researchers, practitioners and/or patient representatives, they will all have a different perspective to bring on the relevance and significance of your findings
- gaining buy-in and generating interest: taking the time to meet face-to-face with people who your research findings might affect can make a huge difference to how they feel about your research. They may also be able to advise you on, and support you with, your approach to dissemination. Policy audiences also often appreciate a heads-up on what the research is showing.

Factors to think about when planning your event

Planning an event is highly time- and resource-intensive. It may also not be the most cost-effective way of engaging people in your research findings, particularly if you can piggyback onto existing meetings and events that your target audiences already attend.

If you have the requirement and resource to run your own events, you will need to allow enough time for planning. Large events involving 200 or more people often take a year to plan, and even smaller events for around 20 people are typically planned over a matter of months rather than weeks. You will need to book the venue and the speakers well ahead of time, and to assess their availability before you finalise the date.

Your event should be designed around the needs and interests of your audience, as well as your own objectives. Consider their motivations for attending, and ensure that these will be addressed by the speakers, content and format of the event.

For example, policymakers may value smaller events that allow for much more in-depth exchanges among a group of people with particular expertise to share. Small and highly targeted events can also be much more productive for the researchers hosting them, particularly where the subject matter is complex and/or they are seeking specialist input.

Bear in mind any constraints faced by those you want to involve, particularly around the timing and venue. For example, consider that:

- clinicians often need a minimum of six weeks' notice to take time out of a clinic
- policymakers may expect you to travel to them, and their diaries may already be booked up months in advance
- stakeholders, especially patients, may have requirements that will need to be accommodated, such as disabled access and hearing impairment aids.

Agree an agenda or terms of reference that can be circulated in advance so that attendees arrive knowing what to expect and what is expected of them.

Factors to think about at your event

- Establish ground rules so that everyone has an equal opportunity to contribute. **Chatham House rules**, for example, can enable attendees to share views more freely in the knowledge that they will not be attributed back to them.
- Create opportunities for informal interaction and learning between researchers and stakeholders. Bear in mind that attendees may also want to spend some time meeting each other. You'll need to ensure that the event timings and room layout can accommodate this.

- Ensure that you are able to capture the discussion points. If there are small table discussions, you will need a note-taker for each table. Even for plenary discussions, you may need more than one person taking notes so you can cross-check for interpretation and accuracy.
- You may want to employ a professional facilitator for large workshops or for meetings where an independent chair might help you reach consensus on important or sensitive issues.
- Circulate a brief event evaluation form, and ask attendees to complete it on the spot. Consider how you might use any learning from this to inform future events and/or provide your research project with some **impact measures for your engagement activity**.
- Finally, follow up with and thank those who attended, as well as those who contributed to the content. You may want to include a short report on the event. Keep in touch with the people you are likely to want to involve again.

Pitfalls to avoid

- It is easy to underestimate the resource and costs involved in coordinating events, which are often highly time- and cost-intensive. See our guide to learn about how you might **secure additional support**.
- It can be dispiriting if, despite all your best efforts, attendance is low on the day. If it is likely to be challenging to attract the people you want to attend, you may do better to piggyback on existing meetings/events, or to plan a series of 1:1 meetings or phone calls.
- If you are sharing information about interim findings at an event, and assuming you can trust attendees to adhere to this, you can mark this 'not for circulation'. Do include some context about the current status of your research project – for example, if your interim findings are likely to change.

Resources

- The Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) has produced **a step-by-step guide to event planning for researchers**. It includes advice on choosing the venue, designing the programme and marketing the event, together with a helpful checklist for the day.
- The charity Involve offers **detailed guidance on how to involve members of the public** in research events and meetings.