

# Issues Forum

An Issues Forum is used to facilitate deliberative dialogue between people on a particular issue. It has been developed extensively by the [National Issues Forum Institute \(NIFI\)](#) in the USA.

The processes designed around democratic forums used to explore public issues. People come together to reason, talk and deliberate about issues, interests and opportunities to determine a common public direction for decision making.

## What is to be achieved?

- In an Issues Forum, the dialogue and deliberations are centred around an issue that the public has a stake in and can contribute to the resolution.
- A *discussion guide* is designed to present several options for dealing with an issue to a broad range of the community.
- The Issues Forum design helps people see that even the most complex issues can be approached, understood, discussed and deliberated on. You just need to provide the information and time needed to consider all the contributing factors.
- Issues Forums can be used as a starting point for broad community exploration on an issue to inform a group of strategic thinkers (eg. Citizen's Jury) in decision making.
- Issues Forums provide a way for people with diverse views and experiences to:
  - seek a shared understanding of a problem
  - search for common ground leading to democratic outcomes.

## What is the format?

- Issues Forums are led by trained moderators who use a *discussion guide* that frames the issue from the stakeholders' viewpoint and presents 3 or 4 broad options to consider for its resolution.
- Forum participants consider what appeals or concerns them, the costs involved, consequences, and trade-offs for each option.
- At the end of the Forum participants are asked to reflect on:

- whether they have changed their point of view on an issue
  - whether they felt there was a shared sense of direction among participants
  - what trade-offs they were willing to make or not how they felt about the consequences of actions proposed
  - what they still needed to talk about
  - which option they recommend for resolution of an issue
  - whether they need to meet again
- A report is prepared on the preferred option and a copy is distributed to stakeholders and decision makers.

## Online use of the tool?

With the changes the world saw in 2020, several engagement tools, usually delivered face to face, have now being turned into online formats.

Skilled moderation of forums on-line is critical to the successful use of the tool. The diversity of participants may result in conversations at various levels of knowledge which can be intimidating for less knowledgeable people and discourage them from participating.

Read some [tips from NIFI on how to convert face-to-face forums to an online format.](#)

## What to consider?

### Diverse viewpoints

Issues Forums are used to address diverse viewpoints on an issue and people need support to deliberate on all the factors contributing to it.

### Choices

It helps people to consider that the choices they make may have consequences and they may need to make trade-offs to get what they want.

### Trade-offs

It can be used to demonstrate to communities that decision makers cannot meet the needs of everyone and some trade-offs may have to be made.

### Not a quick fix

It is not useful when a decision maker wants a quick fix to an issue.

### Gathering all stakeholder views

Stakeholders' views need to be included in the Issues Forum Guide and this can involve the use of considerable resources.

## How to use the Issues Forum tool?

### Before the Issues Forum

- Clarify the issue to be explored.
- Gather views on the issue from all key stakeholders through hardcopy and/or on-line surveys, or face-to-face interviews.
- Use these data to frame the issue (eg. "What can we do about excessive drinking" or "What future do we want for our City?") and prepare a discussion guide on a range of options.
- Distribute the guide to stakeholders for pre-reading prior to attending an Issues Forum.
- Manage registrations, organise catering and venue arrangements, set up venue.

### During the Issues Forum

- Participants are asked to fill in a pre-Forum questionnaire to establish a benchmark for their views on the issue.
- The lead moderator welcomes everyone to the forum and goes through the session ground rules.
- A summary presentation of the options in the Issue Guide is provided. Table moderators invite people to introduce themselves and tell how their lives and concerns are connected to the issue.
- Participants then spend 65% of the time allotted for the Forum in dialogue and deliberation on the options – each option is given equal time so no one option can dominate.
- The lead moderator engages participants in an open session to discover a shared sense of purpose, i.e. is there a preferred option?
- Participants are asked to complete a post-Forum questionnaire to identify any shifts in views on the issue.

#### After the Issues Forum

- Data from the pre and post Forum questionnaires is collated and analysed.
- A report on the outcomes of the Forum is prepared including a summary of the results from the questionnaires, a summary of the themes that emerged, and the preferred option or a combination of options.
- Distribute the outcome report to stakeholders and to decision makers to use the preferred option from the broader community as the basis for their deliberations and decision making.

## Resources Required?

- Data gathering tools such as hardcopy or on-line survey, face-to-face interviews.
- Skilled moderators and support staff.
- Moderators guide and training program.
- Drafting of Issue Guide and printing of copies for distribution (where needed) to target audience and for participants in the Issues Forum.
- Drafting of pre and post Forum questionnaires.
- Large meeting space with tables and chairs.
- Pens, paper, data projector/laptop/screen/whiteboard.
- Catering requirements.

- Collation and reporting of results.
- Additional resources for people who need support to participate.
- An evaluation form for participants and one for the organising team.

## How to Evaluate?

- Ask participants for verbal feedback at the end of the Forum.
- Add evaluation questions to the post-Forum questionnaire.
- Contact participants after the session and ask for feedback.
- Debrief with the moderators and supporting staff and use the feedback to make improvement to future sessions.
- Review the responses to the topic question to identify any imbalances across the options, eg. did participants find little to discuss on any one of the options? Did most participants have a lot to say on one of the options?
- Measure the effectiveness of the process in identifying common themes, areas of divergence or specific actions for each option.

## Tips and hints

### Summarise the options at the start

Present a summary of the options at the beginning of a forum to establish a standard level of understanding. Even if stakeholders receive the Issues Guide, very few will read it in full, no matter how readable you make it.

### Recognise a shared sense of purpose

Forums rarely end in total agreement or total disagreement but in discovery of a shared sense of purpose or recognition of how interests are interconnected. Therefore, Issues Forums are suited to initial exploration of an issue.

### Perspective shifts

People's perceptions change during forums in response to better listening, supported reflective practice and in acting together to generate a shared understanding.

### Rules from the start

Establish basic ground rules around engaging respectfully at the beginning of a forum.

**Moderators support everyone**

Moderators' role is to support participation from everyone. On occasion, they may need to ask a participant to listen while someone else speaks.

**Moderators give everyone a fair go**

Moderators monitor the equal discussion on each of the options during an Issues Forum. No one option gets more time than another and no one participant dominates the discussion.

**Moderators start the discussions then sit back**

Once a moderator has helped with the introductions and posed a question, he/she needs to sit back and allow/encourage participants' conversations rather than through the moderator. Participants should take responsibility for the discussion and feel the outcomes are what they have made together.

**Silence is thinking time**

Allow for silence. It gives people time to think and observe what is going on in the meeting space.

**Use the Issues Guide as a reference**

Participants are reminded and encouraged to consider all the options and fully examine all the trade-offs and consequences. This can be easily missed so always refer them back to the Issues Guide.

**Moderators remain impartial**

Check your awareness of how you feel about the options, so you can focus on remaining impartial in your role as moderator.

## Case Study

**Health Care: "How can we bring costs down while getting the care we need?" (International example)**

The discussion guide clarified this difficult challenge and offered 3 options to address issues through changes in the way hospitals and doctors' function, unhealthy lifestyles, health insurance, reforms in Medicare and Medicaid, etc. It's a balanced, open-minded look at the entire healthcare system—one that moves the discussion beyond the current political debate.

The options put forward in this Issues Forum were:

- Ensure health care for all.
- Build on what we have.
- Let people make their own choices.

[See reference with some additional resources \(including a video\) giving broad detail on this case study.](#)

## Case study

### Soccer in the suburbs (Local example)

Pennington oval has been the home ground for the Western Toros Soccer Club for a number of years.

Over this period several issues emerged for the club, the local residents and the local Council. These issues were having impacts on the wellbeing of residents, on the management and function of the club, and on Council's administration of the reserve license.

To resolve these issues, the Council coordinated separate meetings – led by a trained mediator - with Ward Councillors, club administrators and a group of residents to listen to their experiences.

The information gathered at the meetings was included in an *issue discussion guide* prior to a joint meeting between the residents, the club and council staff to explore 3 possible solutions to the issues.

The key question in the issue guide was, ***“How can we reach agreement on the use of Pennington Oval?”***

To facilitate deliberation, 3 approaches were provided:

1. Focus on working relationships
2. Create a culture of accountability
3. Wait for things to change

Several of the issues raised were resolved during the joint meeting.

A key issue about temporary fencing was not resolved during the meeting. However, as proposed in approach 3 *‘Wait for things to change’*, it eventually resolved itself when the club shifted their adult games elsewhere and the fencing was no longer required.

## Further resources and references

[National Issues Forum Institute](#)

[Australian Community Engagement Foundation](#)