Citizen Forum

A Citizen Forum is a participatory format that enables dialogue between residents, policymakers, public authorities, and other relevant stakeholders. Its purpose is to bring together diverse perspectives, discuss shared challenges, and collaboratively develop solutions. By combining face-to-face events with digital participation formats, a larger number of people can be involved over an extended period of time.

Participation Depth	Participate
Project Phase	Concept Development
Goals	Understanding & Gathering Perspectives
Format	Analogue, Digital, Hybrid
Duration	Several Weeks
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Organised Actors
Group Size	Large Group from 30
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The aim of a Citizen Forum is to bring together diverse perspectives and involve residents at an early stage of planning and decision-making by collaboratively developing ideas and solutions. It fosters dialogue between the public, policymakers, and planning professionals, particularly in complex municipal issues and long-term planning processes.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the objectives and framework
Begin by clarifying:

- What is the topic or issue?
- Which questions should be discussed?
- Which decisions or recommendations are possible?
- Who should be involved?
- How will the results be used?

Important:

Communicate clearly and transparently which aspects are open to influence and which are not.

2. Select participants

Residents are often invited through a random selection process to ensure that a wide range of perspectives is represented.

Consider the following:

- include different age groups
- reflect diverse life situations
- represent a broad range of experiences and backgrounds

In addition, representatives from the following groups may also participate:

- local government
- public administration
- community initiatives
- planning professionals
- stakeholder and interest groups

3. Prepare the online platform
If digital participation is included, the platform should be easy to use and accessible.

Helpful sections include:

- project information
- timeline and schedule
- participant introduction area
- discussion and task sections
- questions and answers
- documentation of results

Ensure that:

- technical support is available
- clear user instructions are provided
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contact persons are easy to find

A dedicated project page can be created on the website, or a PDF containing all relevant information can be linked for easy access.

4. Prepare information materials
Participants should have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the project before the first meeting.

Provide clear and easy-to-understand materials, such as:

- project description
- maps or plans
- background information
- project timeline
- objectives of the participation process

Avoid:

- technical jargon
- lengthy texts
- confusing or overly complex information

Execution

1. Kick-off Event
At the beginning of the process, participants get to know one another and receive an introduction to the topic, objectives, and structure of the Citizen Forum.

The facilitator explains:

- the role of the participants
- how decisions or recommendations will be developed
- how the results will be used in the further process

Helpful elements include:

- participant introductions

- short icebreaker activities
- jointly agreed rules for collaboration

For example:

- communicate respectfully
- allow others to finish speaking
- respect different opinions

2. Initial Discussions and Topic Collection
Following the introduction, participants share their first impressions, experiences, and perspectives.

Suitable methods for this phase include:

- World Café
- Fishbowl
- Small group discussions

The objectives of this phase are to:

- identify key challenges
- collect a wide range of perspectives
- define initial topic areas

The facilitator should ensure that:

- everyone has the opportunity to contribute
- discussions remain clear and accessible
- conflicts are addressed constructively

3. Working Groups
The identified topics are then explored further in smaller working groups.

The groups may:

- analyse problems in greater depth
-

develop ideas

- discuss possible solutions
- define priorities

Helpful guiding questions include:

- What exactly is the problem?
- Who is affected?
- What solutions could be considered?
- What could be implemented in the short term?
- Which issues require long-term change?

4. Online Phase
Between the in-person meetings, discussions continue on an online platform.

Participants can:

- post comments
- add new suggestions
- evaluate ideas
- set priorities
- collaboratively edit and refine texts

Important:

The platform should be actively moderated.

The facilitators should:

- answer questions
- summarise discussions
- support conflict resolution
- encourage respectful communication

5. Establish a Citizen Editorial Team
A small group of participants can be selected to act as a **Citizen Editorial Team**.

Their responsibilities include:

- summarising discussions
- ensuring that different perspectives are represented
- drafting jointly agreed texts
- presenting the results in a clear and understandable way

Important:

The editorial team does not make decisions on behalf of the group. Its role is to support collective understanding and document the outcomes.

6. Develop the Citizen Programme
The proposals and discussion outcomes are combined into a shared Citizen Programme or a set of recommendations.

This document may include:

- key demands
- recommendations
- priorities
- concrete proposals for action

Ensure that:

- the language remains clear and accessible
- recommendations are transparently derived from the discussions
- differing opinions and conflicts remain visible

7. Closing Event
At the end of the process, the results are presented publicly and discussed with representatives from politics, public administration, and other relevant stakeholders.

Important aspects include:

- showing how the results were developed
- explaining the next steps
- openly addressing unresolved questions or remaining conflicts

Helpful guiding questions include:

- Which proposals will be taken forward?
- What can be implemented in the short term?
- Which topics remain open?

Evaluation

1. Document the Results
The documentation should include:

- key discussions
- proposals
- priorities
- open questions
- points of conflict

Use:

- clear and accessible language
- visualisations
- concise summaries

2. Provide Feedback
Participants should be informed about:

- how the results will be used
- which proposals will be pursued
- which decisions have been made

Providing this feedback strengthens trust in the process and encourages future participation.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- addressing urban development or mobility projects
- dealing with controversial or complex topics
- combining in-person and online participation
- engaging residents over a longer period of time
- involving political decision-makers at an early stage

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- decisions need to be made within a very short timeframe
- the project is small and straightforward
- there are insufficient resources for facilitation and participant support
- digital participation cannot be adequately supported

TIPS

- Professional and neutral facilitation is essential.
- Allow sufficient time for dialogue and discussion.
- Ensure that digital participation is as accessible and inclusive as possible.
- Clearly communicate both the opportunities and the limitations of participation.
- Most importantly, participants should feel that their contributions are genuinely valued and taken seriously.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- short-term decision-making processes
- issues without political or administrative scope for action
- processes with very limited staff or time resources

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/buergerforum