

Effective Cycle Forums

This briefing is primarily aimed at Cycling Officers and all those who attend Cycle Forums. Cycling Officers' managers and others with an interest in cycling may also find it useful.

In this briefing, when we refer to 'Cycling Officers' we mean both Cycling Officers and those who have some responsibility for cycling as a part of their job.

• Introduction

Many local authorities have Cycle Forums and they operate with varying degrees of success. The reasons why some Forums are effective and others less effective are many and diverse. It is clear that no single right way of organising a Forum exists, but some factors are worth exploring in the interests of giving a Forum the best chance of success.

This briefing poses some questions and examines some of the critical factors for success in the hope that it will help those either starting a Forum from scratch or wishing to take a fresh look at existing arrangements. It may also be helpful to read Cycling UK's briefing on *Effective Joint Working between Cycling Officers and Campaigners*, which covers some points that are also relevant to Cycle Forums – www.cyclinguk.org/local-campaigners/ctc-local-campaigners-information-kit/campaigning-skills-and-tactics/cycling-offic

• What is a Cycle Forum?

A Cycle Forum is one element of a range of consultation and engagement methods that a local authority can be expected to use in working with its stakeholders. Broadly speaking, a Forum is set up so that officers and councillors can work with a group of local stakeholders interested in improving cycle facilities and promoting cycling within area. Stakeholders are likely to include:

- Local cycle users and cyclists¹
- Representatives from the local cycle campaign and from Cycling UK's Local Campaigners' Network,
- People running cycle-related businesses
- Any local cycling (or other environmental) NGOs
- Police representative / health professionals & providers

Generally, a Forum will meet three to six times a year and have around ten to twenty members. Group size does vary, although twenty is probably a maximum to ensure effective working.

Each local authority has its own particular way of running and using a Forum with its own specific statement of purpose or terms of reference.

Some local authorities have broader 'Access Forums' for pedestrian and disability issues and these may also cover cycling issues (but given their broader focus, it's unlikely that cycling will be considered in as much depth as in a Cycle Forum). However, there are advantages to working with other interest groups and finding out which Forums may be relevant to cycling matters in your authority. It makes everyone more aware of what's being discussed and who's discussing it.

In a few cases, local campaigners have set up Cycle Forums independently of the local authority, and some Train Operating Companies (TOCs) also hold Cycle Forums too. In recent times, Cycle Forums specifically for school children have been appearing as well.

- **Your Current Situation**

To help assess your current situation, ask yourself a series of questions:

Q: Do you have a Cycle Forum?

- > If the answer is **yes**, ask yourself: is it working well?
- > If the answer is **yes**, ask yourself why is it working well? (Make a list)
- > If the answer is **no**, ask yourself why is it not working well? (Make a list)
- > If the answer is **no**, you don't have a Cycle Forum, ask yourself why not? (Make a list)

Your initial answers to the basic questions above may help you focus as you read the briefing.

Even if you have a Forum that is currently working well, it may be worth examining the reasons for success as they will influence how sustainable the Forum is. In some instances, a Cycle Forum has functioned well for years and then goes into a decline. On closer analysis, it turns out the Forum has been overly dependent on the efforts of one or two key people (these could be local authority officers, campaigners, or elected members). When the key person or people move on, unless their input has been fully recognised and arrangements made for others to take on the commitment, the Forum can quite easily stop running smoothly and become ineffective.

- **How to give a Forum the best chance of success**

The specific context in which a Forum operates will influence whether or not it is successful. For example:

A

The local authority has a Cycle Forum because it has a real desire to involve stakeholders in decisions about cycling

B

The local authority has a Cycle Forum purely because it 'looks good' or because other local authorities have a Forum

Of course, things are very rarely as clear cut as in these two examples. Most authorities will be at some point along the continuum between these two extremes. Numerous interlinked and interdependent factors make a Forum effective and are considered under broad headings below.

a. General observations

- Practicalities – be organised
- Set dates for meetings well in advance so that people can work their diaries round the Forum dates (i.e. prioritise the Forum)
- Meet with sufficient frequency to sustain momentum but not so frequently that the time input is unrealistic for those who attend (officers' time is constrained by their other work commitments and Forum participants give their time voluntarily and have their own constraints)
- Meet at a venue spacious enough to accommodate the group, with cycle parking and convenient for public transport
- Communicate with members between meetings when necessary

b. Composition and purpose - What kind of Forum do you ideally want?

- > *Who should be at the Forum? Councillors? Senior Officers? Cycle Campaigners? Other local users? Cyclists? Non-cyclists?*
- > *How can you get representation from a broad cross section of cyclists?*

Is the Forum's purpose to:

- i. Inform campaigners and other interested parties about the local authority's activities to promote cycling and improve cycling facilities?
- ii. Create a dialogue between campaigners, cycle users and the local authority?
- iii. Facilitate consultation with local users on proposed schemes and other issues affecting cyclists and cycling?
- iv. Achieve changes and formally present the views of participants to the local authority?
- v. A combination of all the points above?

Your responses to these questions may help you develop a Forum appropriate to your context.

Each Forum will develop its own ways of working and its own criteria for success. The purpose of some Forums will be covered by the first two points in the list above. In some cases, the relationships between cycle users and the council may have been either non-existent or very acrimonious. So, limiting the Forum's functions to these two points can be a useful, 'safe' way to start off and is not necessarily negative. It is a way to get people talking to each other again without creating unrealistic expectations. However, over the longer term, some Forum members are likely to get frustrated if the purpose goes no further, seeing the Forum as 'just a talking shop' and may stop attending.

To achieve iii and iv above, the Forum needs to have real influence. For this to happen, it must have a formal way of feeding into the local authority at a higher level and be officially recognised. How this is achieved will vary depending on the local authority's working practices and structures. In broad terms, the following may help:

- Get a key pro-cycling councillor to lead / chair the Forum.
- Get the Forum recognised as an advisory body that must be consulted on cycling matters wherever these arise (Highways, Planning, Development Control, Environment, Leisure etc).
- Pass the Forum's minutes on to relevant committees.

c. Context

What is your situation?

> *In a shire county, you may decide that having Forums in each of its different district areas is more effective. Do you need to co-ordinate any activities? If so, how do you co-ordinate the district Forums? Do you need to have an annual meeting attended by representatives from each of the district Forums?*

> *All authorities may need to consider how they co-ordinate with adjacent authorities on issues which cross over the boundaries. Is joint working possible?*

> *Who needs to know about and /or discuss what? Is it worth splitting into sub groups and/or having some meetings to deal with specifics? Some examples are:*

- Technical issues, comments on plans for cycle facilities
- Promoting and marketing cycling
- Cycle training

> Team building – *what sort of atmosphere do you want?*

The Forum is likely to be more effective if members feel comfortable with each other and have a sense of belonging. Therefore, making an effort to ‘develop the team’ may well result in a Forum that is well-attended and more effective. The following suggestions may help:

- Spend some time getting to know each other, so people know who’s who.
- Could you get each member to write a ‘pen portrait’ – a few lines on themselves? You can put these together, so anyone who joins the Forum at a later stage can read them and quickly get a sense of the other members and add his/her own pen portrait.
- Involve the members in decisions about how the Forum operates where possible such as terms of reference, purpose, meetings times, frequency and venue. In some instances, you may not have the flexibility - the Terms of Reference may be decided already, for example. However, it is rare for everything to be set in tablets of stone.

If the Forum has been running for some time and feels a bit stale, then consider what you could do to refresh it:

- It may be beneficial to get an external facilitator for one meeting to help the group redefine its purpose and priorities.
- Consider getting someone to make a presentation with some different perspectives on cycling. It may well be that Forum members themselves are willing to do this, or may know someone else who would be willing to come along and do a presentation.
- Ask the Forum for their ideas.
- Use a different venue; have a ‘social Forum’.

d. Review

Have a periodic review on whether the Forum is being effective by getting members to feedback. The Performance Improvement Grid (PIG) below might help. Members feed back under four headings, and then you can discuss whether to make any changes in how you operate:

DO MORE This is done well	STOP DOING This doesn't help
DO DIFFERENTLY It needs doing but it could be improved	START DOING It would help

e. The Forum meetings

Many books on running effective meetings are available which go into more detail about techniques, but here are a few basic points:

Before the Forum meeting ...

Decide on how to create the agenda (details of venue, start and finish times and list of items for discussion):

- i. The Chair sets the agenda and it is circulated to Forum members in advance.
- ii. The Chair sets a 'skeleton agenda' and circulates it to attendees in advance, requesting that they send any other items to add to the skeleton.
- iii. The Forum members (two or three reps) compile an agenda, which they send to the relevant officer/ chair who approves it and circulates it to Forum members.

Whether you take option i), ii) or iii) above depends on your situation, what you feel comfortable with and how you wish to involve attendees.

- o Circulate the agenda and the minutes from the previous meeting (you will have already done this after the previous meeting – however, including the most recent minutes with the agenda makes it more likely that people will read them and have them fresh in their minds).
- o Make arrangements for minutes to be taken.
- o Check that you have the room booked, refreshments arranged and any equipment you need
- o Try to allocate rough timings to each agenda item, remembering to allow extra time for AOB (Any Other Business).
- o Make copies of the agenda and any other relevant documents and take them along to the meeting (not everyone will have brought theirs).

At the Forum meeting ...

- o Check that the minute-taker is there.
- o Brief introductions (name + who they represent); people rarely manage to get to each Forum and for those who are new, it is helpful to know who's who. Newcomers are much more likely to continue to attend if they feel part of the group.
- o Get approval for the last meeting's minutes and check progress on any actions agreed at the previous meeting. What progress have people made?
- o Ensure that actions are recorded, along with who is responsible for what and by what date
- o Manage the time, ensuring that the discussions don't drift and lots of time is spent on something relatively minor, meaning that insufficient time is left for major items.
- o In cases where the meeting is trying to cover diverse issues, consider dividing it into two parts. Use Part 1 for more formal policy issues and break into smaller groups in Part 2 to simultaneously consider different topics (i.e. each group considers one specific scheme or issue and reports back to the full group).
- o Have a short tea-break in the middle – this gives people a chance to chat informally, something which develops the team spirit; the disadvantage is that it may lengthen the time needed and some members may prefer to pack it all into one session.

After the meeting ...

Write up and circulate minutes as soon as possible.

- **Why doesn't the current Forum function well?**

The points covered so far may have already provided sufficient food for thought. However, for those who wish to look at why a Forum isn't functioning well, the section below may prove useful.

If you think the current Forum arrangements are not functioning well, it is likely to be for a mix of reasons which are often interlinked. The Forum may be very well-organised on a practical level with everyone having advanced notice of meetings dates, minutes circulated in good time and so on. However, maybe no-one knows what the Forum is trying to achieve any longer. So, although it functions well in a tick box sort of way (e.g. the Forum meets every two months on the first Tuesday of the month between 7pm and 9pm at the Council House and is reasonably well-attended), it doesn't actually achieve anything.

Some possible reasons why a Forum doesn't function well:

Purpose

- no-one knows what it is for any more
- people know what the Forum is intended to do, but are not convinced it delivers
- no clear terms of reference were ever established

Atmosphere

- it lacks energy
- the chair is ineffective
- meetings are hijacked by one or two vociferous Forum members
- lack of continuity of attendance

Organisational - meetings

- no minutes taken
- too much on the agenda
- finishes late
- time spent on trivia
- diverse interests (soft measures versus hard measures)

Logistics

- timing of the meeting limits who can attend (if it's held during the working day, for example, only those who don't work full-time can attend)
- location of the meeting
- it covers such a big area/combines so many districts/settlements etc. that it's hard to do justice to everything that members need to discuss

Forums to cover the various districts

- insufficient officer resource to ensure attendance at meetings (without key officers at the table, people who are attending voluntary, in their own time, are likely to feel their own efforts are being undervalued)
- setting up joint meetings involving the various Forums in a shire county is difficult due to the big travelling distances

The Five Whys

To get to the bottom of the issues, and to decide what to do about them, one technique you can use to probe further and to stimulate your thoughts about how to remedy the situation is to ask 'why' five times. Examples:

ISSUE 1: 'No-one knows what the Forum is for anymore'

1. WHY?

Answer: It was started 15 years ago and only a few of the current members were around when it started

2. WHY?

Answer: I don't know

3. WHY?

Answer: I haven't really thought about it till now, so haven't ever looked for any formal documents / terms of reference regarding the purpose of the Forum

4. WHY?

Answer: It hasn't been a priority

5. WHY?

Answer: I've had too much else to do and it is only recently that I have realised no-one really knows what we are trying to do and questioned the value of the time we put into the Forum.

Possible remedial actions ...

- If it is easy to access, find any documentation of the original terms of reference. Are they still relevant? Should they be changed? Can they be changed?
- Circulate them to current membership
- Discuss possibilities with the current membership on the purpose of the Forum and define some terms of reference

ISSUE 2 : 'Meetings are hijacked by one or two vociferous Forum members'

1. WHY?

Answer: They are strong characters who dominate any discussion if given the chance.

2. WHY?

Answer: They feel they 'know best' as they have been attending for a very long time and the chair can't control them

3. WHY?

Answer: The chair is often a relatively junior officer who is standing in for the current official chair, an elected member, who is often 'unavailable' to chair the Forum.

4. WHY?

Answer: In the past, the official chair, both a committed cyclist and a very effective chair always showed up for meetings, sadly he has moved out of the area. The current chair, in place since the last elections, doesn't see the Cycle Forum as a priority.

5. WHY?

Answer: I assume it is because she isn't interested in cycling and uses her time in other ways.

Possible remedial actions:

- Make contact with the official chair and find out more about their situation and priorities.
- In light of the above, can you find any ways in which increased levels of local cycling will help to meet her needs / priorities and thus persuade her of the importance of attending the Forum?
- Could the time, location be moved to fit in better with her plans?
- Dealing with the vociferous members can be a very difficult task for the chair, especially if he/she is relatively inexperienced and / or quite junior. Getting an effective chair is, of course, the obvious answer. However, for all sorts of reasons, this may not be possible at least in the short term.
- As a member of the Forum, you can make suggestions to help improve the process of the meetings such as putting 'Process of the meetings' on the agenda, possibly under AOB.
- At the end of the meeting, get some feedback from the group:
 - > What worked well?
 - > What could we do differently?
 - > Use a flipchart to record points and ensure they are added to the minutes (you can then refer back to these points and use them to suggest creating some ground rules)
- Suggest that one meeting has a professional external facilitator to set up a framework for a meeting which can help to improve the process of the meetings in the future.

● **Conclusions**

It would be rare for any Forum to function totally effectively for a sustained period given the numerous factors involved. However, taking the time to regularly review the Forum and adapt it according to changing circumstances and needs can pay dividends and ensure the Forum functions as well as it can for most of the time.

Cycling UK welcomes feedback on examples of successful Forums to use as case studies. Additionally, any learning points from less successful Forums would also be useful.

● **Forum Statements of Purpose:**

Sefton: The Forum is a network of local people dedicated to improving cycling facilities within the borough and to encourage more people to cycle.

<http://modgov.sefton.gov.uk/moderngov/mgOutsideBodyDetails.aspx?ID=371>

Aberdeen Cycle Forum (ACF): The group's aim is to encourage cycling of all types: cycling for pleasure, cycling to work and to school, to the shops, off-road or on-road. In 2010, it decided it was time to write down what it was doing, an exercise that resulted in a formal constitution www.aberdeencycleForum.org.uk