Q. Why use ... Round-table Workshops?

A. This is a method for public participation or for groups of people who have an interest in a particular service or strategy. The Round-table Workshop method enables participants to make a full contribution to discussions on issues of shared concern and to generate ideas for action. This method works well when there is a relatively clear topic to be discussed.

How to do it...

Preparation
- Each workshop can have a single theme or several themes as part of a strategy.
- Each workshop may last for only half a day but ideally will run for a longer period, with the outcomes of one feeding into the next if there is a series of workshops.
- Every effort should be made to ensure that the people with influence and authority in local networks and organisations participate in the workshops.
- Participants can number from 30–100 for each workshop, while a series of sessions allows as many as 500 people to participate.
- You should consider briefing participants in advance.

Planning the Session
- There needs to be adequate planning time at the outset. This may include discussions with other organisations about inviting people to take part.
- Participants are seated in a single room at individual round tables of 7–10 people, thus avoiding hierarchies.

Facilitating the Session
- The broad stages of the process are:
- A brief introduction is given setting the context and aims of the event.
- Specialist presentations provide technical information and case studies in order to generate new ideas and approaches.
- Round-table discussions generate ideas, which are recorded on paper or tape.
- Each table will need a convenor and a reporter.
- There could be an opportunity for questions and answers before the concluding session during which the groups report their findings.

Immediately after the Session
- A draft of the outcomes is produced and circulated for comment.

Pros
- This method draws on a wide range of opinions.
- With participants drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, relationships can be built between different groups and sectors.
Cons
- There is a risk that the workshop, or some of the tables, can become dominated by particular issues.
- It is not always easy to collate, report on and draw conclusions from a wide range of opinion.

Resources
- Staff time
- Venue and catering
- Reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses of lay participants.

Top Tips
- Consider having each workshop chaired by someone in a position of influence.
- The table chairpersons and reporters could be from other bodies. This would show an awareness of the range of stakeholders.
- Specialist contributors can bring visual and verbal examples of similar exercises for the purpose of stimulating creative thinking.

Sources and further information
Some of this information was first published by: The Aspen Institute
www.aspenroundtable.org