

## Sub-regional forums

**Date:** ongoing

### **Background:**

The Mersey Basin Campaign (MBC) wanted a method of providing the public, private and voluntary sector with information on developments and issues in the areas covered by the three MBC objectives. It was decided that a Forum would be held annually to bring together those working in the environmental sector in each of the Campaign's sub-regions and provide an opportunity for MBC to promote its work to a wider audience, as well as inviting speakers on a range of relevant topics. Initially started in the Mersey Estuary, the Forums were then rolled out across the three other sub-regions (Ribble, Cheshire and Greater Manchester).

### **The project:**

Content for the Forums was designed to be information-based and aimed to bring together interesting speakers covering diverse topics around the theme of water. As the Forums were free to attend, they were particularly attractive to members of the voluntary sector who saw MBC and the Forums as a useful source of information that was relevant and interesting to them. The Forums also functioned as an important networking opportunity across the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Forums were held over a morning with an optional site visit in the afternoon and were chaired by people who were particularly active within the sub-region. Attendance at each of the Forums varied between 80 and 120 people and each delegate was provided with a badge and delegate pack. Speakers were sourced from a variety of organisations and the programme for the events was chosen to be both thematically and geographically balanced. Each Forum contained a presentation covering the work that MBC had done over the year in that sub-region.

Soapbox slots also formed an important part of the Forum programme. They provided an opportunity for members of the voluntary sector to raise awareness about a particular issue or demand change in a specific area. Two Q&A sessions were built into the programme to give adequate opportunity for delegates to voice queries to speakers and receive additional information.

### **How we did it:**

- MBC staff compiled a list of proposed speakers and content for the Forums and ideas for site visits. Speakers and Chairman were contacted and confirmed.
- MBC identified partners to actively support the Forum. Support could be financial or in-kind assistance. Successful partnerships were forged with local authorities to deliver some of the Forums.
- A date was set, the venue booked and the site visit confirmed. Risk assessments for the site visits were completed.
- Catering and coaches were organised and provisionally booked.
- Action Partnership coordinators in each sub-region collated all contacts for public, private and voluntary sector organisations in the sub-region onto a large database. Email and some paper invites were sent out to all the contacts on the database. Invitations either included a link to the website registration form (email) or a booking form to return (paper).
- An online registration form was added to the MBC website for delegates to register their attendance. Registration was open for around 3 weeks.
- Confirmation emails were sent out and delegates were asked to reply via email if they would like to present a soapbox topic or attend the afternoon site visit.

- Catering and any coaches / guides needed for the site visit were confirmed when numbers were known.
- Speakers were asked to send in a short biography and a copy of their presentation at least two weeks before the event.
- A brief and notes on each speaker was drafted for the event Chair.
- An attendance list, event programme and feedback forms for the delegate packs were formatted, along with a front cover sheet and speaker biographies.
- A CD / memory stick containing PDF files of all the items in the delegate packs was sent to the printers along with an order form for number of copies to be produced.
- MBC staff made up delegate packs and printed name badges for attendees.
- Laptop, delegate packs and badges were taken to the venue.
- MBC staff were given clearly defined roles to complete on the day such as working on the reception desk, helping with the AV equipment, carrying the roving microphone during Q&A session and keeping speakers to time.
- Forums were held from 9.15 to around 13.00 with a half hour coffee break and lunch provided afterwards. Delegates registered to attend the site visit were asked to be first in the queue for lunch in order to leave for the site visit on time.
- Badges and feedback forms were collected from delegates at the end of lunch.

#### **Publicity:**

Forums were publicised on the MBC website and were also promoted via existing partnership networks. Particularly newsworthy items relating to the content of the Forums were publicised regionally and in some cases nationally. Local papers and radio stations were also contacted.

#### **Project value and funding sources:**

Around £2,500 was spent on each Forum. This breaks down into £300 - £400 + VAT for printing, £100 - £200 for any coaches / guides for site visit and around £2,000 for venue and catering. A huge amount of staff time was put into each Forum.

#### **Who was involved:**

**Action Partnership Coordinators** – proposed content for the Forums, liaised with speakers and Chair, organised venues, catering and site visits, managed delegate registration, ordered delegate pack printing. Organised any match funding for the Forums.

**New Media Manager** – set up website registration on the MBC website.

**Communications Manager** – copyedited and formatted attendance list, event programme and speaker biographies. Converted all documents to pdfs. Sent out any press releases regarding the event.

**Office administrator** – compiled attendance list and printed delegate badges.

**Deputy / Chief Executive** – gave MBC update presentation at each Forum.

**Chairman (various)** – chaired the Forums, introduced speakers and managed the Q&A sessions.

**MBC staff** – worked on reception desk giving out badges and delegate packs, gave AV support, carried roving mic around during Q&A sessions, kept speakers to time using 5 min, 1 min and STOP prompt cards and acted as First Aiders on the site visits.

**Printers** – printed and collated all documents to be included in the delegate packs.

**Lessons learned:**

**Planning** – allow at least two months to plan and organise an event like this. You will need to allocate someone almost full-time for the last month. Make sure all concerned, especially the speakers and their PAs, know the key deadlines for submitting presentation outlines, biographies and presentations. Make sure your deadlines allow time for slippage, and do send out reminders.

**Short and snappy** – a busy morning with optional site visit is much better than a full day. Limiting speakers to short presentations keeps the programme from dragging and encourages more people to come along.

**Keep to time** – make sure speakers keep to time, as it is generally the Q&A sessions that will be squeezed and these are often the most interesting and dynamic part of the programme.

**Interesting content** – make sure you put together a good line up of speakers that you wouldn't hear elsewhere. Try to have a good mix of speakers and topics so that there is something to interest everyone.

**Professionalism is key** – start on time, end on time, keep speakers to time and arrive early enough to set up all AV equipment. Make sure all printed materials are of a very high standard and that there are enough for all delegates. Make sure attendance list is alphabetical order by surname and that people's organisations are included. Get decent venues, preferably with built in AV equipment and quality catering.

**Good delegation of duties** – ensure that staff are aware of their role and how to do it to guarantee the whole event goes off without a hitch.

**Staff input is huge** – the Forums are a real team effort - people don't just turn up, staff really need to push and cajole people to get bums on seats.