

Aotearoa Local Online Public Issues Forum Guide

A guide and resource kit for planning, launching and managing a local online public issues forum in Aotearoa New Zealand.

By Dan Randow, OnlineGroups.Net, 10 September 2008.

1 Introduction

Local Online Public Issues Forums use the internet to facilitate conversations between citizens about local issues. This document is intended to help with starting and running a local online public issues forum in Aotearoa, following the model used by the Canterbury Online Public Issues Forum. It summarises the learnings gained while starting the Canterbury forum and contains documents and other resources that were created or collected while starting the Canterbury forum.

1.1 The Canterbury Online Public Issues Forum

The Canterbury Online Public Issues Forum (<http://canterburyissues.org.nz>) is a public online forum where Cantabrians discuss local issues. The discussion covers a wide range of subjects, and reflects a wide range of points of view. The forum has over 200 members, around 30 of whom make a total of around 100 posts each month. Discussion is kept civil, and locally focused by simple rules, a volunteer forum manager and steering team, and an non-partisan governance structure. Because of its diverse membership, which includes local politicians, the forum increases the opportunity for participation and transparency in the local democratic process.

The forum was launched in April 2007, by the Canterbury Communications Trust and OnlineGroups.Net, with support from the Community Partnership Fund, two local councils, following a model established by E-Democracy.Org.

1.2 OnlineGroups.Net

OnlineGroups.Net provides software and services that enable online collaboration. Their open source collaboration software GroupServer (<http://groupserver.org>) powers the E-Democracy.Org forums site, of which the Canterbury forum is part. It also powers the software service at <http://onlinegroups.net> where anyone can start a free online groups site.

1.3 The Canterbury Communications Trust

The Canterbury Communications Trust runs the Christchurch community access radio station Plains FM 96.9 (<http://plainsfm.org.nz>).

1.4 E-Democracy.Org

Minnesota-based E-Democracy.Org (<http://e-democracy.org>) has been running successful local online public issues forums for over ten years. Established forums in Minneapolis and St Paul Issues Forums in Minnesota, and Newham and Brighton and Hove in the UK can be found at the E-Democracy.Org Forums site (<http://forums.e-democracy.org>).

2 Local Online Public Issues Forums

Local online public issues forums (LOPIFs) set out to be a truly public place, where truly public conversations are held.

LOPIFs use internet forum software, which enables people to post messages that can be received by all members. The E-Democracy.Org public issues forums enable members to post using either email or the web. Posts can be received by email, or read on the web. All posts are visible to the public, so that non-members can easily follow the conversations before deciding to join, or without joining at all.

E-Democracy.Org forums have four simple guidelines that help to ensure that conversations are civil and constructive, even if they are robust, and that all points view can be heard. Participants must use their real name, be civil, keep their posts locally relevant, and make no more than two posts per day. A volunteer forum manager monitors the conversations, assists and encourages people to participate in line with the guidelines, and responds to breaches of the guidelines. The forum manager is supported by a volunteer steering team. The steering team is accountable for managing the forum in a non-partisan way. This governance structure plays an important role in establishing the credibility of the forum as unbiased.

2.1 Outcomes of Online Public Issues Forums

LOPIFs increase the opportunity for citizens to participate in conversations about local issues. Because anyone with basic internet access and skills can participate, they enable people's voices to be heard publically. They build public awareness of local issues, and the facts and the spectrum of views around them and provide a visible reflection of the diversity of local communities. At times, conversations in LOPIFs can generate workable solutions to controversial problems.

Where local government elected representatives and officials participate, LOPIFs also increase the opportunities for public engagement for constructive communication to occur among and between politicians, officials and members of the public, and for valuable public input into policy and planning processes.

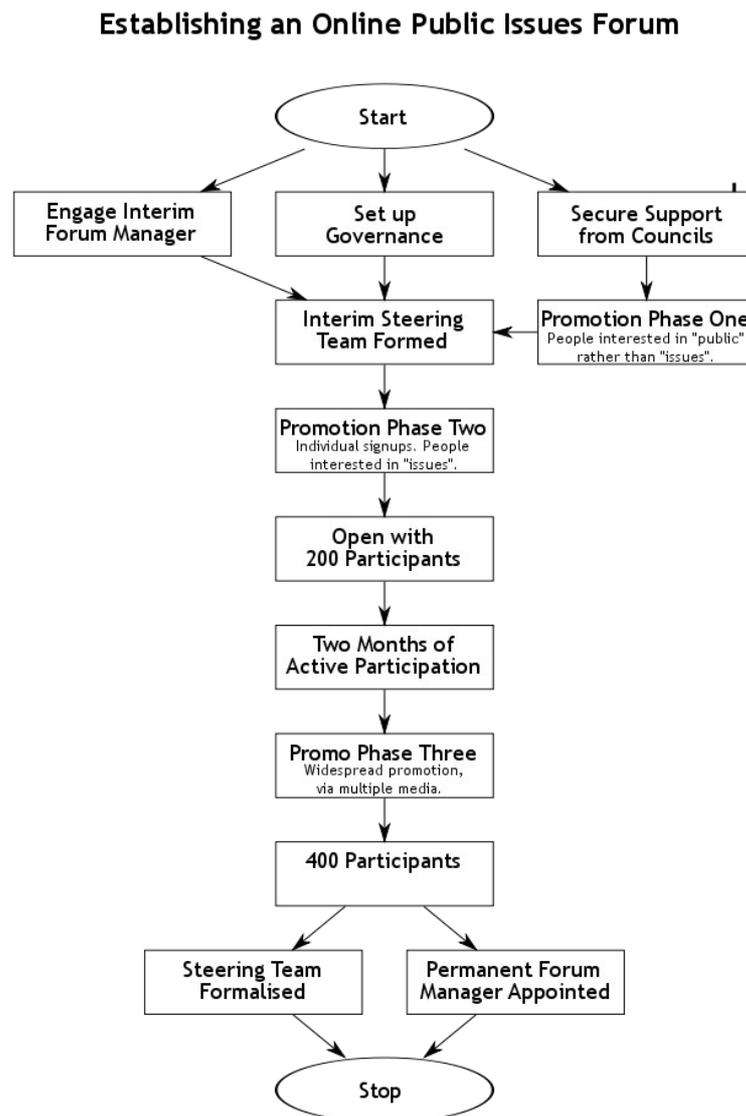
During elections, LOPIFs provide an opportunity for local election candidates to engage in public conversations in a context where the public have the same opportunity to participate as they do. This enables the conversations to occur not just between the voters and the candidates, but among the voters.

Participation in online forums is not a form of representative democracy, and is unlikely to directly impact policy and regulation decisions. It can however provide insight into public perceptions, that may be useful to those processes.

These forums appeal mostly to people who are already active online, and are therefore unlikely to have a significant impact on community uptake of ICT. It is possible, however that they attract some people to participating online. It is likely that public issues forums have a significant impact on voter participation, or on public engagement with local issues. To the extent, however that people are interested in participating, online public issues forum make that slightly easier.

3 Establishing a Forum

The following diagram shows an overview of the process of starting an online public issues forum. The targets shown in this diagram are optimistic. In Canterbury, the forum opened with a membership of 200, which quickly dropped to 150, and then began to steadily rise, passing back through the 200 mark, about a year after launching.



Each of the steps in this process is covered in the following sections.

4 Getting Support

Establishing a LOPIF is going to take some one quite a bit of work. Allow one or three hours per week for a couple of years. Unless you are, or have, a particularly enthusiastic volunteer, you will need some support.

The Canterbury Online Public Issues Forum was established with support from the following sources.

- Funding from the Community Partnership Fund, that was established under the New Zealand Digital Strategy.
- Funding and in-kind support from Christchurch City Council and Environment Canterbury. A sample Memorandum of Understanding for engaging Council support is provided in the Appendices, below.
- Publicity and advertising support from the Plains FM 96.9 community access radio station.
- In-kind support from OnlineGroups.Net.
- Volunteer support from the steering team.

5 Steering Team

The steering team's role is to ensure that the LOPIF achieves its purpose, which is to increase the opportunity for local citizens to participate in the local democratic process.

The team achieves its purpose in the following ways.

- Supports the Forum Manager.
- Ensures that the Forum Manager upholds the forum rules, in a non-partisan way.
- Helps to promote the Forum.

The steering team starts with the one or two people who decide to start the forum, and builds as the promotion process proceeds.

It is desirable to achieve as much diversity as possible in the steering team membership. The membership should reflect a wide range of interests, and political points of view. At the same time, it is useful for steering team members to have a personal commitment to democracy, and public participation in the democratic process. It is desirable, though not necessary to have steering team members who have a high profile locally.

It makes sense to start a "team" online group for the steering team, early in the process of establishing the forum, so that the team can share meeting records and collaborate in between meetings.

Once the forum is established, it can be used to attract further members to the steering team.

The steering team requires only a lightweight structure and even this does not need to be in place until the forum itself is well-established. A sample Steering Team Terms of Reference is provided in the Appendices, below.

6 Governance

The purpose of the governance structure is to provide credibility for the forum's non-partisan status. This plays a major part in establishing the forum as a place where all voices, and all points of view are equally welcome. The governance structure can also be used to process any financial transactions that are involved.

It is useful to establish at least an informal agreement with an organisation that is capable of providing a suitable governance structure, early in the process of planning the forum. This establishes the non-partisan status of the forum from the outset.

The body that provides the governance structure should be one that has credibility as non-partisan, and with a commitment to public participation.

The governance structure should be formalised once the forum is established. A sample Letter Establishing the Governance Structure is provided in the Appendices, below.

7 Guidelines

Forum guidelines play a key role in creating a forum where all voices can be heard. The four most important guidelines are as follows.

1. Use your real name.
2. Be civil.
3. Keep it local.
4. You can only make two posts per day.

A full set of forum guidelines is provided by E-Democracy.Org at <http://e-democracy.org/rules/>.

7.1 Use Your Real Name

This ensures that people makes posts that they are willing to take responsibility for. It also ensures that the conversations in the forum overlap with, and are strongly linked with conversations that take place in the local media and other community contexts.

7.2 Be Civil

This helps to ensure that all voices can be heard in the forum. A diversity of points of view is to be encouraged, and participants must feel confident that they will be treated with respect, even if others disagree strongly with their ideas.

7.3 Keep it Local

This ensures that the forum achieves its purpose of increasing participation in the local democratic process. This focus is more easily maintained when the overall scope of conversations is limited. This guideline can be difficult to manage, as many national, global or indeed universal issues have local implications, and vice versa. To comply with this guideline, posts relating to national, global or universal issues, should address the local implications of those issues.

7.4 You Can Only Make Two Posts Per Day

This guideline prevents individuals from dominating the discussion. It should be enforced by the form technology.

8 Forum Manager

The forum manager's role is to encourage participation within the guidelines. The forum manager is supported in this role by the steering team. The forum manager can participate in the conversations if they wish, although this may increase the risk of concerns being raised about the impartiality of the forum manager. The support of the steering team can be useful in such circumstances.

Most guideline-compliance action taken by the forum manager can be done behind the scenes by directly emailing forum members to request compliance. It is useful to copy such emails to the steering team online group, so that there is a record of these posts.

9 Technology

The E-Democracy.Org forums site (<http://forums.e-democracy.org>), a site that runs on the GroupServer software (<http://groupserver.org>) developed and hosted by OnlineGroups.Net (<http://onlinegroups.net>). Using this technology for the Canterbury forum means it benefits from technology that is well-proven as suitable for online public issues forums. This also locates the Canterbury forum in a growing community of counterparts from the US and UK. This gives the Canterbury team access to support and knowledge-sharing opportunities.

GroupServer enables people to participate in online conversations using email, the web or both.

9.1 Domain

The url of the Canterbury forum (<http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/canterburyissues>) long, and difficult to communicate in print, or verbally. The shorter and more easily spoken domain (<http://canterburyissues.org.nz>) was chosen to make it easier to promote the forum in print, and on radio and television.

10 Promotion

10.1 Phase One: Build a Steering Team

The first aim of the promotion process is to engage potential steering team members to assist with the second phase of the promotion, and establish a non-partisan governance structure from the outset.

Promotion phase one should aim to engage people who are interested in public participation, rather than specific public issues.

Promotion should be carried out using a variety of media, including the following.

- Community networks.
- Political networks.
- Local radio, newspapers and television.

- Posters on community notice-boards.
- Fliers in cafes and community venues.

A public meeting can be useful to explain how local online public issues forums work, and to explain and engage people with the launch process.

10.2 Phase Two: Engage Participants

Building membership is the second greatest challenge in the process of establishing an online public issues forum. This phase targets people who are concerned about local issues. The following media should be used, but the most effective means of promotion is face to face engagement with the public, and collecting registrations on paper. This is hard work, and requires dedicated volunteers. The best community events for face to face promotion are those with some community or political purpose rather than markets or those focused purely on recreation. Door to door promotion also works well.

As participation builds in the forum, forum members can be asked to assist with promoting the forum.

11 Building Participation

Building participation is the second greatest challenge in the process of establishing an online public issues forum. The only way to achieve this is to find ways of opening conversations that engage participants. This can be done in the following ways.

- Forum manager or steering team members open topics.
- Forum manager directly asks forum members to comment on particular topics.
- Guest Speakers.

Over time, momentum builds and participants themselves open sufficient topics to keep the conversation vibrant.

11.1 Guest Speakers

Guest speakers are a highly effective way of stimulating participation in the forum. A guest speaker is a well-known public figure who agrees to make an opening post on a topic of local relevance, and to reply to comments on that topic for a week. A sample email explaining the guest speakers process is included in the appendices.

A list of guest speakers who have appeared in the Canterbury Online Public Issues Forum is in the "Guest Speakers" topic in the forum <http://forums.e-democracy.org/r/topic/31VCAyoczIZW12oZvqveOr>.

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13 Appendices

The appendices contain resources that were collected during the process of establishing the Canterbury Online Public Issues Forum, that may be use in starting other forums.

13.1 Links to other resources

- E-Democracy.Org Issues Forum Guide <http://www.e-democracy.org/if/guide.pdf>
- E-Democracy.Org Forum Managers Online Group <http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/fm>
- E-Democracy.Org Forum Builders Online Group <http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/liftoff>
- the Canterbury Online Public Issues Forum <http://canterburyissues.org.nz>
- Community Partnership Fund <http://www.digitalstrategy.govt.nz/Funding/The-Community-Partnership-Fund/>
- Plains FM <http://plainsfm.org.nz/>
- OnlineGroups.Net <http://onlinegroups.net>

13.2 Media Release for Promotion Phase One

Public Issues Forums – the Future of Democracy?

Participative democracy enthusiasts are required to lead a new online Public Issues Forum to be launched soon in [Region].

A core group of organisers is holding a public meeting to start off the establishment of an online Public Issues Forum for the region, and they are calling on people interested in democratic initiatives to contribute to the support and governance of the forum.

Public Issues Forums are carefully managed email discussion forums focused on public issues in a local area. They have been running successfully in localities around the world for over ten years. Using simple technology, they encourage and provide opportunities for citizens to participate in conversations about local issues. They build public awareness of the facts and of the spectrum of points of view around public issues. At times, they can generate workable solutions to controversial problems.

One of the organisers of the meeting, [Partner Spokesperson], says the forums make it easier for individuals to participate in the democratic process.

“We have a lot of questions in this region about how to deal with the issues facing us” he says, “[issue], [issue], [issue] and [issue] are all the sorts of issues that can be discussed in a public issues forum. But also the little things – everything from berms to the new council building”.

Each forum is managed by a volunteer forum manager who ensures that participation stays within clear guidelines. The forum manager is supported by an independent Steering Committee who ensure that the governance of the forum is is non-partisan. The first stage of setting up a public issues forum is to form a steering committee, and that is the purpose of the first public meeting.

Because the idea is already running in several places around the world, there are plenty of resources and experience that a local group can draw from. These include multimedia presentations and a 60 page Issues Forum Guidebook.

A partnership between [Governance Organisation] and [Partner] has led to the project here but [Governance Organisation Spokesperson], says it's not [her/his] place to lead it.

“The point is the Forum will be governed and managed by interested community members,” [she/he] says, “ [Partner Spokesperson] and I have seeded the idea and we’re committed to supporting the Forum in any way we can but we’re organising this public meeting to bring together the people who are interested in seeing it happen”.

Those interested need have no computer experience, say the organisers, just an interest in working on an exciting democracy project.

The meeting will be held at [venue] at [time & date].

Examples of successful Public Issues Forums include the following.

- Minneapolis Issues Forum (Minnesota) <http://forums.e-democracy.org/mpls>
- St Paul Issues Forum (Minnesota) <http://forums.e-democracy.org/stpaul>
- Newham Issues Forum (UK) <http://forums.e-democracy.org/newham>
- Brighton and Hove Issues Forum (UK) <http://forums.e-democracy.org/brighton-hove>

Contact etc.

13.3 Sign-up Form

13.3.1 [Region] Public Issues Forum: Registration of Interest

Complete if you would like to participate in the forum.			Complete if you would like to help launch the forum, be part of a steering team or be a volunteer forum manager.	
First Name	Last Name	Email Address	Phone Number/s	Locality

13.4 Frequently Asked Questions

13.4.1 Will I get a lot of Email?

You can choose how much email you get. You can get one email for every post, or a maximum of one email per day.

13.4.2 Do I have to join the forum to participate?

You have to join to receive email deliveries of posts, and to make posts yourself. You can read posts on the Web

[http://\[forum_url\]](http://[forum_url])

or via a web feed,

[http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/\[forum_id\]/messages/posts.atom](http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/[forum_id]/messages/posts.atom)

without joining.

13.4.3 How do I leave the Forum?

To leave the forum, log in and then click "leave" on the forum home page,

[http://\[forum_url\]](http://[forum_url])

or send an email with the subject line "unsubscribe" to the following address.

[\[forum_id\]@forums.e-democracy.org](mailto:[forum_id]@forums.e-democracy.org)

13.4.4 What should I do when I join the forum ?

When you join the forum, read some of the discussion that has already taken place, and then introduce yourself by making a post to the "Introductions" topic.

[http://\[url_of_Introductions_topic\]](http://[url_of_Introductions_topic])

13.4.5 What is the "proper" way to make a post to the forum?

When you are posting to the forum, think about whether you are starting a topic, or adding to a topic.

13.4.6 How is this different from Letters to the Editor?

The primary difference between the two is the purpose. The purpose of the Canterbury Public Issues Forum is to increase the opportunity for citizens to participate in the local democratic process. It has no commercial motivation. With the issues forum, there is no editor. As long as people keep to broad guidelines, their posts are simply emailed to the group members, and kept forever in the online archive.

13.4.7 How can I participate if I don't have a computer?

Use a friend's or a public access computer (eg at a Library). Get someone to help you. You will need to get your own email address (eg gmail).

13.4.8 Will the forum change anything or will it be all talk?

The aim of the forum is to allow diverse voices to be heard. It probably won't have any direct impact on decision-making but some decision-makers will pay close attention to the conversations in the forum, and may be influenced by them. Many of the participants will be voters or otherwise involved in political activities. Voting, in contrast has an effect but the voter has restricted options to choose from. In the public issues forum, participants can put forward any idea or point of view, as long as they keep within the forum rules.

13.4.9 What will I get out of participating?

Simply by keeping track of the conversations in an online public issues forum, you will be more informed about what is going on in Canterbury and discover diverse points of view on relevant issues. You also have the opportunity to add your voice to the discussions.

13.4.10 Won't the forum just deteriorate into a nasty fight?

No. The forum has clear guidelines that encourage constructive debate, and prohibit personal attacks. There is a forum manager, who makes sure people comply with the guidelines, and takes appropriate action if they don't. Each person can only make two posts in any 24 hour period. This encourages people to think carefully before they post.

13.4.11 Who runs this? Why should I trust you?

The forum is run by an independent steering committee, whose job is to ensure that the forum increases the opportunity for citizens to participate in the local democratic process. The forum manager is accountable to the steering committee. The steering committee is accountable to the [Governance Organisation], the organisation that.... The forum is following the well-established approach developed by E-Democracy.Org <http://e-democracy.org>.

13.4.12 Why do I have to provide my real name?

Participants are required to provide their real name, as this encourages people to participate in a thoughtful and constructive way.

13.4.13 Can anyone get my email address (can it be harvested for spam)?

When you make a post, your email address will appear in the email that is sent to all members of the forum, who have configured their email settings to receive all posts. Your email address will not be visible on the website.

13.5 Memorandum of Understanding between Project Leaders and [Council]

This is a Memorandum of Understanding between the Public Issues Forum Project Leaders ([Governance Organisation] and [Partner]) and [Council]. It describes how [Council] and the Project Leaders expect to work together on a project to establish an Online Public Issues Forum in [Region].

This Memorandum of Understanding is being established prior to the second phase of an application for funding for this project. It will be used to support that funding application. If the funding application is successful, it will become the basis for working on the project. If the funding application is not successful, it will become the basis for a revised project.

13.5.1 Public Issues Forums

Local Public Issues Forums have been running successfully in Minnesota for over ten years. Using simple technology, they encourage and provide opportunities for citizens to participate in conversations about local issues. They build public awareness of the facts and of the spectrum of points of view around public issues. At times, they can generate workable solutions to controversial problems.

Local Public Issues Forums are managed using clear guidelines to ensure that conversations are civil and constructive, even if they are robust, and that all points view can be heard. Each forum is governed by an independent Steering Committee who support a volunteer Forum Manager and ensure that the forum management is non-partisan.

The recent UK National Local E-Democracy project (<http://www.edemocracy.gov.uk>) established successful public issues forums in UK localities. It also produced tools and templates that can be used to set up similar forums elsewhere. E-Democracy.Org has comprehensive resources, including multimedia presentations and a 60 page Issues Forum Guidebook, available at <http://e-democracy.org/center/if.html>.

Examples of successful Public Issues Forums include:

- Minneapolis Issues Forum (Minnesota) <http://e-democracy.org/mpis>
- St Paul Issues Forum (Minnesota) <http://forums.e-democracy.org/stpaul>
- Newham Issues Forum (UK) <http://forums.e-democracy.org/newham>
- Brighton and Hove Issues Forum (UK) <http://forums.e-democracy.org/brighton-hove>

The UK issues forum pilots and resources were set up by Steven Clift and Tim Erickson of E-Democracy.Org (<http://www.e-democracy.org>) in Minnesota. These and some of the US forums are operating at <http://forums.e-democracy.org>, a site that runs on the GroupServer software (<http://groupserver.org>) developed and hosted by Christchurch company OnlineGroups.Net who started the Canterbury Online Public Issues forum (<http://canterburyissues.org.nz>).

This project will take advantage of these relationships and resources to establish Forums in NZ.

13.5.2 Local Councils and Public Issues Forums

The requirement for independent governance makes it difficult for Councils themselves to convene and manage Public Issues Forums. Council staff can, however support the Forum Steering Committee to promote and launch the forum.

Once it is running, Council staff and elected representatives can follow and contribute to conversations in the forum. This provides insight into community views on local issues and opportunities to answer questions and provide information and explanations.

13.5.3 The Project

The [Governance Organisation] has applied for funding from the Community Partnership Fund (<http://www.digitalstrategy.govt.nz/cpf>) to establish a Public Issues Forum.

The forum will be established under the umbrella of [Governance Organisation] with support from local Councils.

13.5.3.1 Project Leadership

This project will be led by [Governance Organisation] and [Partner].

13.5.3.2 [Governance Organisation]

[Governance Organisation] is ...

13.5.3.3 [Partner]

[Partner] is ...

13.5.3.4 Role of Project Leaders

- The Project Leaders are responsible for the following.
- Overall financial management of the project.
- Overall planning, leadership and coordination of the project.
- Securing funding and support from one or more local Councils
- Drafting and signing appropriate contracts and agreements between partners, funders and stakeholders.
- Leading information sessions and meetings with partners, stakeholders and the public.
- Engaging a volunteer Steering Committee members and a Forum Manager
- Training and support for volunteer Steering Committee members and Forum Manager.
- Launching the Public Issues Forum.
- Supporting the ongoing development of the Forum
- Coordinating the review of the project.

The phase that is most critical to the success of the project is the launch. The experience in the US and UK has shown that the more members the forum has on opening, the greater the likelihood of it developing sustainable momentum.

If the funding is approved, the project will commence in [Month Year] and be reviewed 12 months after the launch.

After its first 12 months of operation, the Public Issues Forum will require minimal resources to keep operating. It is likely that ongoing local funding will be sought to support this.

13.5.4 Establishment Funding

Support, both in cash and in kind, will be sought from the following contributors.

- ...Fund
- Local Councils
- Governance Organisation

- Partner
- Volunteers Steering Committee members and Forum Manager

13.5.5 Support and Funding from Local Councils

Support and funding from local Councils is primarily required to support the launch of the Public Issues Forum.

The launch process will be as follows.

- Promotion planning.
- Production of printed material.
- Purchase of advertising via a range of media.
- A public meeting.
- Promotion via community networks.
- Promotion by volunteers and temporary staff in public places and at community events.
- Liaison with E-Democracy.Org consultants.

It is likely that a combined total of \$amount will be sought from local Councils in each region (approximately 50% in cash and 50% in kind).

13.5.6 Local Council Stakeholding

13.5.6.1 Alignment with Local Government Act

- Support for a regional Public Issues Forum is consistent with the principles of the Local Government Act that relate to the Council, as follows.
- Conducting business in an open and transparent manner.
- Making itself aware of community views.
- Providing opportunities for Māori to participate in decision-making processes.
- Identifying who will be affected by decisions and encourage them to make their views known to the council - councils also must give reasons for their decisions.
- Finding out what all the practical options are for dealing with issues and carefully assess them.
- Collaborating and cooperating with other local authorities as appropriate.

13.5.6.2 Alignment with Community Outcomes

Council support for Public Issues Forums is consistent with the Community Outcomes for [Council] to 2012 (<link to CommunityOutcomes>).

[insert appropriate community outcomes]

13.5.7 Operation Benefits to Council

13.5.7.1 Arm's Length

The independence of the governance structure planned for the Public Issues Forum provides a credible non-partisan status that could not be achieved if the Forums were convened and managed by the Council.

13.5.7.2 Not a Project

The management to be provided by the project leaders significantly reduces the cost of this project to the Council by removing the need for internal project management.

13.5.7.3 Risk Mitigation

The use of a proven approach, shared and localised across a number of regional initiatives, and the involvement of experienced project leaders, both from NZ and overseas, maximises the chances of this project succeeding.

13.5.8 Statement of Intent

This Public Issues Forum project is aligned with the strategic direction of [Council Name] and has operational benefits for us.

It is likely that resources can be made available via existing [Council Name] funding mechanisms to support this project.

The scope of this Memorandum of Understanding is restricted to the establishment of the Public Issues Forum. It is possible that [Council Name] and the Issues Forum Steering Committee may in future make agreements around ongoing support for the Forum.

This Memorandum of Understanding is authorised by [Signatory] for [Governance Organisation]:

Signed: Date:

This Memorandum of Understanding is authorised by [signatory name] for [Council Name]:

Signed: Date:

13.6 Guest Speaker Information

BEING GUEST SPEAKER

Being Guest Speaker involves the following.

- 1: Preparation, before the start day, as described below.
- 2: On the first day of the Guest Speakership, make an opening post to the forum, raising one or more local topics of interest, and inviting responses.
- 3: Remain in the forum for seven days, to respond to questions or views that came up. Depending on the discussion that occurs, two or three thoughtful responses, including one around the end of the week, is

usually sufficient.

There is no expectation that you participate in the forum after the Guest Speakership, though you can do so if you wish.

Please note the four key forum guidelines.

1: Use your real name.

2: Keep it local.

3: Be civil.

4: Only two posts per day.

PREPARATION FOR BEING GUEST SPEAKER

In preparation for being Guest Speaker in the [Region] Online Public Issues Forum, please take the following steps. If possible, complete these steps before the first day of your week as Guest Speaker. That means you will still have your two posts per day to post, and respond to others, on day one.

1: Read the Charter.

[http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/\[forum_id\]/charter](http://forums.e-democracy.org/groups/[forum_id]/charter)

2: Join the Forum, following the instructions on the home page of the forum.

[http://\[forum_url\]/](http://[forum_url]/)

3: Read this post about "Topics in the Forum"

[http://\[url of post about use of topics\]](http://[url of post about use of topics])

4: Read as much of the existing conversation as you can, to familiarise yourself with what has already been discussed. You may wish to view the posts made by previous guest speakers in the forum. Some are listed in the following post.

[http://\[url of post listing guest speakers\]](http://[url of post listing guest speakers])

5: Make a post introducing yourself, in the "Introductions" topic.

[http://\[url of Introductions topic\]](http://[url of Introductions topic])

6: Prepare your opening post, deciding which Topic you are going to post to, or if you are going to start a new topic, deciding what you are going to call it.

13.7 Steering Team Terms of Reference

Accepted by the Steering Team on [date].

13.7.1 Purpose

The purpose of the Steering Team is to ensure that the [Region] Online Public Issues Forum achieves its purpose, which is to increase the opportunity for citizens of [Region] to participate in the local democratic process.

13.7.2 Functions

The steering team achieves its purpose in the following ways.

- Supports the Forum Manager.
- Ensures that the Forum Manager upholds the forum rules, in a non-partisan way.
- Helps to promote the Forum.

13.7.3 Membership

New members who apply, or are invited to join the steering team, are appointed by consensus among the existing members.

13.7.4 Structure

The steering team has a chairperson, appointed by consensus among the existing members, who leads the team, and represents the team in liaison with other organisations.

13.7.5 Accountability

The steering team is accountable to [Governance Organisation] to ensure that the [Region] Online Public Issues Forum achieves its purpose.

13.7.6 Records

The steering team records the agenda and minutes of its meeting in the “[Region] Team” online group.

13.7.7 Meetings

The steering team meets face to face at least four times per year to make decisions based on consensus. The team can make informal decisions in its online group.

13.8 Governance Letter

Chairperson
[Governance Organisation]

Dear ...,

On behalf of the Steering Team of the [Region] Online Public Issues Forum, I request that the [Governance Organisation] agrees to provide a governance structure that holds the Steering Team accountable to manage the forum in a non-partisan way.

The [Region] Online Public Issues Forum was opened on 1 April 2007, with assistance from [Governance Organisation], and [Funder] that was obtained by [Governance Organisation]. The forum has been operating successfully since then. It has over [number] members, who make around [number] posts per month.

The forum is managed by a Forum Manager and a Steering Team who ensure that the forum achieves its purpose, to increase the opportunity for citizens of [Region] to participate in the local democratic process. The team supports the Forum Manager, ensures that the Forum Manager upholds the forum rules, in a non-partisan way, and helps to promote the Forum.

The non-partisan status of the Steering Team is essential to the credibility of the forum as a neutral place, where all voices can be heard. The Steering Team is seeking to establish formal accountability to [Governance Organisation] for this non-partisan status, in order to strengthen the credibility of the forum. This accountability would enable the [Governance Organisation] to intervene in the activities of the Steering Team, in the event that a complaint was made, or that another reason for intervention arose.

The Steering Team currently has no funds, and is not planning fund-raising. The Steering Team members and Forum Manager participate on a voluntary basis. [Governance Organisation] has acted as the manager of funding transactions with [Partner] during the process of establishing the forum. This process will be concluded within 2008. It is possible that the Steering Team may request that [Governance Organisation] manages funds on behalf of the Steering Team in future.

yours etc,