

Issues to think about before you start – support

Build in time for briefing / debriefing. Meet members of the public before each meeting to ensure they know what to expect and are clear about the items on the agenda. Make contact with them after the meeting to find out if there was anything they didn't understand or didn't get to say in the meeting. This doesn't always have to be done formally, for example it could simply involve a chat on the way home, or a phone call the next day.

Provide lots of informal, personal contact. Make people feel welcome at meetings and talk to them during the breaks. Establishing a good relationship with members of the public will help you to recognise and respond to their individual support needs. It will also help them to feel more comfortable about telling you if they have a problem.

Create opportunities for socialising amongst the group members. For example offer lunch before meetings or tea/coffee breaks during the meetings. This is fundamental to building good working relationships and enabling the group to work well together. It can also help people to establish connections with others who can provide informal support.

Ensure someone in the team is given the lead on support for members of the public. Someone needs to have responsibility for providing this support, so that it is offered proactively and checks are made regularly to find out whether support needs have changed over time.

Prepare the whole group for dealing with any emotional issues that arise. For example reach an agreement as to what will happen if somebody becomes distressed in a meeting or feels unable to handle the discussions. This might involve the

person leaving the room and taking a break. On their return their distress might be acknowledged and then the meeting moved on. This is important so people don't feel too embarrassed to come back to the meeting after becoming upset and everyone in the room feels comfortable with how the situation is handled.

Encourage peer support. If there are two or more members of the public they can provide peer support to each other. Members of the public might also benefit from having a [mentor](#) on the group – someone who is more experienced and can provide one-to-one feedback and encouragement.

Emotional support is not only important for members of the public. Other group members can become upset when talking about people's personal experiences. They may have a personal history of the issue themselves. Be prepared to offer emotional support to everyone involved.