

Hosting Consultative Meetings – Ideas & Principles

The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) Australasia has prepared this document for Members of Parliament (MPs). Please feel free to use and customise.

The purpose of the document is to outline well established principles for engaging people in productive conversations, especially around complex and contentious matters. These principles include gaining a diversity of views, encouraging idea generation and reflective thinking by participants, and ensuring that the collective output is linked to the objectives for the session. We are also making some suggestions about ways to achieve this.

In providing this advice we are aware that some MPs already use a number of these strategies, and honour these principles, to engage their constituents.

Before the Meeting

Consider the invitation and who will come

The usual methods of getting people to come to public meetings are by way of advertisements and press releases in local papers. It is our experience that these methods lead to a particular group of attendees (people who are comfortable coming to meetings and some stakeholder groups, sometimes referred to as 'the incensed and the articulate'). In this case, these methods are likely to generate more interest than usual, given the link to the national summit and providing the way for any local person to become involved.

Creative ideas emerge from difference and diversity; people from wide ranging backgrounds and interests coming together. If you have time, other methods for gaining diverse views include: specific invitations to community groups to send a representative (and if needed provide support for this to happen - a venue with disabled access, interpreters, child care) and specific invitations sent to randomly selected people in your electorate. Without such recruitment strategies you might simply only hear from the people you *always* hear from.

Organise an independent facilitator

Consider using a facilitator. IAP2 can provide a list of people willing to facilitate meetings on a volunteer basis to the Minister's office. An independent facilitator has the skills to plan the meeting and then manage the meeting to ensure you get the most information and views (the best conversation) in the time available. They may also add credibility to the process as they will be seen as independent and only concerned to ensure a meeting at which everyone gets a chance to contribute their views. They can assist you to plan the session as well as being the front person during the session.

Consider making sessions at least 3 hours long.

Good discussion takes time. The more time you have, the more chance you have of people not just stating their own views but being able to reflect on the views of others and collectively come up with new ideas. The shorter the session (2 hours is considered short) the more structured the session needs to be to collect ideas and the less chance for more reflective discussion. A high quality conversation involves 'deliberation' – a quality that occurs when people have useful information to 'chew over', and the chance to 'weigh up' the merit of different options.

Just Prior to the Session

Other support staff you may need at the session

It is very useful to have a registration desk managed by at least 2 people, and someone to offer light refreshments. A scribe is also invaluable. Without capturing the views of the session it would be very difficult to demonstrate that people have been genuinely heard, that their views are valued, or that their input has been useful in preparation of the issue under discussion.

Room Set Up

It is advisable to avoid theatre style set ups as they do not encourage open discussion. Attendees only see the backs of people's heads and do not have a chance to build rapport with the other participants. Preferable room settings to encourage discussion are circles of chairs or tables of 6-10 people. The facilitators will have their own ideas about resources required. At a minimum, provide sheets of flip chart (butchers paper) for each table with flip chart markers at each table.

At the Session

Role of Facilitator

At the session the facilitator's role is to present the agenda and scope of the session(s), guide discussion within that scope (i.e. keep it 'on track'), and to create a safe and respectful place for all participants. The facilitator will ensure that progress is made toward achieving the session's objectives, and will creatively manage the dynamics of the meeting. The facilitator will use methods that enable quieter people to provide their thoughts, and to constructively channel the energy of more dominant communicators. All voices need to be heard. Facilitators will **not** rely solely on conventional public meeting style discussions, which favour certain individuals. The facilitator will conclude the meeting by reporting on the main achievements of the session, and how this output will be used in the future.

Making it count

People need to know that their contribution has a purpose – that their views will be seriously considered. In the opening statement it would be good for the Local Member to be very clear about how the information being collected will be collated and what it will contribute to (policy, debate etc).

Engaging people in government decision making activities like this works best if the decision is not yet made and the decision maker is openly seeking the advice of the community. Giving the timing of the decision making process is important. However, if the decision makers or their representatives take a strong role in putting their own views at such meetings, it will give the impression that the community views are not valued and that the community is wasting its time.

Role of the MP and other government attendees

It is suggested that the MPs and government attendees declare that they have come to listen. It is expected that the MP would make an opening/welcoming statement. At the conclusion of the session it would be very useful for the government attendees to report back to participants what they learnt from the session, and how they intend to report back on their community forum experience.

Meeting Purpose

It may be valuable up front in the introductions (as in any correspondence and publicity) to be very clear about the purpose of the meeting. The meeting is to generate ideas, or provide some feedback about some existing ideas, related to a particular topic or topics. It is **not** a general meeting to discuss all issues in the electorate. The intention is to promote dialogue and deliberation. It is not intended to be an opportunity for people to make long, formal presentations. The meeting is to be structured in such a way that everybody contributes and everyone learns something new. To encourage participants to focus on the topic it would be good to encourage people who are attending to have read the information on the topic/s before they come. This could be contained on a website for easy access.

Starting the Session

Welcome

Participants could be welcomed by the MP, who should reiterate the purpose of the meeting, how this meeting fits into the Government's policy agenda and what will happen with the information generated by this community forum. The MP could then explain their role, and that of other government representatives and the facilitator for this session.

Introductions

The more people get to know each other, the more respect they are likely to have for each other's views. Good introductions are essential – the amount of time you give to this will depend on the length of the session and the number of people in the room. The MP, staff and the facilitator should all be introduced. It may be valuable for the facilitator to provide some more information on the background that led to them being chosen and/or invited to this meeting.

If less than 20 attend, participants could individually introduce themselves by saying why they are there, and what matters most to them. In larger groups this could be done around small tables. Alternatively, questions could be used such as:

- The areas that most interest me are ...
- This forum will be worth my effort if ...

Meeting Formats to Encourage Discussion and Ideas

There are many formats and techniques to choose from. If you are using a facilitator they will be able to provide advice on the most suitable formats for the session to meet the overall objective, the interests of people attending, the timeframe and the number of people in the room.

There are a range of methods and techniques for vision setting – Appreciative Inquiry, Future Search, Technology Of Participation (TOP), Workshop Method (aka Cardstorming), World Café, Open Space Technology, Large Scale Set Ups, 21st Town Meetings, use of creative methods (photos, videos, stories). These would be valuable if a full day is available. They are harder to use in a short 2 hour session. Some simple meeting formats are suggested below.

Larger groups

For groups of more than 20 people, table discussion is suggested – tables of 5-8 people. If there is more than one topic under discussion then topics could be allocated to tables and people invited to sit at a table to discuss that topic. If there are large numbers and they are not evenly distributed, you can simply have more than one table discussing one topic and the ideas from 2 or 3 tables collated later in the session. It is not seen as a problem if there is little to no interest in any of the topic areas. Allow people to focus their energy where they are most interested.

It will be critical for discussion to be documented in a way that is easy to collate. Scribes for each of the tables would be ideal. The main points made could be captured on Flip Chart under various headings such as:

- Key issues
- Points of difference
- New ideas/solutions
- Key Questions (that have emerged during discussion)

Ending the Session

A plenary session can sometimes be drawn out, and an anti-climax. Depending on numbers your facilitator will have a range of ways that the output of the session can be reported upon and celebrated. Tacking up flip charts and inviting all participants to walk around to view while they enjoy some refreshments is a relaxed way to do this. Alternately a very brief report can be given by each table. This could simply involve one of the table participants reporting to the whole group the suggestion, or issue, that was generated the most energy.

After the Session

How to collect and document the information

There are various ways of collecting the information. If the TOP Cardstorming method is used, the participants themselves will document the output. Most other methods will involve scribes writing on flip charts, or typing in responses.

A consistent reporting format for the sessions, summarising the output, will make it much easier to use the information at the community forum.

The next two pages provide a suggested approach to doing this.

Draft Template for Local Summit Reports

Electorate:

MPs present:

Location:

Date:

Session Hours: From ___ to ___

Government representatives present:

Facilitator:

Demographic information of those who participated.

Age

	12-18	19-29	30-49	50-69	70+
Numbers					

Cultural Background

	Indigenous	Anglo-Celtic	Non-English speaking background
Numbers			

Gender

	Male	Female	Transexual/transgender
Number			

Key Messages Arising from the Community Forum

1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	
6.	
7.	
8.	
9.	
10.	

Example of Output Reports (probably in Landscape form)

Long Term National Health

	Key Issues	Points of Difference	Ideas/solutions	Questions
Preventing chronic and acute health problems				
Retaining access to the very best of modern medical technology				
Using electronic infrastructure to facilitate efficient and effective patient care				
Preserving the blend of public and private health care				
Planning for the future demands on our medical workforce				