

## How do I have effective dialogue with the public?

### Creating an open dialogue which prizes mutual listening

*This toolkit is designed to help you facilitate and guide discussions, debates or dialogue in your public engagement. It will consider what two-way conversations with publics can achieve, what format and techniques might be best suited to your aims and how to facilitate it well.*

#### 1 | Why organise a dialogue-based activity?

Dialogue involves two-way communication and is a powerful approach for helping groups from different backgrounds to share knowledge, perspectives and experiences. Dialogue enables you to learn from and understand others, even when they come from very different viewpoints and it can enable people to work together to solve issues. Increasingly,

researchers are seeking to engage the public through dialogue to achieve meaningful and productive engagement with their stakeholders and wider publics. It can help form networks, gain trust and build better relationships with those outside science. It also allows us to gain insights to make research more relevant for society.

#### A little history: From deficit to dialogue

Towards the end of the 20th century, science communication activities sought to address negative attitudes towards science and a perceived deficit of scientific knowledge amongst the public. This 'Public Understanding of Science' model therefore focused on educating the public: sharing facts and knowledge to address the 'deficit' in public understanding and appreciation of science. The assumption was that any negativity towards science existed due to a lack of understanding: if the public understood more science, their attitudes towards it would be positive and they would be more receptive to its outputs regardless of what they were.

However, several public scientific controversies highlighted that increased knowledge does not necessarily lead to increased enjoyment or acceptance of science. Sociologists, and many in the scientific community, started to recognise that a more two-way approach to communicating science was needed so that science and wider society could exist harmoniously and so that science could continue to have positive societal impacts.

By the 21st century, dialogue, achieved through 'Public Engagement', became recognised as a key activity for the scientific community to take part in. It aimed to put the emphasis on listening to other voices and facilitating two-way conversations as well as sharing scientific knowledge.

## 2 | What kind of dialogue-based activity should you run?

There are many types of dialogue-based activities out there - panel sessions, debates, or a series of focus groups to name just a few. To decide which would suit you best, consider your aim and your audience. Some key questions to think about are:

- How in-depth or complex is the input you need?
- How ambitious is your aim?
- How sensitive is the issue?

Generally, short activities with less interaction such as panel sessions can allow you to get a degree of input on simple, non-sensitive topics. This is a good way to get initial feedback, scope out a topic or boost awareness. Your audience can ask questions for clarification,

comment or share brief experiences. Debates may be set up to compare and contrast different points of view on a particular argument. Consider who you are including on your panel. Can you feature a range of perspectives to achieve balance? If your subject is on patient data, for example, how will you feature the patient voice in your panel?

Longer activities, spread out over several sessions will allow rich dialogue on complex and sensitive topics. Such in-depth dialogue can be facilitated to share and understand personal values, interests, needs and fears. You can also achieve more ambitious aims such as re-building relationships and coming to a consensus on an issue.

### Don't rush it!

Dialogue can be a lengthy process particularly for sensitive topics – building trust and establishing a safe space can take time but will be worth it. It's important that you allow plenty of time and the environment is relaxed to encourage productive discussion. Considering this, decide how many sessions you need and be conservative. It may take one whole session to tackle any preconceptions your participating groups have and another session to scope out the issues. You will also need to balance this with the time commitments of your participants.

**Note:** Dialogue is often used to engage with sensitive issues, particularly as it can help identify common ground and strengthen relationships. If you are planning discussions around sensitive topics see our resource on engagement with controversial issues or come along to our [Masterclass](#) for tailored guidance.

## 3 | Planning and preparing your activity

An open mind-set should underpin your planning and preparation. Dialogue sessions are a great opportunity to explore the knowledge, perspectives and first-hand experiences of others – not as a means of educating or convincing others to agree with your viewpoint. See participants as equals with important insights to contribute. And if someone raises a point that you don't agree with, focus on trying to understand their point of view and the reasons behind it as well as sharing your own.



### Materials to prepare

- **Background research** – Try to be aware of relevant current affairs – if you're not up to speed this could seem disrespectful or suspicious. If you choose to avoid an area of discussion, have a good reason prepared.
- **Framework** – A framework can include prompts that are of interest to your participants to encourage discussion.
- **Protocols** – If logistical issues occur, or if the discussion takes an unexpected or heated turn then having clear instructions to refer to will help guide those supporting the activity.
- **A brief** – Fully brief everyone supporting your activity, including protocols and set responses.

## Considering your participants:

- Be extremely clear about what your activity will involve both when promoting your activity and before the activity starts. Make sure that those taking part know what they are contributing to and how their contributions will be acted upon. This will set expectations and avoid frustration.
- Involve your participants in the planning. Contact representatives of your stakeholder groups and get their feedback on the structure and the framework in particular.
- Be inclusive. Consider any accessibility needs your participants may have, like wheelchair access or an interpreter for those whose first language isn't English.
- Provide further opportunities. Ensure your audience has a way to contact you with further comments and questions. This can ensure they don't walk away from your activity feeling frustrated if they don't get a chance to speak.

Consider how you will evaluate your discussion activity – both in terms of whether you met your own aims and the experiences of your public participants.

## 4 | Facilitating dialogue

In some cases, you may wish to consider hiring a freelance facilitator to design and guide your dialogue activity. Other times you may act as the facilitator, in which case, it's important that you plan your activity considering the following:

**Remember!** Your role is to provide a safe environment where people feel comfortable sharing their personal perspectives without being judged. The below points will help you ensure the space is safe, open and inclusive.

**Start with refreshments or introductions:** Allowing time for your participants to get to know each other before diving into the issue can help to create a positive and relaxed environment.

**Create agreed ground rules or guidelines:** From the outset, get your participants to agree on some basic rules of how they can interact with each other. Agreeing on these rules together can ease people in to working together and make them feel more confident in contributing to conversations. Importantly they also give you more authority to refer to them later and challenge disruptive behaviour.

**Be aware of power dynamics and aim to address them:** There may be participants who are more comfortable joining in than others for various reasons. Try to create an environment where everyone feels able to participate. For example, someone who feels shy may not want to share their opinion verbally but would be happy writing it on a post-it note.

**Listen actively:** Adopt an encouraging manner, maintain eye contact with the person talking and summarise what was said to ensure you've interpreted it correctly and show that their voice has been heard and is valued.

**Keep the conversation going:** When discussion falls quiet you can recap what has been covered so far, encourage others to speak, or move on to the next section. Have some questions prepared to help maintain the flow of conversation.

**Allow space for contributions:** But don't feel you have to fill the gaps immediately. Some people may not be immediately forthcoming with speaking, so it is important to give space and time for them to contribute. As facilitator you can ensure that there are pauses in the conversation to enable others to speak up.

**Use a parking place:** When participants are going off task, make a note of the point (perhaps on a white board or on flip chart paper) then address it at the end if there is time or make arrangements with the participant to discuss it at a later date.

**Re-frame confrontational or obstructive comments:** Facilitators can play a mediating role in reframing questions or comments from participants to a more productive point. Acknowledge what was said, and try to keep its meaning, while rephrasing as a question or comment to help move discussion on.

**Use the UHT technique:** If someone is behaving in a disruptive way in your discussion, a useful technique for facilitation can be to explain that you 'understand' [acknowledging their concern], 'however' it is disruptive to the group [for the following reasons], 'therefore' perhaps we can try [this] as a solution.

**Avoid jargon:** Speak in plain English to make sure the discussion is accessible for all. If your topic deals with lots of acronyms or jargon providing a glossary or a reminder of the key terms at the start may be helpful.

**Thank people for their contributions:** both when appropriate as part of the discussions, but also at the end of your event.

### Stick to your promises!

Sticking to any promises you have made will help to build trust and rapport with your participants. This includes:

- How the activities will happen (e.g. where, when and for how long – stick to agreed breaks and don't overrun!)
- How participants contributions will be used and if and how you will keep them informed with progress on the project
- What incentives such as payment or prizes will be offered in return for participation

## 5 | Dialogue techniques

As a general rule, it's easier to discuss topics in depth in smaller groups. If you want to plan for an activity with a large number of participants, consider breaking them up into small groups for sections.

You can bring them together when introductions or summaries need to be given. Below are some other techniques that may be useful to nurture and enable dialogue:

<b>Brainstorming</b>	<b>Buzz</b>	<b>Carousel</b>
Ask participants to call out any ideas that come to mind. These ideas can be clustered afterwards and can identify themes for discussion.	Encourage participants to discuss their initial reactions in pairs or threes. This is good to wake people up and get them to reflect after a presentation. It is also a more comfortable format for those who might be too shy to share their thoughts in large group situations.	Position flip-charts with different but related questions at several stations. In groups, ask participants to respond on one flip-chart, then rotate, adding to each new chart. Each turn on the carousel should require less time.
<b>Fish bowl</b>	<b>Future visioning</b>	<b>Metaplan</b>
Get a small number of participants sit in the inner circle (fish bowl) and have a discussion. The rest sit around this group and pass notes forward for the inner circle to discuss. Those in the fish bowl can also swap positions and join the outer circle.	Ask participants to think of what they would like to see happen decades into the future. This helps find common ground between very different groups and provides a destination to guide discussions towards.	Get participants to write their ideas about a topic on post-it notes. Then get the group to organise the post-it notes into common themes for discussion. This makes sure almost everyone contributes anonymously and independently, avoiding 'group norming'.
<b>Nominal group feedback</b>	<b>Roleplay</b>	<b>Sliding scales</b>
This allows you to get feedback from different groups quickly after a discussion. Get each group to list their top ten points, then go around each group asking for one point until everything has been included.	Roleplay is good for allowing participants to explore different perspectives and can tackle difficult subjects indirectly. It can help to put participants in the frame of mind of others. A good brief will be necessary and participants may need reassurance to get involved.	Prepare a scale along a wall. (It could be 1-10 or Strongly agree to Strongly disagree.) Participants place a sticker / post-it where they sit on the scale on a particular issue. To anonymise this, you can ask them to write a number on the post-it for you to place. This can help frame a discussion on different positions or could help you choose who to group together for a later activity and avoiding like-minded people being placed together. This technique can also be used to evaluate perspectives before and after the activity.

## Case study: Researchers' Cafe

A collaboration of Imperial research centres and patient partners ran a series of Patient and Public Involvement discussions at the Imperial Festival 2018 and the Great Exhibition Road Festival 2019. Discussions took place around small tables, within an area themed as a café:

- The location and set up encouraged conversation and minimised power dynamics – everyone was sat at the same table, facilitators guided the questions, and the atmosphere was fun and informal.
- There were multiple ways of contributing to the conversation – people could raise their ideas, questions or concerns verbally as part of the table discussions, or write them down and post them in large coffee jars.
- The purpose was meaningful – ideas and questions were collated about real research projects and researchers were open and willing to act on feedback.
- The Researchers' Café is now being developed as a model way of doing patient and public involvement, with further activities being trialled across West London.



The collaborators were the Patient Experience Research Centre, the Patient Safety Translational Research Centre, the Imperial Clinical Trials Unit, the Imperial Clinical Research Facility and many patient and public members.

## Further reading – let us know of others!

**For more around dialogue activities and the theory behind different models of communication:**

[www.beltanenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/DialogueTheory2012\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.beltanenetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/07/DialogueTheory2012_FINAL.pdf)

**For discussion events where you might wish to guide people towards creating a consensus or agreeing on a shared outcome or decision:**

[www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/how\\_to\\_facilitate\\_deliberative\\_engagement.pdf](http://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/how_to_facilitate_deliberative_engagement.pdf)