

Practical Guide to Facilitation at The Citizens' Assembly

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1. Purpose of the Citizens' Assembly

The Citizens' Assembly was established by Resolution of both Houses of the Oireachtas. Its purpose is to allow a cross-section of the public to hear presentations from experts and civil society groups and to engage in rational and reasoned discussion, and to then make recommendations to the State on the options available.

The Assembly has been asked to look at the following issues:

1. the Eighth Amendment of the Constitution;
2. how we best respond to the challenges and opportunities of an ageing population;
3. fixed term parliaments;
4. the manner in which referenda are held;
5. how the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change.

The Assembly may also be asked to consider other matters that may be referred to it.

There are 100 Members of the Assembly, including the Chairperson. Members are being chosen at random to represent the views of the people of Ireland, and will be broadly representative of society as reflected in the Census, including age, gender, social class, regional spread etc. They must also be on the electoral register to vote in a referendum.

2. The Role of the Facilitator

As facilitators, you'll provide a very valuable service to the Citizens' Assembly members, enabling the small groups to have a considered debate about very important topics of national interest.

You'll serve the meeting best by putting all of your attention into the meeting process and how the group is working, and by holding back from contributing to the meeting content. In this way, you'll create the best possible conditions for views, ideas and suggestions to emerge and ultimately to be included in the recommendations to the Houses of the Oireachtas.

It's very satisfying to be the enabler who helps to bring out other people's views and ideas. People love to be listened to and appreciate when their views and suggestions are valued. It leads to a lively, positive atmosphere, with the focus on new possibilities rather than on problems. Further tips for successful facilitation are included in Appendix I.

3. Groundrules

Healthy debate and idea generation is greatly helped by observing some simple process groundrules. The following are the guidelines for behaviour that will *encourage and support people to participate and contribute to group discussions* during the Citizens' Assembly. You are invited to share these groundrules with the people at your table and ask them if they are happy to commit to them or put forward others. If they agree, you will have the authority to make interventions in the discussion and improve the process.

○ *Share the airtime*

Every group has individuals who are more reticent and others who love to talk. It's vital to hear the views of the quieter people, both for the inherent value of those views and

suggestions and to give due respect to everyone present. At this session, everyone has an equal voice.

- **Ask participants to headline their views/suggestions; then give some background**

To ensure that each person is heard when they speak, ask them to catch people's attention by making a headline for their argument first (the 'hook' of their view/suggestion) and then follow up with their background thinking. (We want the news headlines, not the full bulletin!)

- **Be Respectful**

Listen to and show respect for the opinions of others. Engage in the discussion: do not get involved in disruptive side conversations or talk over others. It's important that we have one conversation at a time. Keep your mobile phone and other devices packed away while the Citizens' Assembly is in session. There will be lots of breaks for you to catch up with the outside world!

- **Make connections**

New thinking and fresh ideas emerge when you allow your mind to freewheel and to make connections between seemingly unconnected things. When a group sets out to invent something new, one idea or suggestion can trigger another in surprising and productive ways. Spot the unlikely connections.

- **Don't evaluate views/suggestions**

It's vital that each participant is allowed (by the group) to express his/her views and alternative suggestions without fear of being dismissed. If suggestions are evaluated prematurely, they're unlikely to survive and grow. This damages the morale and courage of those present.

- **Keep track of thoughts, views and suggestions that come to you**

Follow the theme - stay focused and on track. In a group, it's inevitable that people have to wait their turn to contribute. To free your mind during this waiting time, jot down any ideas that come to you. Then you'll be better able to listen for connections and further ideas.

You'll be supported in your role as facilitator by the Chair, the Secretariat and the Advisory Group. The Chair will guide everyone present through each of the steps and keep you on track regarding time-keeping. Members of the Secretariat and Advisory Group will be available in the room to support you and to encourage participants to observe the groundrules if necessary. Don't be afraid to put your hand up and ask for assistance if you need it. Also in the room will be the expert speakers. These people will be available as a resource to participants to answer questions or clarify points. If your table wishes to speak to an expert, let them know that they should ask you to invite them to the table. As the experts will be in demand, please focus the question that is being put to them so that they can move to answer others' queries.

4. Facilitating the Conversations at your Table

You'll facilitate a number of conversations at your table, each of which will be kick-started by an issue for consideration by the people at your table. The Chair will introduce each issue and call an end to the discussion when the time is up. The issue (s) will be highlighted on a screen at the top of room so everyone can see them. You will facilitate the discussion around the issue in question.

Use the questions below only as guidelines as to the kind of approach you might take to get the conversation going, to explore issues and to help the participants to think in new ways. You are trying to give them the responsibility for making the conversation a success, rather than taking that responsibility on yourself.

Probe participants deeply and intently - not like a dentist or a piranha going after the bait - but like an interested friend hanging on to every detail. Maintain a demeanour of 'benign curiosity' and encourage participants to explore views and ideas with each other (rather than respond only to questions by you).

- This is what we're being asked to do. How should we start?
- Let's take the first issue ... can we give that 10 minutes?
- What interests you about this topic?
- If Ireland were a 'best example' on this issue, what would we see?
- Can you tell me more about that?
- In what ways is this important to you?
- How does this issue affect you?
- What do you wish were different?
- How do you think that problem could be solved? What steps could be taken?
- What needs to change for this to work really well?

Some points to note:

- Phrase in *rapport* talk not *report* talk
- Convey positive regard and appreciation, no matter what views are expressed
- Evoke essential values, aspirations and inspirations

Managing Negatives

People should feel free to talk about things they believe require fixing. However, if they are allowed to focus for too long on negatives, the dynamic of the discussion will change. This can be managed in several different ways:

- **Postponing:** Tell them you will make a note of what they have said and keep it on record. The question "*What would you change if you could change anything about (the issue)?*" is a place to collect this 'negative' data.

- **Redirecting:** If you have listened sufficiently to the seemingly negative issues, find a way to redirect the person back to the task at hand. *“I think I understand some of the problems...”* Paraphrase a few of the problems that you’ve heard and check with the person for clarity. *“Right now, however, I would like to focus on times when things were working at their best. Can you think of a time, even the smallest moment, when this [situation] was at its best?”* If the person says it never happened at its best, before giving up find out whether the person ever had a good experience in any context anywhere. Then ask how this good experience could be applied here.
- **Listening:** If someone feels real intensity about what he or she wants to say about issues, let the person say it. If it is very strongly felt, you are not going to get ideas for change until the person speaks their mind. This may mean muddling through quite a bit of manure and the biggest threat is that you will take this personally and lose sight of the goal. Pay attention to your inner feelings and try to maintain a level of detachment. You must be empathetic without taking responsibility for the person’s grievance. Maintain a caring and affirmative spirit.
- **Using Negative Data:** Everything people find wrong represents an absence of something they hold in their minds as an ideal image. What processes if present (rather than absent), might create the ideal situation, which the negatives imply? Data is data and is a useful source of information particularly as it is conditioned by affirmative images. The trick is to focus on using the negatives as springboards for finding the ideal, and then asking the person to generate ideas as to how to achieve the ideal.

You will find additional tips on keeping the conversation on track in Appendix II.

5. Checklist

In a nutshell, here's what we'd like you to do over the weekend:

- Take your seat 10 minutes before each session begins and personally welcome participants to your table.
- Distribute surveys and ballot papers (if appropriate) at your table and ask participants to complete them.
- Outline the ground rules that will guide the table conversations.
- Facilitate conversations at your table.
- Work with the note taker at your table to ensure objections/concerns about Rules and Procedures and ideas to strengthen them are documented.
- Work with the note taker at your table to ensure the accurate documentation of key issues and alternative proposals/amendments arising at your table in relation to each item under deliberation.
- Support the Chair at the plenary sessions by inviting relevant participants at your table to contribute their views.
- Ask a member of the Secretariat or the Advisory Group for support if you need it.
- Assist the team to count ballot papers (if appropriate).
- Attend the facilitators debriefing session following the meeting.

Appendix I: Tips for Successful Facilitation

1. Summarise & Assimilate Inputs

- Make sense of what is happening in the group (by observing and listening – this will help you to make the correct interventions)
- Keeping the group focused on the task and the theme or question
- Reflect back what you hear verbally and/or visually
- Pull together diverse inputs and draw connections between contributions
- State clearly your understandings or paraphrase to check understanding and make a participant feel heard

2. Observe the Mood:

- Awareness of emotional undercurrents, gleaned from tones, body language, intuition
- Ask deeper questions

3. Manage the Process

- Lead the group through the process and remind them of any ground rules (see below)
- Manage the process so that people can focus on the content
- If a conflict emerges, help each person feel heard, and seek common ground
- Help people understand each other by translating information from a participant into terms that the other participants can also grasp

4. Timekeeper:

- Keep an eye on the clock
- Warn the group well ahead of any deadlines

5. Engage Participants:

- Keep track of whose turn it is to speak

6. Stay out of the Content

- It is not your job to have a point of view about any aspect of the discussion
- Try not to be drawn into giving a view, advice or direction

Appendix II: Suggestions for Keeping the Conversation on Track

Keeping the participants on track starts with good preparation and includes the use of appropriate process intervention. Process intervention is an interruption by the facilitator of the conversation process in order to refocus the participants and/or to rebalance group interactions.

Most interventions can link back to the ground rules. As a guideline, always start with the lowest level of intervention, which is the least obvious and least threatening to the individual or group. As facilitator, your goal is to support the participants in achieving their desired outcomes by staying on track and balancing participation with results, so interventions must be supportive. Speak the intervention clearly using assertive language, with supportive tone of voice and body language.

The following are examples of the 6 most common situations requiring intervention to keep the conversation on track, with example suggestions on how to intervene in each situation.

- Side-Bar Conversations
- Staying on Time
- Never Ending Discussion
- Conflict (personal attacks)
- Returning from Breaks
- Texting, tweeting and use of mobile phones

Topic	Situation	Intervention
Side Bar Conversations	A member of the group is having sidebar conversations with other participants throughout the session	1. A friendly reminder: "Just a reminder, we agreed to 'one conversation at a time' in our groundrules for the session."
		2. Direct the reminder: Make eye contact (with Susan) and restate, "One conversation at a time please."
		3. Personalise it: "Susan do you have a clarification question?" or "Susan I can see that you have something to contribute; when Sam has finished we'll hear from you."
	If Susan is the only one interrupting or having side conversations.	4. Make a direct request: "Susan, please hold your comments until Sam has finished."
		5a. Talk to her at break, one-on- one.
		5b. Put the process on hold and ask the group "Do we need to take a break?"
If there are many people interrupting or having side conversations.		

Staying on Time	The group has a lot to cover in the session, but they seem to go down rabbit holes and may veer off into other topics.	1. Invoke the “keep focused” ground rule: Suggest the concern is ‘ parked ’ – capture items that need to be pursued, but are not the focal points for this session.
		2. Specifically re-focus on the particular topic/agenda item: “I’d just like to remind you that we are discussing question 2. Please hold discussion on other topics until we get to them.”
	The discussion has continued for some time and you are running out of time for the item.	3. Attempt closure of item: “We have 10 minutes remaining for this item. We need to re-focus. What do we still need to discuss to conclude this item?” “We are almost out of time for this item, there appears to be more discussion required. Is that true?” Follow-up a ‘yes’ response with, “What do you need in order to close on this item?” or “Why are we unable to close on this item?” If the item is truly important and just wasn’t given sufficient time for the necessary discussion and action....
		4. Give participants a choice on how they spend their time: “Is this item more important than staying with the theme we’re discussing?” <i>Note: If so, go with the group’s energy and capture the issue</i>

Never-Ending Discussion	Information Barriers Sometimes a discussion will not come to closure, usually because of information that is insufficient, inaccurate, or unreliable. Sometimes a topic leads to significant emotional reactions.	Follow the same guidelines under “Staying on Time”. It may be that there is insufficient valid information to progress, in which case park the item for another meeting.
	Personal Agenda or “Hobby Horse” Whenever a particular topic comes up, an individual may begin to recount the same war stories, etc. You can often tell by reading the faces of the other participants (look for rolling eyes!). The individual, often oblivious of the reactions of others, settles into the story.	1. Gentle interruption: Once you’ve determined that an individual is in a familiar story mode, and what’s being said does not appear to contribute to the item under discussion, gently interrupt him to ask, “John, excuse my interruption, but I’m not sure how this fits with our topic. Can you clarify for me?”

		2. Direct the enquiry: Make eye contact with John and ask, "This sounds like familiar ground; is this a recurring theme?" Then make eye contact with the other participants. At this point John will usually confess that this is either a war story or a favourite 'complaint.' Acknowledge him and then move on.
		3. Personalise the request: "John we agreed that this item would remain parked, has anything changed its status?"
	It is unlikely that a person will continue raising the issue. In the event that he does....	4. Firmly restate the request: You can restate the intervention comments under either 2 or 3 and that should allow the group to continue forward without using up valuable time.

Conflict: Personal Attacks	Individual Attacked A group member takes "pot shots" at other team members. For example, Bill is taking 'shots' at Joe.	1. Apply gentle humour: observe Joe's reaction and Bill's demeanour and body language. Say nothing the first time unless you are sure that it was intentional, or make light of the first occurrence: "I hope that comment isn't an indication that we need armour for this meeting!"
	Bill takes another shot	2. Restate the ground rules: Make eye contact with Bill and say, "Our ground rules clearly state that....We welcome all ideas, comments that build or clarify ideas etc., but not negative comments."
	Once again, Bill aims another sarcastic or belittling remark at Joe	3. Confront Bill directly: firm words, supportive tone and stance. "Bill this is not the first time that you have targeted Joe with your remarks, please stop." Then redirect him with "What is the concern you have with the issue/idea? How would you modify it to improve it?"
	Bill persists with comments aimed at Joe	4. Gentle, public reprimand: In a gentle tone say, "Bill despite my reminders, you continue to make critical comments towards Joe's ideas. If there is a personal disagreement between the two of you, it is inappropriate to play it out here. Can you participate in this session productively?" (This gives Bill the opportunity to bow out. If he chooses to leave, ask the team if they can continue without him.) The same intervention could be made one-on-one with Bill at break.

Group Attacked	Bill is taking potshots at everyone.	1. Apply gentle humour; observe their reactions and Bill's demeanour and body language. Say nothing the first time unless you are sure that it was intentional, or make light of the first occurrence: "I hope that comment isn't an indication that we need armour for this meeting."
	Bill takes another shot	2. Restate the ground rules: Make eye contact with Bill and say, "Our ground rules clearly state that....We welcome all ideas, comments that build or clarify ideas etc., but not negative comments."
	Bill continues. At this point he has made several remarks to various group members and you have redirected his comments and reminded him of the ground rules.	3. Address problem directly: "Bill you have made several negative comments to group members. Is there something else going on that is interfering with your ability to participate here today?" Or throw it to the group. "Everyone, how do you feel when Bill makes this type of comment?"
		4. Personal Confrontation: If the attacks continue and the group is reluctant to say anything to Bill when discussed as in 3 above, then speak to Bill at break as in Step 4 above.

Returning From Breaks	Team members are late returning from breaks.	1. Light reminder: "Remember, you agreed to return from breaks on time because it helps the session to finish on time; it's one of your ground rules." Just before the next break remind the team to be back on time, advise them of when that is and suggest that you all synchronise your watches.
	Team members are chronically late returning from breaks. If it is the same members each time then remind them when they return.	2. Ask for input: "Out of curiosity, why do you have a ground rule that says return from breaks on time, and yet consistently several people are late returning from break each time? What do we need to do for this to work?" Members may need some flexibility from time to time to accommodate other needs – advise the group that the participant will be stepping out for a while.
Texting, tweeting and use of mobile phones	Team members are continually using their phone or other device whilst the Table Conversation is taking place.	Remind the person of the groundrule about phone usage and ask if they would defer using their phone until there is a break. Alternatively, if their need is urgent please ask them to leave the table to do their business and return when they can give the conversation their full attention.