

# Deliberative Engagement Guide

## Contents

Introduction.....	2
<b>What this guide covers</b> .....	2
<b>Who is it aimed at?</b> .....	2
<b>What is deliberative engagement?</b> .....	2
<b>How might deliberative engagement be useful to you?</b> .....	2
How to run a deliberative engagement workshop.....	4
<b>Before the event</b> .....	4
Defining event purpose and aims.....	4
Communicating with SMEs.....	5
Planning the event.....	5
<b>During the event</b> .....	11
Make people feel welcome.....	11
Establish ground rules.....	11
Take notes and record ideas.....	11
Facilitation tips.....	12
Evaluation.....	12
<b>After the event</b> .....	13
Follow up.....	13
SME networks.....	13
Further reading and contacts.....	15

## Introduction

### What this guide covers

This guide explains how you can bring small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) together to solve their common challenges and problems, using a [deliberative workshop](#). It gives very practical guidance on what you need to think about when communicating with SMEs, how to run a successful deliberative workshop, and how you can sustain the SME network afterwards.

It draws on the learning from a number of case studies that were held across Europe in 2015/16, as part of an EU-funded project. You can read more about the project and the case studies [here](#).

### Who is it aimed at?

This guide is aimed primarily at intermediary organisations that work with SMEs. What is an intermediary organisation? There are many different types of intermediary, including trade bodies, membership-based advocacy groups, municipal authorities, economic development organisations, innovation hubs, professional networks, etc. If your organisation works to support SMEs in some way then you are an intermediary and this guide is for you. The guide will also be of wider interest to business organisations, academics, communication practitioners and policy makers.

This guide covers just the essentials. More detailed training material for intermediary organisations on deliberative engagement can be found [here](#).

### What is deliberative engagement?

Deliberation is where people come together to learn, discuss and work out solutions collaboratively. It is this element of working together, based on discussing and sharing ideas, that makes an event or a workshop 'deliberative'. The idea is that participants take an active part in discussions and take ownership of the issues they are discussing.

Deliberative engagement is sometimes used in democratic public decision-making but it can be valuable in a number of other contexts. It enables a range of people, who might not all hold the same views, to work through an issue together. It provides opportunities to see something from another perspective or to develop a consensus or collective standpoint.

### How might deliberative engagement be useful to you?

Intermediary organisations support their SMEs in a number of different ways. For example, this may be by building political influence or bargaining power, providing advice on a particular issue, creating knowledge-sharing networks or supporting economic development. There are a number of ways that deliberative engagement can support these functions:

- Deliberative engagement can **support collaboration** by emphasising common interests and getting SMEs directly involved in solving problems

- Deliberative engagement events can help **initiate SME networks** by identifying shared goals and introducing new contacts
- It can strengthen SMEs' power to deal with **particularly difficult problems**. Sometimes called 'wicked' problems, these are issues which are challenging and complex and are not easy for individual organisations to solve, such as the impacts of climate change and other issues associated with business sustainability. Research has shown that collaborative strategies which involve multiple stakeholders can be more effective than traditional approaches in addressing these types of issue.
- Deliberative engagement can contribute to **better understanding** of an issue by sharing knowledge and experiences between organisations
- Deliberative engagement events can also **build the confidence** of SMEs in participating in policy discussions.

Just because it has beneficial impacts, this does not mean that deliberative engagement is easy! It needs to be well designed and implemented and there are some potential problems to watch out for. This guide will tell you about the key things you will need to run a successful deliberative engagement workshop and will give you tips on how to manage the difficulties.

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## How to run a deliberative engagement workshop

### Before the event

Good deliberative engagement will not happen by accident, particularly where you or the SMEs are unfamiliar with this way of working together. It needs good planning and preparation.

#### Defining event purpose and aims

Before you start planning a deliberative engagement event you must have a clear idea of why you are doing it and what you want to get out of it.

What is the problem or challenge that you are looking to address, and is deliberative engagement going to be a useful way of addressing it? Deliberation is not the answer to all problems. It is best suited to situations where there is a problem or challenge that affects multiple SMEs, the problem is not straightforward, and where collaboration between SMEs might help them to solve it.

You will find it very helpful to frame the issue as a clear question that needs to be answered. Don't try and get too much done in one workshop, so focus on one particular issue.

You will also find it helpful to have a clear idea of what the benefit will be to the SMEs you wish to involve. A clear business case for taking part will help you to recruit participants. An example of this is set out in the case study below:

#### **Case study: Tackling Fuel Poverty, UK**

**Event organiser:** The organiser was a large private sector service provider which transports gas to 2.7 million homes and businesses across the North East of England. This company works with a network of SME stakeholders to address the challenge of fuel poverty amongst their customers. Reducing fuel poverty is part of their regulatory responsibility.

**Problem:** The North East of England has one of the highest levels of fuel poverty in England.

**Question to be answered:** How do you get relevant organisations to work together to reduce fuel poverty amongst energy customers?

**Purpose of event / outcomes:** To generate learning around tackling fuel poverty, share good practice and highlight productive areas for collaboration

**Business case:** Resources dedicated to tackling fuel poverty are currently dispersed and fragmented, requiring the development of a more unified strategy by those stakeholders with an interest in fuel poverty. Greater collaboration and knowledge sharing would enable more effective interventions.

## Communicating with SMEs

There is no point running a workshop if SMEs don't attend! Inviting, and attracting, participants is clearly a crucial step. The people who are running and managing SMEs are often very busy and highly focused on the needs of their business. You may already have well-established networks and contacts with your SMEs, but even if you do there are a number of important tips to follow if you want to attract the right people to your workshop:

- Who is your target audience? This will of course depend on the issue to be discussed in the workshop. It may be a particular type of SME you wish to attract or you might want a mix of different organisations in order to get different points of view
- Invitees need to be motivated by the issue. Think about who will be interested in coming and why, and ask yourself the question: is it important enough at this time for them to want to come to the event?
- How are you going to communicate with the SMEs? In general, a personal approach is best, for example by telephone or email. If it works for your SMEs, using media like LinkedIn or Facebook can be useful, but you are still likely to find that adding a personal approach to this will make the difference.
- Having a good reputation as an intermediary and an existing relationship with SMEs will also help attract people to the event.
- You may also want to make use of other organisations' networks in order to reach SMEs. This might be useful if you want to attract SMEs who are harder to reach.
- Use clear and plain language when communicating. Make it relevant to the SMEs.
- Give the SMEs some idea of the other organisations you are inviting – this may encourage them to attend.

## Planning the event

The event design should follow on from your objectives. You have already decided why you are holding this event and what you want to get out of it. You should keep this clearly in mind when you come to plan the event.

Some general points to consider:

### **What time of day should I hold the event, for how long and where should I hold it?**

Because SME owners and managers are busy people, you should keep the workshop fairly short, ideally around 2 – 3 hours. Any longer and you may find people will find it difficult to attend. And think about the best time of day to hold the workshop: are the SMEs likely to prefer a daytime or evening event?

When selecting a venue, make life as easy as possible for your guests. Think about how practical it is to get there by car (are there good parking facilities?) and public transport. Think about whether holding the event in more relaxed surroundings (e.g. a café or pub) or a more formal venue (e.g. hotel conference room) will work better for your SMEs. We found during our case study research that having one of the SMEs host the event at their business premises was a selling point to the other SMEs.

## How many people should I invite?

This depends on your objectives and who you need to involve, but there are some general points to keep in mind. You are going to be asking people to get involved in discussions and people will not be comfortable doing this in very large groups. When planning the event you will therefore need to think about how to break people up into small groups to encourage discussion. For example, you should be aiming for about 6 – 8 people in each discussion group. You may want to invite more people than this to the workshop, and that's fine, but thought needs to be given to how you can get the participants to interact and talk through problems.

## Writing your planning down

You will find it very helpful to prepare an event planner with key milestones (i.e. what needs to be done before the event and by when). Don't under-estimate how long it will take to do some of the preparatory tasks before the event – give yourself plenty of time to plan ahead. It may be more difficult than you think to attract the SMEs and so give yourself sufficient time and resources to do this.

Take advantage of free event planning software you can download from the internet – it can help with key administrative tasks and communications. But remember: keep it clear and simple.

You will also find it very helpful – in fact, essential - to write out the design for the workshop itself (i.e. what will happen, and when, during the workshop). You should include timings in this, to make sure that you have enough time for each of the stages, such as welcome / introduction, any presentations, group discussions, feedback session, etc. A simple process design template is included in the more detailed [training material](#).

## Who will facilitate the event?

Most deliberative engagement events require some form of facilitation. A facilitator is someone who leads and supports an event without dictating the nature of discussions or outcomes. Their role is to help groups work through the issues, ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate in discussions, keep to time and keep a focus on the purpose and objectives of the event.

You will need to have an experienced facilitator for your event. This could be someone from your own organisation or you could engage an independent facilitator. If you anticipate that some of the discussions are going to be confrontational or difficult, then having an independent facilitator might be helpful. A good place to start if you are looking for an external facilitator is on the International Association of Facilitators [website](#).

Ensure the facilitator is well-briefed and comfortable managing the deliberative process.

## How do I know what sort of deliberative technique to use?

Your facilitator should be able to help you decide what approach is best. Remember to bear in mind the objectives for your workshop and the people who will be participating.

It is likely that the SMEs (and you!) will be unfamiliar with this way of working. If that's the case then you will find that using a simple technique is probably the best approach. Keeping things simple will also help with timings, given the short time available for the workshop.

There are a number of 'off-the-shelf' deliberative techniques that you can choose from. You could adapt one of these to suit your circumstances. You can see some examples of 'off-the-shelf' techniques in the boxes below. Or you could design your own approach, with advice from your facilitator.

Whatever approach you use, you will find it helpful to keep in mind these general guidelines for good deliberation:

- The event should make a difference
- It should be run with integrity and openness
- Tailor it to the circumstances and design it to meet your aims and objectives
- Involve the right number, and the right type, of people
- Treat participants with respect and value their contribution
- Give priority to participants' discussion, learning and feedback
- Make sure you review and evaluate the event so that you can improve practice, and
- Keep participants informed about (or engaged in) the outcomes.

### Deliberative Workshops

Deliberative Workshops are facilitated group discussions that provide participants with the opportunity to consider an issue in depth, challenge each other's opinions and develop their views/arguments to reach an informed position. Deliberative Workshops can build a greater understanding of what participating SMEs think, the reasoning behind this and how their opinions might change as they are given new information.

More information and advice on running a deliberative workshop event can be found in the links below:

- Participation Compass - <http://participationcompass.org/article/show/153>

## Open Space Technology

Open Space technology, also known simply as Open Space, are events where there is a central theme around which participants are able to set their own agenda for discussion. Participants are invited to nominate topics they would like to discuss, the chosen topics are divided into separate rooms or spaces. Participants are encouraged to join the discussions that they are most interested in or where they feel they can contribute or learn the most. This is known as ‘the law of two feet’, i.e. you decide where your own feet take you.

This technique gives a lot of control to participants. It is useful for building relationships and a sense of community but is not so useful when trying to achieve a specific outcome.

More information and advice on running an Open Space event:

- Participation Compass - <http://participationcompass.org/article/show/140>
- Open Space World - <http://www.openspaceworld.org/files/tmnfiles/2pageos.htm>

## World Café

The World Café is a method which traditionally makes use of a café but can be situated in any space. Issues are discussed in small group tables for about 20 minutes. Participants are often encouraged to record their conversations creatively, for example by drawing on paper tablecloths. When the time is up members of the group rotate to a different table and join that discussion. One person, ‘the host’, must remain at the table and summarise the discussions to new participants.

Each round is initiated with a specific question related to the overall purpose of the event. The same questions can be used for more than one round or they can build upon one another. Moving around the room means that the ideas from other tables are brought into each table discussion. The process ends with everyone coming together in a plenary to summarise the main ideas and discuss possibilities for follow-up.

More information and advice on running a World Café event:

- Participation Compass - <http://participationcompass.org/article/show/166>
- The World Café - <http://www.theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/>

## Conversation Cafés

Conversation Café is a relaxed dialogue method which invites people to take part in discussions about topical issues in an informal setting. The organiser's role is mainly to welcome the participants, although they may also take part in the event as participants. Discussions are free flowing with little facilitation. A 'talking object' is often passed around, allowing only the person in possession of the object to speak at one time.

This technique encourages networking and stimulates debate and ideas. It is a good method to use with groups that share similar values or interests and is less suited to controversial topics or hostile groups.

More information and advice on running a Conversation Café event:

- Participation Compass - <http://participationcompass.org/article/show/156>
- Conversation Café - [http://www.conversationcafe.org/?page\\_id=231](http://www.conversationcafe.org/?page_id=231)
- National Coalition for Deliberation and Dialogue - <http://ncdd.org/rc/wp-content/uploads/2010/06/ConvCafeHostManual.pdf>

## Dialogue

Dialogue refers to a process which brings a range of stakeholders together to talk through an issue, identify common ground and look for mutually beneficial solutions to a problem. It is often used in the context of conflict resolution. Stakeholders should be involved in identifying the problem, devising the methods and creating the solutions. It is a technique that is suited to controversial topics e.g. negotiating inter-industry competition.

Dialogue is mainly conducted through a series of workshops or meetings, allowing trust to build over a period. It can therefore be quite time intensive. Dialogue processes are very flexible and will vary depending on the nature of the issue being addressed and who is involved.

More information and advice on running a Dialogue event:

- Participation Compass - <http://participationcompass.org/article/show/130>
- National Coalition for Deliberation and Dialogue – <http://ncdd.org/rc/what-are-dd>

## Action Learning

Action Learning is a process where participants study their own actions and experience in order to help them learn more, solve problems and improve performance. Each participant has an opportunity to describe their problem to the rest of the group, receive questions and decide action points to commit to. Participants who are not presenting should not seek to solve the problems on their own. Instead they support the other participant in better understanding their issue and the options available to them. This technique should be undertaken in small groups and works best when groups meet at regular intervals.

It is a useful way of challenging ingrained behaviours and discovering creative solutions to a problem. It is a good technique to use when addressing common problems that everyone can learn from, e.g. dealing with difficult consumer behaviour.

More information and advice on running an Action Learning event:

- Participation Compass- <http://participationcompass.org/article/show/168>

A longer list of different deliberative engagement techniques can be found at <http://participationcompass.org/article/index/method> and at <http://ncdd.org/rc/>

## During the event

So, you've planned your event carefully and have got good take-up from your invited SMEs. What are the important things to think about during the event and what are some of the problems that you need to look out for?

### Make people feel welcome

People are naturally anxious attending group events, and may be particularly anxious if they are not familiar with deliberative approaches. So, make them feel welcome and comfortable. Food and drink are always a good way to welcome people, and make time for people to chat and get to know each other in a more relaxed way.

It is often helpful to 'break the ice' at the start of the workshop, to help people to relax. There are many ways of doing this and your facilitator should be able to suggest ideas. One example is to get participants to pair up, introduce themselves to each other, and then get each person to introduce their partner to the rest of the room. You could also use this as an opportunity for people to say what they are hoping to get out of the workshop.

### Establish ground rules

Deliberative engagement events can sometimes open up difficult conversations, depending on the issues and the people in the room. There is often a lot to cover in a short amount of time, differences of opinion may lead to conflicts within a group or some participants may dominate discussions and prevent others from participating. One way of managing these potential difficulties is by setting ground rules at the start of the event which provide expectations of how the event will be run and how participants should behave. It is also good practice to invite the participants to contribute anything they think should be included in the ground rules.

Some example ground rules are:

- Only one person talks at a time
- Mutual respect - everyone's opinion counts
- Keep to time
- Be honest

Of course, good facilitation is also key for managing this process.

Explain clearly at the start how the information generated by the event will be used, shared and what people might expect in terms of future activities - this will help to generate a sense of purpose and direction.

Manage expectations about the process. At the end of the event there may not yet be a definitive outcome if the issue being discussed is particularly complex.

### Take notes and record ideas

It is important to make sure that the discussions and ideas that are developed during the course of the event are recorded so that they can be referred to later or incorporated into a report. This could be done by getting the participants to write up their conversations and

ideas on flip chart paper or post-it notes, one of the event organisers could act as scribe or you could have note-takers creating a more detailed record of what was discussed. Deliberative engagement events will often use all of these techniques.

In order to ensure the record of the event accurately reflects what is discussed the note-taker or scribe should check with participants that they are happy with what is being recorded and give them opportunities to put things in their own words.

### Facilitation tips

Your facilitator will know how to prepare for the event, but here are a couple of tips to help make the event go well:

#### **Dominating voices or low engagement**

A problem that organisers of deliberative engagement events often face is dealing with differing levels of participant engagement. While some participants may have a lot to say and could be at risk of dominating discussions, others may take more of a back seat and not engage fully with the process. These behaviours can be managed by good facilitation and by designing the event in a way that encourages everyone to participate, such as using small-group discussions.

#### **Participant preparation**

To help make the event a productive one you may find it helpful for participants to do some preparation beforehand. This is particularly useful if you are using a technique like Open Space where the agenda is more open and participant-led. In this case, you could ask participants to put up their suggested topics on a board during the registration process and encourage other participants to look at these before the workshops starts.

### Evaluation

Make sure that you evaluate your event, to assess how effective it has been in achieving its objectives. This also helps to improve future practice. Further guidance on evaluation is included in the [training material](#).

Remember to ask participants for their feedback before they leave the workshop!

And remember, make it enjoyable and have fun!

## After the event

Running a successful deliberative engagement event depends as much on what happens after the event as what happens before.

There are a number of key actions that will need to be taken once the event has concluded:

### Follow up

When you are planning your deliberative engagement event, you should think ahead to what sort of outputs you will need. Participants should be leaving the workshop with a clear sense of what will be happening next. In some cases this may be actions that were agreed at the workshop. It may be that some sort of written report or blog will be shared with participants afterwards. It all depends on the purpose of your workshop.

There will be some simple courtesies to attend to, like thanking participants in a more formal way and communicating the next-steps, e.g. in a follow-up email.

Make sure you maintain the momentum generated in the workshop. The participants will not thank you if they see their efforts go to waste. Meet your promises and don't let deadlines slip – delivering what you say builds trust.

### SME networks

It is likely that one of the reasons you are working with your SMEs in this way is to generate an SME network that can continue the collaborative and problem-solving approach that you began during the workshop.

It may also be that one deliberative workshop is insufficient to cover the necessary ground that allows you to tackle the problem properly. So you may want to run a follow-up workshop to continue the collaboration.

You might also want to encourage, and support, the development of a more self-sustaining network, so that the SMEs can continue to work together in a collaborative way. You may find that the SMEs are willing to put some of their own resources into this, particularly if they see the benefits of the process.

An example of the conditions that can help to generate an SME network are summarised in the case study below:

### **Case study: SME workshop on energy saving, Denmark**

**Event organisers:** The organisers were two municipal authorities and a business development centre. One of the municipalities has a track record of working strategically to reduce energy consumption in its area. The other municipality was looking to develop support for businesses around their energy use, while the Business Development Centre supports business innovation.

**Problem:** The EU has set demanding carbon-reduction targets, but how do you engage SMEs in discussing their contribution to this challenge? How do you frame the conversation with SMEs in order to get them interested?

**Question to be answered:** How can SMEs reduce their energy consumption and save money?

**Purpose of event:** To share experiences and ideas amongst SMEs on saving energy, and to explore the appetite for setting up an energy savings network.

**Outcome:** The SMEs actively engaged with the issue because it has a direct impact on their profitability. They could see the value of being part of an energy savings network and offered to help fund the establishment of the network. By framing the event in terms of cost saving, and by getting the SMEs involved in sharing their ideas for energy reduction, the organisers were able to engage SMEs on an important climate-related issue.

## Further reading and contacts

You can find out more about some of the things covered in this guide in the following resources:

- [Training material](#) for intermediary organisations
- The [case study report](#) from the EU-funded project that led to this Guide

You can also find out more about the organisations that took part in this project, and contact them, via the links below:

**Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, UK:** <http://www.leedsbeckett.ac.uk/>

Contacts: Professor Ralph Tench [r.tench@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:r.tench@leedsbeckett.ac.uk) or Paul Willis, Director, Centre for Public Relations Studies [p.a.willis@leedsbeckett.ac.uk](mailto:p.a.willis@leedsbeckett.ac.uk)

**The Foundation for European Initiatives, UK:** <http://www.tfei.org.uk/>

Contact: Dr P A Quantock [info@tfei.org.uk](mailto:info@tfei.org.uk)

**Laboratory for Research in Economics and Management, The University of Udine, Italy:** <http://www.cego.uniud.it/it/ricerca/laboratori-di-ricerca/larem.html>

Contact: Professor Luca Brusati [luca.brusati@uniud.it](mailto:luca.brusati@uniud.it)

**Varna Economic Development Agency, Bulgaria:** <http://www.veda-bg.eu/>

Contact: [office@veda-bg.eu](mailto:office@veda-bg.eu)

**Department of Business Communication, Aarhus University, Denmark:**  
<http://bcom.au.dk/>

Contact: Professor Finn Frandsen [ff@bcom.au.dk](mailto:ff@bcom.au.dk)

**The Involve Foundation, UK:** <http://www.involve.org.uk/>

Contact: Clive Mitchell [clive@involve.org.uk](mailto:clive@involve.org.uk)

**Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management, Switzerland:**  
<http://www.globalalliancepr.org/>

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