

# How to facilitate meaningful participation



What conditions need to be in place to set up safe, trustworthy and engaging participatory spaces?



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# Foreword

## Why participatory spaces matter



Participation is becoming a more common part of how we make decisions about our communities, environments and shared futures. Across Europe and beyond, public authorities, researchers, civil society organisations and community groups are increasingly creating opportunities for people to have a say in matters that impact their everyday lives. Neighbourhood regeneration, climate adaptation, energy transitions and public space design are just some of the areas where efforts are being made to open up decision-making.

But participation is about more than getting people into a room. Too often, participatory processes fall short because they are treated as one-off consultations instead of relationships that need time and care. People might be brought in

after the important decisions have already been made, given little room to influence what happens, or asked for their views and then left without any explanation of what happened to their contributions. Experiences like these can wear down trust and leave people feeling that participation is little more than a symbolic exercise. Creating the right conditions for engagement means asking different questions: How did people experience the process? Whose voices were heard? And did participation actually make a difference to the outcome?

People are more likely to engage when they feel welcome, respected and confident that what they say will be taken seriously. They also need to understand why they have been invited, what is expected of them and where their contribution might lead.

Meaningful participation is shaped by a series of choices, many of them seemingly small: where a meeting is held, who receives an invitation, how information is presented,

how conversations are facilitated, whose knowledge is valued, and how people are treated before, during and after the process. Together, these choices shape whether people feel able to participate, whether they trust the process and whether their contribution can genuinely influence what happens.

This guide looks at those conditions and offers practical guidance for facilitating meaningful participation. It explores how to create participatory spaces that are safe, trustworthy and engaging. Drawing on lessons from research and practice, it helps practitioners design spaces where people feel able to take part and where different forms of knowledge are recognised and valued.



## How to read this guide

This guide is designed for practitioners, public authorities, researchers and community organisations planning participatory processes. Each chapter explores one aspect of participatory space design—from trust and inclusion to communication, facilitation and long-term ownership. Use the guide as a source of ideas and to reflect on your own practice. The guide is designed to be a practical resource, with lists and reflective questions contained throughout, to help you apply the insights within to your own work.

We have highlighted two aspects of participatory design that are vital to making the process meaningful. These aspects are reflected on throughout and highlighted in the text to demonstrate their importance and emphasise how they can be realised.

## People as shapers

The first aspect is a shift from “people we need to hear from” to “people capable of shaping outcomes”. Too often participatory processes are seen as tick-box necessities, rather than valuable processes within the design of solutions. By changing the way we see participants, as valuable contributors rather than required signees, we can make participatory processes more mutually beneficial. Points in the guide that speak to this are **marked in purple throughout**.

## Design for context

The second aspect is the need to adapt participatory processes to different contexts and communities. There is no one-size-fits-all in participation. The unique geographies, histories, economies and cultures of our societies present different requirements for engaging stakeholders. Points in the guide that refer to this are **marked in orange throughout**.



# 1. What Makes a Participatory Space safe, trustworthy and engaging?

A successful participatory process begins before anyone walks into the room. It starts with a series of choices: why people are invited, how expectations are set, where the meeting takes place and how participants are welcomed into the conversation.

Those choices matter. They shape how people experience the space, whether they feel at ease enough to contribute and whether they feel that their time, experience and knowledge are being taken seriously.

This chapter introduces the foundations of meaningful participation, which will be explored in the chapters that follow.

## 1.1 From consultation to collaboration

Not all participation looks the same.

Sometimes people are asked give feedback. Sometimes they are invited to exchange and discuss ideas. In other cases, the aim is to work together on solutions or make decisions collectively. Each approach has its place, but the room for influence can be very different from one process to another.

Being clear about the purpose of participation matters from the start. If key decisions have already been made, say so plainly and explain what can still change. **If participants are expected to shape the outcome, tell them how their contributions will be considered and used.** Clear expectations help build trust; vague ones can quickly leave people feeling frustrated or misled.

People also bring very different experiences with them. Some may have taken part in participatory processes many times. Others may be sitting in one for the first time. Previous experiences can shape how people respond: some arrive with confidence and positive memories, while others may be carrying disappointment or distrust after taking part in processes where little seemed to change.

Trust is built through both **procedure** and **physicality**.

Good procedures are transparent, fair and consistent. Participants should understand why they have been invited, how decisions will be made and what will happen once the process is over.

The physical setting matters just as much. A welcoming venue, an accessible location, suitable timing and a comfortable environment all send a message about whether people's contributions are valued.

## 1.2 Principles of a safe, trustworthy and engaging space

Every participatory process is different, but the most successful ones are built on a common set of principles.

**Respect** means recognising every participant as an expert in their own experiences.

**Transparency** means being honest about the purpose of the process, how decisions will be made and where the limits of influence lie.

**Inclusion** means **actively designing for those who are least likely to participate—not only those who are easiest to reach.**

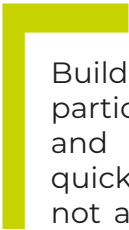
**Reciprocity** recognises that participation is a two-way exchange. Participants contribute their time, knowledge and experiences. Organisers have a responsibility to listen, communicate and give something back.

**Openness** encourages curiosity, learning and the willingness to hear different perspectives.

**Shared ownership** shifts participation away from consultation and towards collaboration. **Participants should feel that they are helping to shape the process rather than simply responding to it.**

**Psychological safety** creates the conditions for honest conversations. People are more willing to ask questions, express uncertainty and disagree respectfully when they know their contributions will be treated with respect.

## 1.3 Building Trust Throughout the Process



Building trust is a vital part of organising a participatory process. Without it, the value and authenticity of the outcomes can quickly become questionable. Trust does not appear overnight, either. It takes time to build and needs attention throughout the process. That's why we consider trust in three stages: before, during and after participation.

### Before participation

At this stage, trust comes down to transparency and making the mutual benefit clear. Participants need to understand why they have been invited, what the process is intended to achieve and how their contributions will be used. This is often easier when local partners and existing networks are involved, particularly

those that already have relationships with the community. Communication should be clear and consistent from the very beginning.

### During participation

**Once the process is underway, trust grows when people can see that their contributions are being taken seriously.**

That means listening actively, treating everyone with equal respect, showing that ideas are being recorded and considered, being open about decisions as they are made and leaving room for questions throughout the process. Small gestures count, too. Remembering someone's name, thanking them for a contribution or briefly summarising what has been said can change how welcome and valued people feel.

## After participation

The conversation should not end when people leave the room. After the process, trust depends on showing participants that their contributions mattered and explaining what will happen next.

Communicate how their input will be used, what actions will follow and which decisions were made as a result. If some suggestions could not be taken forward, explain why.

**People are much more likely to participate again when they can see where their contribution made a difference.**



## 1.4 Psychological Safety and Belonging

Trust in a participatory process is closely tied to how people experience the space itself. A process can be transparent, carefully planned and well organised, but meaningful engagement is difficult when participants do not feel comfortable speaking up.

Psychological safety and a sense of belonging create the conditions for open dialogue. They give people room to share ideas, ask questions, admit uncertainty and challenge different perspectives without worrying that they will be dismissed or judged.

### What creates psychological safety?

Psychological safety is the sense that it is safe to participate.

People are more willing to contribute when they know they will be heard, even when others disagree. Confidence grows when questions are welcomed, different perspectives are treated with respect and mistakes are understood as part of learning rather than occasions for criticism.

A psychologically safe space does not mean avoiding disagreement. Quite the opposite. It makes respectful disagreement possible, allowing people to challenge ideas without turning those challenges into personal attacks. When participants do not have to worry about embarrassment or judgement, they are more likely to speak honestly and engage in a constructive way.

## Creating belonging

People are more likely to take part when they feel that they belong in the space. The setting should feel welcoming and should reflect both the topics being discussed and the people taking part. Small choices in how a space is designed can have a surprisingly large effect on whether someone feels at ease enough to contribute.

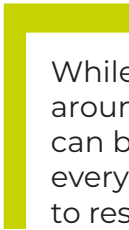
Simple welcoming rituals, thoughtful introductions and opportunities for informal conversation can help people settle in. Sharing refreshments, using inclusive language and choosing icebreakers that invite genuine connection, rather than putting people on the spot, can also help create a space where participants feel recognised, valued and included.

## Responding to difficult emotions

Participation often touches on issues that matter deeply to people. Conversations about local change, community identity or the future of a place can bring up anger, frustration, grief, distrust and fear. These emotions can affect how safe people feel in the room, so they need to be handled with care.

That does not mean treating emotional expression as a problem or a barrier to participation. It means recognising that strong feelings are part of the process and making room for them within the participatory structure. Participants should have ways to express their perspectives and emotions without undermining the psychological safety of others. When emotions are acknowledged with empathy and respect, they can open a path into dialogue rather than shut it down.

## 1.5 Understanding your local context



While this guide has been developed around ideas, approaches and tools that can be applied across different settings, every participatory process still needs to respond to its local context. Every place has its own history, relationships and experiences, and these shape how people respond when they are invited to participate. Taking the time to understand that context is one of the most useful investments organisers can make.

Before planning a process, consider:

- What previous experiences have different groups and communities had with participation?
- Are there existing conflicts or tensions between those you want to invite?

- How much trust exists between communities and institutions?
- Which local values, identities or traditions are important to include and which others may be sidelined by this?
- What issues matter most to people right now?
- Who already holds influence, and who is often left out?

Working through these questions gives organisers a clearer picture of the people and relationships involved. It also helps you design spaces that feel relevant to those attending and anticipate potential obstacles before they become harder to manage.

Whenever possible, work with local organisations, community leaders or trusted individuals who know the context well. Their relationships and experience can help build trust before participation even begins.

## 2. Adopting an Inclusive Mindset towards Participation

Before we get into the physical and structural details of designing a participatory process, it is important to pause and consider the assumptions being brought into the room.

Who do we expect to participate? Whose knowledge do we see as relevant? Who do we assume will be interested, available or confident enough to take part? What do we already believe about the people or communities we want to engage? And what kinds of power imbalances might already exist among those in the room?

These questions are easy to miss when the focus is on finding interesting and engaging formats. Yet assumptions made, often without us noticing, can shape who ends up

in the room, whether people feel willing to take part in activities, whose voices receive attention and what is ultimately treated as valuable.

Entering a participatory process requires an inclusive mindset, along with a willingness to remain open and curious. **People experience the same place or issue in different ways, and some perspectives will inevitably be easier to see or hear than others.** We also need to be willing to question familiar ways of working and change the process when the context calls for it.

This mindset needs to be there from the beginning and carried through every stage of the design. **The more open we are when shaping the process, the more room we create for people to participate.**

## 2.1 Clarifying the Purpose of Participation

Before anything, we should properly understand why participation is needed and which situational factors will impact its usefulness.

**Participation is most meaningful when people have a genuine opportunity to influence something.** If key decisions have already been made, or if there is little room left to change the outcome, that should directly shape the kind of process we design.

Ask:

- Why is participation actually needed?
- What decisions are still open?
- What has already been decided?

- Who has the authority to make the final decision?
- What can realistically change as a result of the process?
- What will participants gain from taking part?

These questions matter even more when working with communities that have been through repeated consultations without seeing meaningful change. Participatory fatigue can quickly undermine our ability to generate results that genuinely reflect the community. The purpose of participation therefore needs to be clear to both organisers and participants.

It helps to work backwards. **First, what can change in the intervention? Then, what kind of input could influence that change? Finally, what kind of process could generate that input?**

## 2.2 Who should be involved?

It is always useful to broaden our idea of who should be invited to a participatory process. **There is no single list of people who belong in every process. Start with the issue and the place.** Consider who is affected by the decisions being discussed, who holds relevant knowledge, who has influence and whose perspective may be missing from existing conversations.

There are many stakeholder mapping approaches that can help identify:

- People directly affected by the issue.
- Local organisations and community groups.
- Decision-makers and public authorities.
- Local experts and practitioners.

- Community knowledge holders.
- Businesses and other relevant organisations.
- Groups that are often underrepresented.
- People who may be affected but are not already organised.

**The mapping approach you choose should reflect the context you are working in.**

Whatever method you use, look beyond the people who are easiest to reach.

Established organisations and active community groups can be useful starting points when identifying participants. They can help you understand the local stakeholder landscape and connect with people who are already involved. But they do not necessarily speak for everyone in a community. It is just as important to cast a wider net and look for people who are less

organised, less connected or rarely included in these conversations. Inclusion, though, is not simply a matter of adding more names to a participant list. A large, diverse group is not automatically an inclusive one.

As preparations begin, consider the balance between institutions and citizens, professional and lived experience, established voices and perspectives that are less often heard.



## 2.3 Power dynamics

People enter a room with different levels of authority, confidence, knowledge, social status and influence. These differences can shape who speaks, who gets heard, whose knowledge is treated as credible and whose ideas end up influencing the outcome.

Some forms of power are easy to spot. A public official may have formal decision-making authority. A technical expert may control specialist knowledge. A community leader may carry considerable influence within their neighbourhood. Other forms are harder to see. Someone who speaks confidently, feels at home in formal meetings or communicates easily in the dominant language may have an advantage over someone with equally relevant knowledge but less confidence in that setting.

Power can also sit outside the room. Participants may already understand that some people involved in a process have more ability to influence decisions than others. Historical power imbalances can shape how willing people are to contribute, what they feel comfortable saying and whether they believe their contribution is worth making in the first place.

When considering power in participatory processes, the goal is not to erase differences in power. That is rarely possible. The point is to recognise them and design the process so they do not stand in the way of meaningful participation.

### Recognising power

Before the process begins, consider where power sits:

- Who has formal authority?
- Who controls information or expertise?

- Who exhibits influence over decision-making?
- Who is more likely to be confident speaking in public settings?
- Whose knowledge is usually treated as legitimate?
- Who may feel less entitled to speak?
- Are there existing tensions or inequalities between groups?
- Which historical inequalities may be present in the process?

Pay particular attention when people with very different levels of authority are invited to participate as though they have equal influence. Putting everyone around the same table does not, by itself, make a process equal.

## Designing for more balanced participation

The structure of the process can reinforce existing power, or it can create more balanced conditions.

Consider using:

- Small groups before whole-group discussion, giving people space to form and express their thoughts.
- Different ways of contributing, so confidence in public speaking is not the only route to influence.
- Anonymous inputs, where participants may feel uncomfortable expressing a view openly.
- Rotating speakers or roles, rather than allowing the same people to lead every discussion.

- Visual and practical activities, which can reduce reliance on formal language or specialist knowledge.
- Clear and shared information, so that some participants do not enter the discussion with significantly more information than others.
- **Different forms of expertise, making space for lived and local knowledge alongside professional expertise.**

The facilitator also has an important role in noticing when power is shaping the conversation. Speaking often does not necessarily mean someone has the most relevant contribution. Someone who says very little may hold important knowledge but need a different way to bring it into the discussion. Equal participation does not always mean giving everyone exactly the same thing.

**Ultimately, managing power is about more than making sure everyone gets an opportunity to contribute, whatever format works best for them.** It means creating conditions where different contributions can carry weight, while helping participants understand how their knowledge and influence relate to the decisions being made.



## 2.4 Participation barriers

An inclusive mindset means recognising that participation is not equally easy for everyone. It is tempting to read an empty chair, a late arrival or a quiet participant as a sign of disinterest. But there may be many reasons someone cannot participate in the way we expect. Some barriers are obvious. Others are easy to miss.

Consider:

- Time: Can people realistically attend at the proposed time?
- Childcare and caring responsibilities: Are participants responsible for children, older relatives or others who depend on them?
- Transport: Can people reach the venue easily and affordably?
- Disability: Can everyone access and move around the space, hear and see what is happening, and take part in the activities?
- Digital access: Does participation depend on devices, connectivity or digital skills?
- Literacy and language: Is information understandable to people with different levels of literacy and language proficiency?
- Confidence: Are people familiar and comfortable with the type of discussion being proposed?
- Previous experiences: Might previous experiences of exclusion, consultation or broken promises affect people's willingness to engage?

We should adjust our mentality to consider what factors might be making participation difficult for some, and then design the process around these barriers. Barriers should be considered from the beginning, not only once someone encounters a problem.

Think about practical adjustments such as:

- Offering different times or ways to participate.
- Providing clear information well in advance.
- Choosing venues that are easy to reach and fully accessible.
- Providing childcare or considering caring responsibilities.
- Offering translation, interpretation or alternative formats where needed.

- Allowing people to contribute in different ways, including without speaking publicly.
- Providing support for digital participation rather than assuming everyone is digitally confident.
- Building in breaks and allowing people to arrive late or leave early when circumstances require it.

Not every barrier can be removed. The aim is to understand them, plan for them and avoid making unnecessary assumptions about what participation should look like.

It also means being willing to adapt. **If people are not engaging, the answer may not be to ask them to participate more. Sometimes the better response is to change the way the process itself is designed.**

### 3. Physical Accessibility, Safety and Comfort

Physical environment is a major part of the participatory process. Where a meeting takes place, how people enter the space, where they sit and whether they can move around comfortably all shape how the process feels. A room can make people feel welcome and equal. It can also create distance, reinforce hierarchy or leave some people feeling excluded.

These details are easy to overlook when planning an activity. They should be treated as part of the design from the outset, not as practical matters to sort out at the last minute.

## 3.1 Location

The location of a participatory activity sets the tone before the conversation has even started.

**A familiar, accessible place can make participation feel easier and more natural.**

A venue that is difficult to reach, strongly associated with an institution or unfamiliar to the community can add another barrier before the discussion has even begun.

Where possible, choose locations that are:

- Familiar: somewhere people know and feel comfortable entering.
- Neutral: a place that does not suggest that one stakeholder owns the conversation.
- Easy to reach: consider public transport, walking routes, parking and distance.

- Physically accessible: check entrances, toilets, seating, lighting and access for people with different mobility needs.
- Psychologically welcoming: consider whether the building and surroundings feel open, safe and appropriate for the people you want to involve.

The most convenient location for the organising team may not be the best choice for participants.

It is also worth thinking about what a place represents. Government buildings, institutional offices and formal meeting rooms can reinforce existing power relationships. **A location associated with previous conflict or exclusion may affect how people feel before the process even begins.** At the same time, choosing a space that is too informal may leave participants wondering whether their input is being taken seriously.

## 3.2 Room design

Once people enter the room, its layout keeps communicating.

A traditional meeting room often places one person at the front while everyone else faces them. That arrangement can create a clear divide between the person assumed to hold the knowledge and those expected to receive it. Participatory spaces benefit from layouts that soften this hierarchy.

Where appropriate:

- Use circular or semi-circular seating so people can see one another.
- Avoid a fixed “front of the room”.
- Place facilitators at the same level as participants, rather than above them or placed behind a desk.

- Make sure everyone can see and hear what is happening.
- Check lighting and acoustics, particularly for people with hearing or visual impairments.
- Keep the room at a comfortable temperature.
- Provide enough space for people to move around easily.
- Have breakout areas available for smaller discussions.
- Consider whether some conversations require privacy or a quieter space.

Furniture plays a part, too. Rows of chairs facing a presentation screen create a very different experience from chairs arranged around a shared table. **A room set up for collaboration should make it easy to look at one another, move between activities**

**and contribute without having to cross unnecessary physical or social barriers.**

There is no single perfect layout. The right arrangement depends on the purpose of the session and what participants are being asked to do. What matters is thinking carefully about what the layout makes possible, and what it quietly gets in the way of.



### 3.3 Creating a caring atmosphere

Small gestures can make a space feel much more welcoming. They also signal that people's time and presence matter. A clear sign at the entrance, someone ready to greet participants or simply a comfortable place to sit can change those first few minutes considerably.

Consider:

- Welcoming arrival: make it clear where people should go and ensure someone is available to greet them.
- Informal conversation: allow time to settle in and speak with others before starting.
- Refreshments: provide drinks and, where appropriate, food throughout the session.

- Local food: food can create a connection with the place and provide a simple opportunity for sharing.
- Name badges: these can make it easier for people to address one another.
- Comfortable furniture: people are less likely to engage when they are physically uncomfortable.
- Clear signage: make entrances, toilets, breakout spaces and other facilities easy to find.
- Music: when appropriate, music can help create a relaxed atmosphere while people arrive.

These details may look minor beside the substance of a workshop, but they help establish the tone for all that follows. They also affect how comfortable people feel, which in turn can shape the depth and relevance of what emerges from the process.

At the same time, care should feel genuine rather than staged. Not every space needs food, music or elaborate welcoming activities. What matters is paying attention to what it actually feels like to be there.



## 4. Time and Continuity in participatory processes

Timing is easy to get tangled on when designing a participatory process. Scheduling can be surprisingly complicated, and it can have a major effect on whether a process succeeds. Everything else might be carefully designed and still exclude people simply because it happens at the wrong time, runs for too long or asks people to keep giving their time without showing what comes from it.

Thinking about time means looking beyond the date and length of a workshop. **It means considering the realities of people's lives, the rhythms of the place and the amount of time needed to build relationships that can support meaningful participation.**

### 4.1 Choosing the right time

A participatory process takes place within the everyday lives of the people involved. Work, school, caring responsibilities, religious commitments, seasonal activities and countless other demands all compete for people's time. What looks like a convenient date or time for a workshop from the organiser's perspective may be much harder for someone else to attend.

Before setting a date, consider the time of year and season:

- School holidays: family routines and caring responsibilities may change.
- Religious holidays: avoid important dates or periods of observance where possible.
- Weather and daylight: these can affect travel and willingness.

- Seasonal work: Farming, tourism and other seasonal work can make some periods particularly difficult.
- Local events: festivals, community events or other important dates may compete for people's time.

Then, think about timing within the week:

- Working patterns: which participants work standard hours, shifts or weekends?
- School and family routines: do particular days create additional caring responsibilities?
- Community activities: meetings, religious activities or other commitments.
- Travel: are transport options different at weekends or on particular days?
- Multiple sessions: offering different days may make participation more accessible.

Finally, think about the time of day:

- Working hours: can people attend without taking time away from work?
- School and childcare: does the timing fit around drop-off and collection?
- Caring responsibilities: are people likely to have responsibilities at particular times?
- Energy and attention: will participants be arriving before, during or after a long working day?
- Travel home: can people get home safely and easily after the session?

There may be no perfect time. If that is the case, be transparent about the constraints and consider other ways for people to contribute.

## 4.2 Duration

When deciding how long a participatory process should last, think about how to gather the input you need while asking for as little of people's time as possible. The length of a session should match what you are asking participants to do. A brief meeting may be enough to gather initial views, while building shared understanding or working through a complex issue may take longer. The trick is to avoid both extremes: rushing people through discussions that need care, or keeping them in the room simply because there is time available.

Consider:

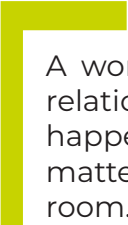
- Purpose: Does the activity need a short discussion, or time to explore an issue in depth?
- Complexity: More information, activities or topics require more time to process.

- Attention: Avoid long periods of listening or repeating the same type of activity.
- Breaks: Build in opportunities to rest, move around and have informal conversations.
- Pace: Allow enough time for people to think and respond without making the session feel rushed.
- Participation fatigue: Be mindful of how much energy you are asking people to give, particularly across multiple sessions.

A useful session does not need to fill every available minute. Sometimes it is better to leave people with enough energy and interest to keep the conversation going than to squeeze one last activity into the programme.



## 4.3 Participation across time



A workshop is only one point in a longer relationship with participants. What happens before and after the session can matter just as much as what happens in the room.

### Before

The period before participation is a chance to build familiarity and trust. Participants may need information about the process, time to prepare or simply enough notice to decide whether they are able to take part.

Consider how much time is needed to:

- Build relationships with local partners and communities.
- Understand the context.
- Communicate the purpose clearly.

- Give people enough notice.
- Prepare participants for what will happen.

### During

The session itself needs enough space for people to understand, reflect, discuss and contribute. Not every moment needs to be tightly structured. Informal conversations and pauses can be valuable parts of the process.

Avoid treating the scheduled activity as the only time that matters. Sometimes the conversations before an activity begins, or those that happen over a break, are where relationships start to take shape.

## After

What happens after participation can determine whether people feel part of the process or just having attended an event.

Make space for:

- Communicating discussions, outcomes and decisions.
- Explaining what happens next.
- Allowing participants to respond or stay involved.
- Maintaining relationships beyond the original activity.

Thinking in time also means being careful about repeatedly asking communities to give their time without showing the outcome. Participation can become exhausting when people are continually consulted but rarely see what comes of it.

The aim is to **build a relationship that develops over time, rather than a string of disconnected engagement activities.**



## 5. Communication Before, During and After

The way we communicate can shape whether people see a participatory process as relevant, accessible and worth their time. It can make or break the experience. That means paying attention not only to the information we share, but also to the language, tone and stories we use, and to whether we help people connect an issue with their own experiences, values and concerns.

**People are more likely to engage when they can recognise something of their own everyday lives in the conversation.**

Communication that feels relatable, respectful and aware of people's emotions can create a stronger sense of relevance and belonging than communication built only around facts and technical information.

This matters throughout the process: from the first invitation, through the conversations and activities themselves, to the way we explain what happened afterwards.

## 5.1 Invitations

The invitation is often the first point of contact between a participant and the process. It should help people understand why they are being invited and give them enough information to decide whether they want to take part.

An invitation does not need to explain everything. It needs to make the purpose and opportunity clear without adding unnecessary barriers.

Use invitations that:

- Use plain language: write in a way that feels natural and easy to understand.
- Explain the purpose: why is this conversation happening and what is it about?

- Explain the benefits: what can participants contribute, learn or influence?
- Set clear expectations: what will people actually be asked to do and how much time will it take?
- Make expertise requirements clear: where specialist knowledge is not needed, say so explicitly.

Avoid presenting participation as an obligation or using language that suggests people need to be experts to have something useful to contribute.

Where possible, connect the invitation to people's experiences. **Explain why the issue matters locally and why their perspective could add something to the conversation.**

## 5.2 Language

The language used during participation can determine who feels able to enter the conversation. Technical terms, project jargon and acronyms may be efficient within a project team, but they can create distance for everyone else. People may feel as though they have stepped into a conversation where they lack the right vocabulary, background or knowledge to contribute.

Avoid:

- Technical language when a simpler alternative is available.
- Project jargon that only makes sense within a particular organisation or project.
- Acronyms that require participants to learn a new vocabulary.

Instead, use:

- Everyday language that people would naturally use themselves.
- Recognisable examples.
- Visuals that can make complex information easier to understand.
- Relatable stories.

The aim is to make the content accessible enough for people with different backgrounds and levels of expertise to contribute meaningfully. This doesn't mean stripping the workshop of complexity or talking down to participants.

Language also tells people who the space is really designed for and whose voice carries the most weight. A conversation packed with jargon can unintentionally suggest that professional knowledge matters more than lived or local experience.



## 5.3 Affective communication

Good communication is about more than making sure information is understood. It also matters how that information is received and what it means to the people hearing it. An affective communication approach helps participants connect what is being presented with their own experiences. It can come through words, images, stories, tone, body language and even the way a space is arranged.

Affective communication becomes especially important when discussing issues tied to people's homes, communities, identities or futures. People may respond with hope, pride, frustration, fear or uncertainty. These reactions are not separate from the subject itself. They can reveal what people value, what they feel is at stake and what they need to understand.

Communication becomes more meaningful when it starts from these realities instead of expecting people to connect with an issue through information alone.

In practice, deploying affective communication can mean:

- **Framing the issue around what matters locally, connecting the topic to people's everyday lives, experiences and concerns rather than only to project or policy objectives.**
- Working with familiar people and places, using trusted local figures, organisations and settings to make communication feel more accessible and genuine.
- Using familiar examples, stories and visual materials that reflect local experiences, cultural context and ways of understanding an issue.

- Making space for people's concerns and emotions, allowing feelings such as uncertainty, frustration, hope or fear to become part of the conversation rather than treating them as barriers to participation.
- Adapting the format to the people involved, recognising that different groups may respond better to different combinations of discussion, stories, visuals, presentations or informal conversation.
- Listening and adapting throughout the process, using participants' responses to refine the way the issue is communicated.

This requires a degree of humility. We cannot always know beforehand what will resonate with a particular community. Asking, listening, testing and adapting are therefore part of the communication process itself. That often means making

the design process two-way, creating an exchange in which organisers are willing to learn, revise their understanding and respond to what they hear.

## 5.4 Closing the communication loop

As participation becomes more common, we need to shift our thinking from “how do I get people to join this activity?” to “how can I encourage people to want to participate again and again?”. That means making sure the conversation does not end when participants leave the room.

What happens afterwards can shape how people understand the value of taking part. When there is no communication about the outcome, participants may be left wondering whether their contribution was heard, what happened to it or whether anything actually changed.

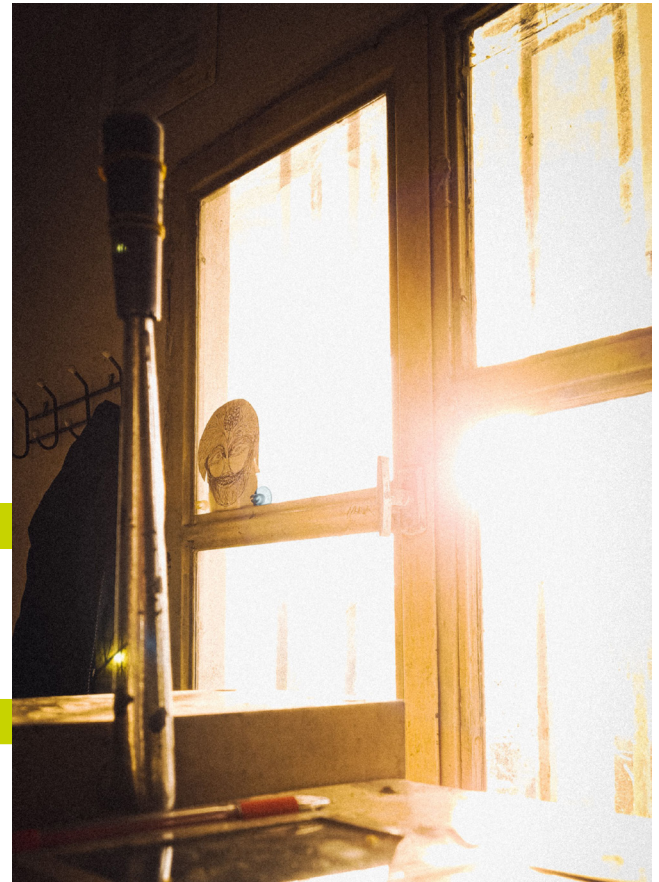
Participants should know:

- What happened: what was discussed, heard or produced.
- What changed: which ideas or contributions influenced the process.
- What did not change: which suggestions could not be taken forward.
- What remains uncertain: where decisions have not yet been made or outcomes are still developing.
- What happens next: the next steps and opportunities for continued involvement.

Not everything can, or should, change as a result of participation. Being honest about that is more useful than creating expectations that cannot be met.

Uncertainty should be communicated rather than hidden. If decisions have not yet been made, say so. If there are constraints that cannot currently be resolved, explain them.

Feedback does not have to be complicated.  
**What matters is that people can see the connection between their participation and what happened afterwards.**



## 6. Facilitation that Enables Participation

Effective facilitation gives participants a real opportunity to contribute while making the process feel worthwhile and enjoyable. It is the link between how a process is designed and how people actually experience it.

The facilitator is not simply there to keep time and work through the agenda. They shape the atmosphere, notice who is participating and who is not, help people understand the purpose of each activity and adapt when the conversation takes an unexpected turn.

Good facilitation provides enough structure for people to participate with confidence, while leaving enough room for different perspectives to emerge.

### 6.1 Representation

The facilitator is often the first person participants meet when they enter a participatory space. **Their presence can shape whether people feel that the space is meant for them and whether they feel comfortable enough to contribute.**

Alongside thinking about who is represented among participants, consider whether people can recognise themselves in those facilitating the process and whether the facilitator's way of communicating makes participation feel accessible. Someone who seems distant, unfamiliar or difficult to approach can unintentionally become another barrier.

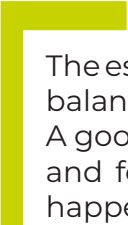
Consider:

- Identity: Where appropriate, can participants see aspects of their community, background or lived experience reflected in the facilitator? This can help create familiarity and signal that different perspectives belong in the space.
- Familiarity: Does the facilitator understand the local context and communicate in a way that feels natural to the people taking part? Familiar language, examples and ways of interacting can make a space easier to enter.
- Respected voice: Does the facilitator communicate in a way that makes people feel their experiences and knowledge are valued? Participants should not feel that they need professional expertise, confidence or a particular way of speaking to be taken seriously.

- Multiplicity: Where there is a diverse group, avoid relying on one facilitator to represent everyone. A facilitation team with different backgrounds, experiences or local connections can help make the space feel more open to different participants.

This does not mean facilitators need to share the same identity or background as every participant. **What matters is recognising the distance that may exist between the facilitator and the people in the room**, and making sure that distance does not become a barrier to participation.

## 6.2 Role of the facilitator



The essence of good facilitation is finding the balance between structure and openness. A good facilitator keeps the process moving and focused while staying alert to what is happening in the room. They may need to clarify a question, change an activity, steer the conversation back towards its purpose or create more room for a perspective that has not yet been heard.

A facilitator should be:

- Neutral: avoid promoting one participant's position or presenting a preferred answer.
- Supportive: help participants understand the task and feel confident contributing.
- Observant: pay attention to who is speaking, who is quiet and how people are responding to one another.
- Adaptive: adjust the pace, format or questions when the planned approach is not working.
- Inclusive: actively create opportunities for different people and forms of knowledge to contribute.

Neutrality does not mean standing back and doing nothing. If one voice consistently dominates, or if someone is being dismissed, the facilitator has a responsibility to step in.

At the same time, the facilitator should not take ownership of the discussion. Their role is to help participants develop, test and exchange their own perspectives.

That takes preparation. Before the session, be clear about the purpose, expected outputs, key questions and points where the discussion might need to be redirected. During the session, keep returning to these without making the conversation feel scripted or mechanical.

## 6.3 Managing discussions

Not everyone participates in the same way.

Some people speak quickly and often. Others need time to think, may feel uncomfortable speaking in a group or may express themselves more effectively through writing, drawing or smaller conversations. Silence can mean uncertainty, disagreement or reflection. It can also mean that the question has not yet connected with someone.

The facilitator can help create a more balanced conversation by supporting quieter participants and managing dominant participants.

### Supporting quieter participants

Do not assume that someone who is quiet has nothing to say. Use smaller groups, paired conversations, written inputs or a short period of individual reflection before opening a discussion to everyone.

When appropriate, invite contributions without putting people on the spot. Questions such as “Would anyone who has not spoken yet like to add something?” can open the conversation without singling anyone out.

## **Managing dominant participants**

A confident participant can unintentionally take up space that others need. Thank them for their contribution, then deliberately make room for other perspectives.

Small groups, speaking rounds, time limits or anonymous voting can help prevent the discussion from being shaped by the most vocal participants.

## **Working with silence**

Silence does not always need to be filled.

Give people time to think, particularly after a complex question or an emotionally difficult topic. If the silence continues, change the question or method rather than repeatedly asking people to respond.

## **Keeping conversations productive**

When discussions become complex or drift away from the purpose, bring participants back to something concrete.

Such as:

- A specific local experience or challenge..
- Conditions that are missing or should change.
- A different perspective that might affect the outcome.

This helps keep the conversation grounded rather than letting it turn into an abstract debate. It also gives different types of knowledge a clearer place in the discussion.

## 6.4 Dealing with conflict

Most participatory processes will involve some disagreement. People may have different priorities, very different experiences of the same issue or conflicting ideas about what should happen next. That is not necessarily something to avoid. If a process genuinely makes room for different perspectives, disagreement can be a sign that people are participating honestly. The challenge is knowing when disagreement has shifted into hostility.

People should be able to challenge ideas, question assumptions and express frustration without feeling that they, or others, are being personally attacked. The facilitator's job is to hold that boundary and step in when the conversation moves from difficult to damaging.

Constructive disagreement usually stays focused on the issue. Even when emotions run high, participants continue responding to one another and remain open to hearing something they had not considered before. Hostility does the opposite. Voices get louder, interruptions increase, personal criticism replaces discussion and people who might otherwise contribute begin to withdraw.

Pay attention when:

- One participant repeatedly interrupts others.
- Personal criticism replaces discussion of ideas.
- A disagreement becomes targeted at an individual or group.
- Participants become visibly uncomfortable or distressed.

- Misinformation is presented as fact.
- The conversation moves so far from the purpose that others can no longer contribute.

When tensions rise, slowing the pace can be more useful than trying to settle the disagreement immediately. Restating what has been heard, identifying areas of agreement and difference, or returning to the purpose of the discussion can give the conversation some structure again.

Sometimes the problem is not disagreement itself, but how it is being expressed. A participant may repeatedly dominate the discussion, dismiss other people or present inaccurate information as fact. These situations call for a different response. The facilitator may need to redirect the conversation, clarify factual information or remind everyone of the expectations agreed at the beginning.

There are also moments when continuing is simply not the best option. If people are becoming distressed, the conversation has turned personal or participants are no longer able to listen to one another, a pause may be more productive than pushing ahead. A short break, a change of format or a quieter conversation away from the main group can give people the space to regain perspective.

## 7. Designing Activities Everyone Can Join

With so many things to consider when designing a participatory process, selecting the right activity can be difficult. A good place to start is by matching the purpose of the process with an activity that supports it. Before settling on a tool, exercise or workshop format, **think about what participants need to contribute, explore or decide. The method should then follow.**

Then tailor it to the people involved. An activity that works well with one group may create barriers for another, especially when it depends heavily on confidence, technical knowledge or speaking in front of others.

Good activity design considers the content, the people and the process together. The aim is to make it easier for everyone to find a meaningful way into the conversation.

## 7.1 Complexity

Participatory activities can become complicated very quickly. There may be a lot of information to communicate, several questions to explore and different outputs to produce. Trying to fit everything into one session can leave participants spending more time figuring out the activity than engaging with the issue itself.

Keep the task as simple as possible without making the issue simplistic.

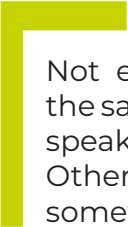
Avoid:

- Too much information: **Give participants what they need to contribute, rather than everything the organisers know about the subject.**
- Expertise: Technical information can be useful, but should not dominate the activity or assume prior knowledge.

- Long lectures: Extended periods of listening reduce opportunities for people to contribute and can make it harder to stay engaged.

When information is necessary, introduce it in manageable parts and connect it directly to the question participants are being asked to consider. **Start with concrete situations and local experiences before moving towards more abstract or technical ideas.** Rather than asking participants to respond to a technical concept, for instance, ask what it could mean for their everyday lives or their local area.

## 7.2 Different ways of contributing



Not everyone thinks or communicates in the same way. Some people are comfortable speaking straight away in a group. Others need time to think, prefer to write something down or find it easier to explain an idea through an image, an example or a conversation with one other person.

**A well-designed activity gives people more than one way to contribute.**

Depending on the purpose, consider using:

- Writing or Post-its to give people time to formulate their own ideas before sharing them.
- Drawing and visual exercises to explore ideas that may be difficult to express in words.
- Voting to identify priorities or compare different views, including anonymous voting where this can reduce social pressure.
- Paired conversations to give people a quieter space to develop their thoughts.
- Mapping to connect experiences and ideas to a particular place.
- Storytelling to bring lived experiences and personal perspectives into the discussion.

- Object-based discussion to provide a concrete starting point for reflection.
- Future scenarios to help participants explore possible changes and imagine what they could mean locally.
- Walk-and-talk activities where the physical environment itself is part of the discussion.
- Digital tools where they genuinely make participation easier rather than creating another barrier.

These methods should not be used simply to make a workshop more varied. Each one should have a clear purpose. A useful activity might begin with individual reflection, move into pairs or small groups, and then bring the conversation back to the whole group. This gives people time to develop their thoughts before they are expected to speak publicly.

## 7.3 Respecting different knowledge



Participatory spaces often bring together people who know things in very different ways. A technical expert may understand how a system works. A public official may know the regulatory or institutional context. A local resident may understand what that system actually feels like in everyday life. A community organisation may know the relationships, histories and concerns that rarely appear in formal data.

These forms of knowledge do not need to compete. They can sit alongside one another. **Activities should therefore be designed to accommodate different kinds of knowledge and give each a meaningful place in the conversation.**

Make space for:

- Lived experience: what people experience in their everyday lives.
- Professional expertise: specialist knowledge developed through work or research.
- Local knowledge: understanding of a place, its history and how it functions in practice.
- Cultural knowledge: values, traditions, identities and ways of understanding a community or place.
- Practical knowledge: experience of what works, what does not and what is possible in real-world conditions.

The activity should not treat one type of knowledge as the default. Technical information may be necessary to open a discussion, but it should be presented in a way that allows people without specialist expertise to respond from their own experience.

This becomes particularly important when discussing potential solutions. Rather than asking participants to judge whether something is technically feasible, ask what it would mean in their context, what opportunities or concerns they see and what conditions would be needed for it to work.



## 8. Following-up and Building Ownership

When ending a participatory process, it is important to value the contributions people have made and leave the door open for future engagement. Following up gives participants a clearer sense of what their contribution achieved, while longer-term engagement can help build the relationships, confidence and local capacity needed to keep participation going.

This means looking beyond the immediate outputs of a workshop and asking what has been built through the process: what people have learned, which relationships have developed, how participants have influenced the process and whether they are now better placed to shape what happens next.

## 8.1 Evaluation

It is important to evaluate participation based on more than how many people attended. Not everyone in a large workshop may be heard from. A smaller process, on the other hand, may build valuable relationships, generate useful learning or give participants meaningful influence that attendance figures would never capture.

The aim of evaluation is to understand what the process was like, what it achieved and what could be improved.

Consider:

- Who took part? Who was represented, and whose voices were missing?
- How did people experience it? Did participants feel welcome, listened to, respected and able to contribute?

- What did people learn? Did participants gain new understanding, and did organisers learn from participants?
- What changed? Did the process build trust, relationships or confidence, and **did participants have any influence on what happened next?**
- What could be better? What made participation easier or more difficult, and what should change in the next activity?

Evaluation should be useful to both participants and those running the process. For participants, it can create space to reflect on what they heard from others, what they contributed and what they would like to see happen next. For organisers, it can show what worked, where barriers remained and how future activities could be improved. It does not need to be complicated. A short questionnaire, group reflection or informal conversation may be enough.

## 8.2 Transparency after the process

Once people have contributed, it is important to follow up so participants are not left wondering what happened to their input. One of the main challenges is that organisers may not yet know which insights will eventually be used in an intervention. But following up does not mean promising that every suggestion will be adopted. Decisions can be shaped by resources, regulations, political priorities and other factors beyond the scope of the participatory process. What matters is being honest about those constraints and explaining how decisions were reached.

Participants should know:

- What comes next: what will happen after the activity and when.
- What changed: which ideas, priorities or decisions were influenced.
- What did not change: which suggestions were not taken forward.
- Why: explain the reasons where decisions differ from participants' contributions.
- What remains open: **make clear if and where there is still an opportunity to influence what happens.**
- How to stay involved: provide realistic opportunities for continued participation where appropriate.

Transparency matters most when the outcome is not what participants hoped for. A clear explanation can help maintain trust, even when the answer is no.

It can also be useful to leave room for participants to take issues further themselves. If something cannot be changed within the process, participants should understand why and, where appropriate, what other routes may be available to them.



## 8.3 Building ownership

A participatory process becomes more meaningful when people can continue shaping what happens without always relying on the organisation that started it. This means gradually moving from consultation towards stewardship. **Rather than repeatedly asking communities for input, create opportunities for people to take on roles in shaping, organising and sustaining the process themselves.**

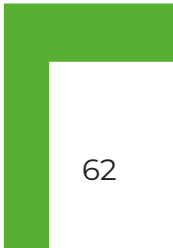
This might involve:

- Supporting local champions: identify and support people who are motivated to continue the work within their communities.
- Developing community leadership: create opportunities for participants to take on greater responsibility over time.
- Peer facilitation: support participants to facilitate conversations with others, rather than always relying on external facilitators.
- Supporting communities to organise themselves: provide space, connections or resources that allow participants to initiate activities and conversations independently.

- Sharing responsibility: involve participants in deciding what happens next, rather than presenting a completed plan for approval.
- Reducing external facilitation over time: allow the role of the practitioner or organisation to change as local capacity and confidence develop.

This does not mean every participatory process needs to become completely community-led. Different contexts call for different levels of external support. The important question is whether participation is helping people build greater capacity to shape their own environment, relationships and future.

The strongest outcome may not be a successful workshop. It may be a community that no longer has to wait for someone else to organise the next conversation.



## Closing reflection

This guide was written as a practical resource for designing participatory processes. It serves as a collection of principles, questions and conditions to set up safe, trustworthy and engaging participatory spaces.

Participation is at its strongest when people are recognised as contributors rather than recipients, and when processes are designed around the communities they serve rather than around predefined formats. This requires openness, adaptability and a willingness to learn from the people involved.

There is no single model for meaningful participation. Every context is different. Every community brings its own histories, relationships, priorities and forms of knowledge.

Ultimately, meaningful participation is not defined by the methods we use. It is defined by whether people feel able to take part, whether their contributions are valued and whether they have a genuine opportunity to influence outcomes.



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