

Online Public Deliberation Toolkit: Guidance for using online methods for deliberative public engagement

Produced by the Networks of Exchange: Developing lessons and sharing best practices on Online Public Deliberation Project, April 2022

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Background

This toolkit provides tips and best practices about online deliberation which we hope will be useful for those who are considering running an online ‘mini-public’ such as a citizen’s assembly or citizen’s jury. The toolkit covers the following key issues:

- Practical considerations (e.g., support, costs, communication)
- Accessibility and inclusivity issues
- Timing of your assembly (e.g., length of sessions, time to organize etc.)
- Building a sense of common purpose and collective identity
- Moderation, facilitation, break out groups
- Achieving deliberative quality online

The toolkit draws on our experiences and research findings from the **Networks of Exchange Project**, funded by the ESRC’s Impact Acceleration Account (University of Exeter), as well as the team’s experiences running online deliberative engagement events with a variety of stakeholders and members of the public. The Networks of Exchange Project was designed both to inform the design of an online citizen’s assembly being conducted by Devon Climate Emergency (Devon County Council), as well as to disseminate learning from that project to local authorities and others that may be considering running their own online mini-publics.

In producing this brief guide, we have drawn on our experiences during this project which included a webinar run jointly with *Involve* (with thanks to Kaela Scott for input) and *Devon Climate Emergency*, as well as research with key stakeholders involved in the project, including assembly members. We have also drawn on our collective experiences convening other online deliberations. More detailed information including academic research about online deliberation can be found in the Rapid Review which is accessible via the link below⁵.

⁵ [Sandover, R., Moseley, A. & Devine-Wright. \(2020\). The Feasibility of an Online Citizens’ Assembly to support Devon’s Transition to Net Zero: Rapid Review. University of Exeter.](#)

Practical considerations

Some key practical considerations to bear in mind when setting up an online deliberative mini-public include the following:

- Ensure participants have been contacted beforehand to iron out any practical issues relating to internet access, availability of suitable equipment including microphone, device, speakers etc. – participants really value this support.
- Continued support will be needed throughout, and some people are likely to need quite high levels of support.
- Clear communication about timings, meeting links, organization is essential. People like to know what's coming ahead over the course of the mini-public, and what each session will entail.
- Ensure interactive activities used during the mini-public are suitable for participants' equipment – if needed, provide tablets to avoid reliance on smartphones which can limit effective participation – especially if participants need to consult documents, presentations & visual resources.
- Without adequate support, one may question how representative the sample will be – those with lower familiarity with digital communication or poor access to equipment may either drop out or decline the invitation to participate.
- All of this – both personnel time and additional equipment - should be factored into the budget for your citizen's assembly or jury.
- The costs of online mini-publics can be similar to those in offline mini-publics. Whilst you may save money on some areas (e.g., hotel bookings, travel, food), there will be new costs associated with the online format (e.g., provision of equipment, training, and technical support for participants). Other costs such as paying for professional break out group facilitators, organizational and administrative support will be similar whether your format is online or offline.

Accessibility and inclusivity

- Online formats can be particularly useful when participants are geographically dispersed or when reaching rural/ remote populations.
- During covid, many participants have felt safer meeting online than in person.
- Online formats can enhance participation levels of those who work and those with caring responsibilities, making it easier to fit around other commitments.
- Online formats also provide benefits for those with mobility issues or with limited access to transport.

- On the other hand, participation is more challenging for those with poor internet quality, and less familiarity with using digital communication (hence the need for support with this, as outlined above).
- The quality of Internet is crucial to effective participation.
- Chat functions and live transcripts allow less confident communicators or those with hearing difficulties to participate more easily.

Timing & Flexibility

- To avoid participants feeling drained and to maintain focus, online deliberations work best in shorter sessions, as compared to face-to-face deliberations. Typically, sessions of around 2-2.5 hours including a break work well. Consequently, the number of sessions is likely to be greater to allow sufficient time to cover the topics.
- Typically, online mini publics happen over shorter sessions over a longer period (e.g., two evenings per week over 6 weeks, or a combination of weekend mornings or afternoons and weekday evenings), as compared to face to face sessions which sometimes occur over full weekends or several full weekend days.
- However, at the same time, participants can feel frustrated if there is insufficient time to discuss the issues in the depth they would like. Sufficient time is critical. It takes time to learn how to take part in online deliberation, and to build trust and rapport. Compared to face-to-face deliberation, it can take longer to allow everyone to make their points in an online setting, due to short pauses between speakers, or technical glitches that create a need for repetition.
- Since online sessions are typically shorter than face-to-face deliberations, participants may need or want to consult written or audio materials between sessions, to ensure that the online interactive sessions can be spent solely on discussions.
- The organizers of a mini-public need to consider how many topics or how much material people can really discuss in the depth required when using online formats: this may point toward the desirability of avoiding very large topics, such as ‘how do we tackle the climate emergency in our local area’. Instead, focused questions such as ‘what role can renewable energy play in our locality?’ may be more productive. On the other hand, it’s important not to be too narrow or prescriptive about what can or cannot be covered. Allowing some flexibility in the schedule for participants to contribute their own ideas

about topics can be beneficial, whilst allowing people to feel some ownership of the agenda.

- Organizers should be mindful of the time commitment they are asking participants asking for – is it fair? Are participants adequately financially compensated? Is time spent watching presentations and reading materials between the sessions also compensated for?
- Organizers should be aware of how long it takes to arrange speakers – ask people early to ensure you get the speakers you really want.
- Allow flexibility in the schedule day by day (if running the event over several days) – unanticipated topics or issues are likely to come up that you will want to revisit and probe further in subsequent sessions. Furthermore, you will learn what's working well and not so well as you go along, so allow yourself the freedom to make changes to the process or schedule as you go.

Building a sense of common purpose and collective identity

- It's harder for people to get to know one another in the same way they do in an in person setting. However, over time, this can and often does happen, providing there are sufficient sessions, and enough opportunities to interact with the same people over time. Small break-out groups can be useful for this purpose.
- On the other hand, don't allocate people to the same small group every single time. Consideration needs to be given to changing group membership if the dynamic isn't working well in any of the small groups. Be flexible and be responsive! Allow people to gradually meet a range of people in your mini-public.
- Think creatively about ways in which you can break the ice and allow people to get to know each other. Consider having informal chat sessions between the formal deliberation sessions. Build in some creative and fun moments. Generally, leave space for a degree of informality.
- Allow people the opportunity to 'tell their story'. Deliberation is as much about giving people the chance to reflect upon how an issue affects them, their community, or the people they know, as it is about people voicing opinions or engaging with arguments.

- Finally, consider using hybrid online and offline mini publics as a way of building trust and allowing people to get to know one another – combining a mix of in person and online sessions provides variety. You may wish to hold your first session in person to allow people a chance to meet directly. At the end, you may wish to come together again to meet in person, perhaps holding a celebratory event to thank and reward participants for giving their time, commitment, and energy.

Moderation, facilitation, break out groups

- If conducting an online plenary which entails participants adding comments in the ‘chat’, ensure you have at least one if not two people supporting the Chair. It is difficult for the Chair keep track of comments whilst introducing speakers, inviting people to contribute, synthesizing the discussion, and keeping time.
- Break out groups are an important way of ensuring everyone has an equal chance to participate. It’s very difficult to hear from everyone in a plenary setting but when broken into several small groups everyone can have a greater chance of voicing, being listened to, and engaging with others.
- Moderation is vital in the small break-out groups just as it is in a plenary session, and moderation skills need to be taught and learned. If conducting a mini-public, ensure group moderators are fully briefed, given prompts, and have clear sense of what needs to be achieved. As far as possible, provide some training in moderation skills and use experienced moderators wherever possible. Having a second moderator to back up the main moderator can provide useful support.
- Having a consistent format for all groups to report back to the whole assembly on the discussions from their breakout rooms can be helpful.
- Ensure break-out group moderators running different groups have a chance to debrief with one another after the break-out sessions. This is a useful way of picking up moderation tips, identifying any problems, and coming up with solutions.

Achieving deliberative quality online

- One challenge with online mini-publics is that some people may be more reluctant to voice disagreement online. People may feel more comfortable doing this in face-to-face settings where any disagreements can be resolved more easily, with opportunities for informal chat in coffee breaks etc.
- One way to address this is simply to reassure people that it's ok to voice disagreement online – providing it's done in a polite and courteous way, emphasizing disagreement is with the point itself rather than the person making it.
- On the other hand, the online setting can sometimes promote a lack of civility, with people who know they are unlikely to meet in person occasionally less respectful in their tone and interactions than they may have been face-to-face. The moderator plays a crucial role here. Agreeing mutual ground rules from the outset can be a way to ensure civil behavior and maintain high deliberative standards. Hybrid mini-publics with online and offline meetings can also aid in this respect.
- Allowing sufficient time between deliberation sessions can enhance the quality of deliberation overall. Compared to in-person events where lots of material is covered in one day, online deliberations which are more broken up over a longer period, allow participants the opportunity to reflect on the issues, re-read or re-watch materials or presentations, and come to the next session with questions for speakers or issues to raise with other assembly members, after considered reflection.
- Achieving deliberative quality entails ensuring people listen and are listened to. Only after this happens can people update beliefs based upon what has been said. Ensuring equality of voice is part of this process, so try to build-in ways of ensuring everyone is heard and is supported to speak up. In online environments this can be more challenging. Going around the group in the break-out sessions to allow each person to speak in turn is one method. Proactive moderation also helps, with moderators feeling empowered to invite those with quieter voices into the conversation, perhaps making use of the chat facility where needed if some participants find this more comfortable. Keeping a watchful eye on the clock and moving on when needed is important to ensure a small number of people are not taking up most of the discussion.

Concluding comments

Online mini publics offer several advantages but also pose some challenges. They potentially offer a very useful way of gaining high quality public input into decision-making within local government or other policy contexts. They enable issues to be considered in an in-depth way compared to some other forms of public engagement, such as surveys. Online platforms like Zoom and Teams have transformed the potential of online deliberation.

Yet online mini publics are time and resource-intensive to organize and execute effectively. They are not a cheap alternative to face-to-face deliberations. While there may be some obvious cost savings associated with transport, catering and accommodation, new costs will arise, such as accessing technical equipment and training participants to use it. Training for facilitators may also be needed, or the employment of trained external facilitators to run the events. Over time, as public authorities gain more experience in conducting mini-publics, they may find less need for external facilitation.

Thinking through the kinds of practical and design considerations contained in this toolkit and via the links below, we hope, will provide you with some helpful pointers in getting started on the online (or hybrid online and offline) mini-public deliberation journey.

Links to other toolkits and websites

- **Involve:** a selection of resources from *Involve's* website
 - <https://www.involve.org.uk/>
 - <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/citizens-assembly>
 - <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/citizens-jury>
 - <https://www.involve.org.uk/resources/methods/citizens-panel>
 - https://www.involve.org.uk/sites/default/files/field/attachemnt/Deliberative-public-engagement-nine-principles_1.pdf
- **Democratic Society:** How to run a citizens' assembly: A handbook for local authorities based on the Innovation in Democracy Programme
 - <https://www.thersa.org/globalassets/reports/2020/IIDP-citizens-assembly.pdf>
- **My Society:** Digital tools for citizens' assemblies
 - <https://research.mysociety.org/publications/digital-tools-citizens-assemblies>
- **Extinction Rebellion:** The Extinction Rebellion guide to citizens' assemblies
 - <https://extinctionrebellion.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/The-Extinction-Rebellion-Guide-to-Citizens-Assemblies-Version-1.1-25-June-2019.pdf>
- **The Sortition Foundation:**
 - <https://www.sortitionfoundation.org/>
- **UN Democracy Fund & the new Democracy Foundation**
 - <https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/sortitionfoundation/pages/356/attachments/original/1575014579/New-Democracy-Handbook-FINAL-LAYOUT-reduced.pdf?1575014579>