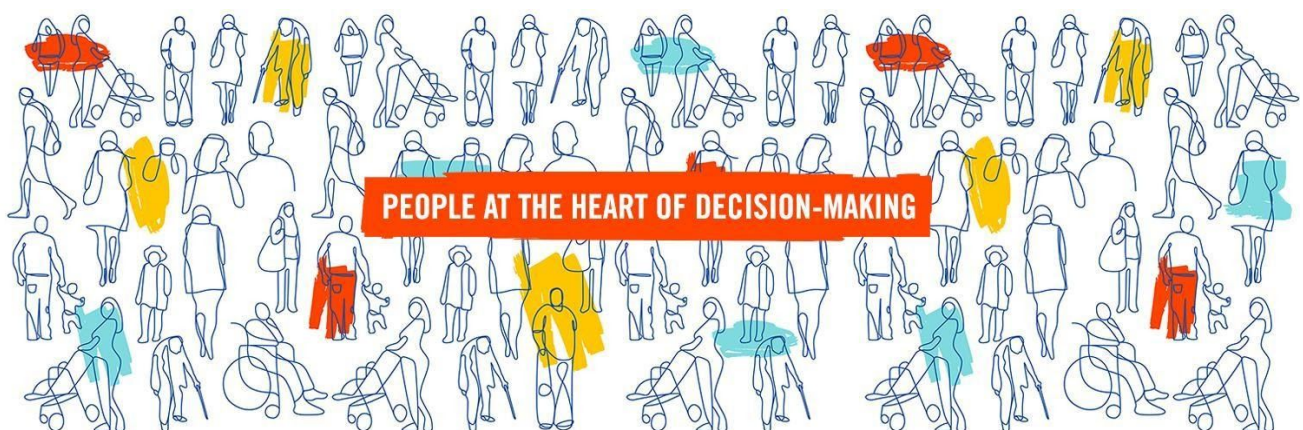




Practitioners' Network Session: Pandemic Practice Progress

Thursday 15th October 2020, 10am -
12pm



01. Introduction

Back in January, the practitioners' network met to share learning about the different citizens' assemblies and juries from 2019. As the pandemic hit and lockdown began, practitioners met again at the beginning of March to explore what online might mean for the future of deliberation. We have been on a huge learning curve over the past six months, with adaptation and new learning about what works well, what is challenging and what the future of online deliberative processes might look like, taking centre stage. With practice of online engagement under people's belts, we met again in October to share learning from practitioners' experiences over the past six months.

The session focused on three key questions:

- What has been working well with online engagement?
- What are the current challenges and/or barriers to online engagement?
- What do we need to focus more on for our online practice in the next six months?

Five members of the network gave lightning talks to share their experiences from online processes. Practitioners' then divided into breakout rooms to discuss what the future of online deliberation might hold. The following is a summary of the session.

02. What has been working well with online engagement?

Practitioners shared experiences of what has been working well with online engagement.

Practitioners discussed the progress that has been made at improving **inclusion in online processes**. The points below outline key steps taken to promote online inclusion.

- **Onboarding.** The onboarding process was considered central to promoting online inclusion. Practitioners emphasised the need to allow a significant amount of time per participant to ensure they have suitable equipment, practiced basic tech skills needed to participate and feel comfortable online.
- **Digital inclusion.** Many practitioners emphasised that a wider variety of participants are taking part in online processes, in particular young people, people with disabilities and those with caring responsibilities. It was noted that many people feel more comfortable participating online than in-person.
- **Criteria for engagement.** Practitioners noted that including participants with limited online experience in engagement criteria, alongside high levels of onboarding support, enabled great discussions between a wide variety of participants.

Practitioners explored the positive steps that have been taken to improve **participant experience** in online processes.

- **Creating a sense of occasion.** Many practitioners noted the importance of creating a sense of occasion around sessions, sharing experiences of mailing information and physical objects such as snacks and mugs to help foster a sense of belonging and shared experience.
- **Encouraging informal conversations.** There was much discussion amongst practitioners about how best to facilitate informal conversations and horizontal relationship building between participants. Some noted using the chat function in Zoom had helped build rapport and humour between participants whilst others shared different online platforms that allow for informal conversations; Zoom's new feature of choosing breakout rooms, Hopin and Remo were all mentioned.
- **Collective identity.** Some practitioners discussed the development of collective identities in local processes, sharing experiences of participants from a range of areas across a region connecting over simple things like the love of local landscapes (or moaning about a particular road!). Questions were raised about how to support this in larger regional or nationwide processes.

Many practitioners noted the benefits online engagement presents when engaging with **speakers**. The following points were raised as areas of success.

- **More interest from speakers.** The increased accessibility of online processes for speakers has also increased the number of speakers willing to take part.
- **Increased diversity of speakers.** Many practitioners noted that online processes are often more inclusive for speakers, limiting the travel cost and time needed to participate in in-person processes. Practitioners felt this had led to a greater diversity of speakers available in particular noting, for example, the increase of speakers of colour taking part in processes normally dominated by white speakers at climate assemblies.
- **More opportunities to interact with and provide training for speakers.** Many practitioners discussed the ability to pre-record speaker presentations allowing greater control over the content and length of speaker presentations (as well as potential for participants to listen back later). Additionally, it was considered to be easier to interact with and provide training for speakers over Zoom on how best to present to a public audience.

Practitioners discussed the **ideal duration** of online processes. Whilst there was not complete consensus about this, some general observations about successful processes are captured below.

- **Evening sessions.** Some practitioners shared experiences of running evening sessions, noting they felt more comfortable asking people to give up an evening than a whole weekend. It was also felt that evening sessions can fit better with caring and work responsibilities.
- **Weekend sessions.** Some practitioners shared experiences of running online sessions at the weekend. It was generally agreed it was best to break Saturday sessions into two, providing people with a long lunch break. There was discussion about the ideal length of each of these sessions, with practitioners noting that between 2 - 3 hours works well.

- **Space between sessions.** Practitioners discussed the ideal gap between sessions, with some practitioners noting lengthy gaps between sessions (2 - 3 weeks) can result in the process losing momentum.
- **Microgroups.** Some practitioners shared experiences of microgroups, groups of four participants with one facilitator, that met between weekend sessions. These microgroup sessions were more informal and less structured, allowing participants to stay engaged and develop ideas whilst also building positive relationships with each other.

Practitioners shared different **technologies and online engagement platforms** they had found useful during their online sessions.

- **Microsites.** Many practitioners had been using microsites as ways to promote asynchronous engagement between sessions. This was seen as extremely useful in enabling participants to re-watch and explore materials and also build relationships between participants. Practitioners also noted microsites improved the transparency of processes, with participants more aware of the whole journey. Emphasis was placed on the ability of microsites to enable a different kind of contemplation than in-person sessions, with participants having more time to consider learning outside of sessions.
- **Digital tools.** Many practitioners shared experiences of using different digital tools during sessions. Jamboard, Miro and Google Docs were all mentioned as useful tools. Practitioners did note the importance of maintaining focus on the quality of discourse not just on the potential of online tools to ensure they don't get in the way of conversation.
- **Chat function.** Many practitioners noted the benefits of using the chat function in Zoom to enable participants to contribute in both small group and plenary sessions. It was seen as helpful for moving conversations onwards and for fostering stronger relationships between participants.

Practitioners discussed how the move to online engagement has highlighted the **strength and adaptability of the sector.**

- **Development of new skills.** Many practitioners felt they had developed new skills as part of moving online. In particular practitioners noted their improved tech confidence and their 'talk, listen, type' skills.
- **Sharing learning.** Practitioners emphasised the importance of staying connected and sharing learning with others in the sector to help support the positive development of online engagement.
- **Successful projects.** Many practitioners shared success stories of online processes, emphasising that online processes can work and produce excellent outputs.

Some practitioners discussed the ability of online processes to strengthen input and understanding from **commissioners and stakeholders.**

- **Easier to engage online.** Many practitioners felt the process of engaging with commissioners and stakeholders in the design process was considerably easier online than in-person. In particular, practitioners noted that stakeholders were more likely to join and present at sessions when they were online.
- **Understanding of extra costs.** Some practitioners noted that when moving existing processes online many commissioners were understanding that the cost of the project would not go down and were understanding of additional online costs.

Practitioners discussed **work arounds for the team** working at online sessions. Whilst many agreed the process is more intense online than in-person, positives were raised about online processes.

- **Communication.** Many practitioners felt the use of WhatsApp to communicate during online sessions was invaluable. In particular, it was seen as useful for 'thinking on your feet', so last minute changes could be quickly and easily shared between the team..

Stand out moment: Artist-in-residence

- An artist-in-residence was an exciting new addition to one of the assemblies. They were engaged to capture creative responses to the assembly, for instance creating and photographing a physical noticeboard in the local area. These photos were shared with participants using an online portal. This will be followed by an exhibition of the artist's work.

03. What are the barriers and/or challenges to online engagement?

Practitioners shared experiences of the barriers and challenges they have faced during online engagement.

Many practitioners noted the large amount of **staff time and resources** required for successful engagement processes. The following were raised as particular areas that demand time and resources.

- **Onboarding and re-boarding processes.** It was noted that many participants need a significant amount of support to engage online and that this support needs to continue throughout the project. The level of support needed was often more than anticipated and lots of 'beginners' guides' are necessary.
- **Preparation for online sessions.** It was noted that in addition to process designs, preparation for online engagement including preparing online platforms and microsites were time consuming.

- **Staff time on the day.** Practitioners discussed the number of staff needed to run a successful online process, noting in particular the need for tech support and a greater number of facilitators as breakout groups tend to be smaller online than in person.

Practitioners noted additional staff time and resources need to be factored into processes from the beginning. In particular, there was emphasis on the need to make commissioning bodies aware of the time and resources needed to run effective processes.

Whilst practitioners acknowledged much progress has been made to ensure online processes are more inclusive, the issue of **digital exclusion** was raised as an ongoing challenge to successful online engagement.

- **Hardware.** Concern was raised about participant access to hardware, for instance a suitable laptop/tablet, webcam, headphones/speakers, stable broadband. It was noted that hardware can be supplied in small numbers, but it is difficult to provide the necessary equipment to a large number of participants.
- **Tech confidence.** Practitioners noted the need to challenge assumptions that people had become more confident with technology due to Covid-19. Indeed, it was discussed that many participants are still not confident with technology and don't necessarily feel comfortable participating on video calls. It was also noted that those with more tech confidence are more likely to engage with and use microsites more often, contributing to the dominance of the 'usual suspects' in online processes.
- **Continuing the conversation.** Many practitioners noted the importance of continuing conversations about digital exclusion with commissioners, emphasising the need to be upfront about the financial costs of ensuring processes are done fairly and effectively.

The effect of online engagement on **relationship building** was raised as a challenge by many practitioners.

- **Participant - participant relationships.** It was noted that participant relationships can often feel transactional in online processes. Practitioners felt there was often little space for participants to develop strong relationships with each other.
- **Participant - practitioner relationships.** Some practitioners raised the concern that participants speak through facilitators rather than directly to other participants.
- **Practitioner - practitioner relationships.** Practitioners noted they often missed in-person debrief sessions and relationship building with other team members around in-person processes.

Stand out moment: Always remember to save!

- After an engaging and rewarding breakout room session one practitioner was caught out, forgetting to save the chat before leaving the session. This is a good reminder for everyone to always save online work and be aware of tools where participants can inadvertently delete content!!

04. What's Next?

In breakout groups, practitioners explored the question: '**What do we need to focus more on for our online practice in the next six months?**'. The following were identified as key areas for further exploration.

All breakout groups emphasised **commissioners and the commissioning process** as an essential area for further focus. Practitioners noted the need to proactively engage with commissioners to share learning about successful processes.

- **Centring digital inclusion.** Many practitioners noted commissioner interest in digital inclusion. It was felt that continuing conversations with commissioners is needed to ensure the additional requirements of online work - for instance extra time for onboarding, providing hardware, smaller group sizes with more facilitators - remain at the forefront of thinking when commissioning online processes.
- **Myth-busting.** Many practitioners noted the importance of myth-busting potential misconceptions around online engagement. In particular, emphasis was placed on dispelling ideas that online processes are necessarily cheaper and quicker to run than in-person processes.
- **Data quality.** It was noted by some practitioners that commissioners weren't necessarily concerned about cost but instead were sceptical of the quality of data produced from online engagement. In response to this, it was noted by many practitioners that online engagement often produces very high quality data and there is a need to feed this back to commissioners.

Many breakout groups discussed the importance of **sharing learning** between practitioners and with commissioners. Groups raised the following questions.

- **Development of evidence base for online engagement to increase commissioner confidence.** Many practitioners noted the advantages of co-creating an evidence base that demonstrates the value of online processes. The collation of quantifiable evidence to demonstrate the strength of methods and the richness of outputs was shared as an idea. In particular, practitioners noted a strong evidence base is needed to support practitioners working in smaller communities where there is often greater concern from commissioners about the value of online engagement.

- **Development of standards for online engagement.** Some practitioners noted the potential benefits of co-developing standards for online engagement to ensure practice remains impactful.
- **Resource sharing to avoid replication.** The need to support localised engagement without unnecessarily duplicating challenges from previous processes was noted. Practitioners discussed how to better share resources to avoid this situation.

Many breakout groups discussed the importance of continuing to develop **new and creative online design**. Practitioners emphasised that online engagement is not a 'stop gap' until face-to-face engagement can begin again.

- **Joint sense-making.** Practitioners emphasised the need to engage with joint sense-making design, making online spaces more creative and connected and the encouraging of horizontal connections between participants.
- **New ideas for online.** Many practitioners commented on the need to create new ideas for online engagement and not to rely on the same methods as face-to-face processes. Ideas of interacting with physical space, using maps and models, encouraging alternative expression through drawing and photos were shared as potential avenues to explore. Practitioners discussed the need to 'be brave' when exploring the future of online engagement.
- **Data quality and outputs.** Whilst it was noted that online engagement often produces good quality data, there was discussion about the levels of social and emotional dynamics included within this data. It was felt further discussion was needed to explore the difference in data produced from online engagement.
- **Creating a sense of occasion.** Practitioners discussed the strides that have been made in creating a sense of occasion at online processes, for instance by sending snack packs and mugs. There was discussion about the need to explore further how to bring the 'special' feeling often felt at in-person events into the online experience.

Some breakout groups discussed the idea of online engagement **disrupting democracy**. Practitioners explored the following ways online engagement might do this.

- **Creating new institutions.** Practitioners raised the question of online engagement enhancing or creating new forms of direct democracy, for instance, public petitions leading to referendum votes.
- **Longer term questions.** Practitioners also emphasised the need to think longer term about the ability for online engagement to enhance democracy, noting the potential positives of challenging existing structures by creating means for mass engagement through, for example, automated chatbots ([see here](#)), whilst also noting potential negatives in terms of the social and emotional quality of dialogue.

Practitioners discussed the future of **managing conflict** in online engagement..

- **Expressing concerns and disagreements.** Many practitioners noted the increased ability of participants to get in touch with practitioners outside sessions (e.g. microsites, email) increases the number of grievances raised by participants. Whilst it was noted these grievances are legitimate and should be expressed, practitioners felt more needed to be done to effectively and fairly deal with this level of feedback. In particular, there was discussion about how to ensure these avenues for conversation are accessible to all and do not become dominated by the 'usual suspects'.
- **Speaking through facilitators.** It was noted that some participants speak to and through facilitators as opposed to engaging more widely with the group. Many felt this had a detrimental impact on the deliberative nature of processes and hindered the building of relationships between participants. Some practitioners discussed the potential for self-organised/self-facilitated discussions to reduce the role of facilitators in online engagement processes (whilst also acknowledging some of the safeguarding implications of this).

Practitioners discussed the future of **hybrid models of engagement**. It was noted this is an area for further thought and exploration.

- **Hierarchy between 'Zoom and room'.** There was discussion about the pros and cons of hybrid models, with some practitioners emphasising the risk of making vulnerable participants feel excluded from the process if they aren't able to participate in-person. Many agreed that there is a big difference in experience between those meeting in-person and those on Zoom.
- **Ongoing uncertainty about Covid-19.** Practitioners noted the ongoing uncertainty of Covid-19 currently made it very difficult to plan for hybrid sessions.

Stand out moment: Sharing online

- Online platforms have had a positive impact on participant experiences, allowing continued engagement between sessions. This has been really successful at keeping momentum going and gaining a rich level of detailed data from participants. It has also brought participants closer together as they use the portal to share photos and stories.

05. Concluding Thoughts

We have been on a huge learning curve over the past six months. There:

- has been much positive development of knowledge, experience and innovation, with practitioners reshaping deliberative engagement for an online format - this is continuing at pace.

- are areas for continued focus in practice, particularly as the evidence of differences in impact between in-person and online processes become clearer as processes conclude and are received by decision makers.
- is a need to build an evidence base to show the ability of online processes to be meaningful and impactful and to continue developing and sharing learning within the space.

It has been incredibly helpful to share learning and experiences across the practitioners network. This community discussion helps build and improve our collective and individual understanding, paving the way for increasingly inclusive and impactful deliberative democracy in the UK.

Appendix

List of Attendees

Name	Organisation
Alison Crowther	MadeToLast Resilience
Amanda Stott	facilitate this! Ltd
Andy Paice	Independent associate
Anna MacGillivray	URSUS
Christopher Ward	Climate Assembly Nottingham
Claire Mellier-Wilson	Claire Mellier-Wilson
Dave Mckenna	Dave Mckenna Solutions
Dr Diane J Beddoes	Deliberate Thinking Ltd
Eilidh Russell	Sustrans
Eva Trier	Eva Trier Consulting Ltd.
Graham Smith	University of Westminster
Hally Ingram	Involve Associate
Henrietta Hopkins	HvM
Hilary Topp	Hilary Topp
Jane Mitchell	JL&M Ltd
Kaela Scott	Involve Foundation
Liz Goold	Independent consultant- associate of Involve, DemSoc and Shared Future
Maddie Gough	Involve Foundation
Mel Stevens	DemSoc
Michelle Mackie	Ipsos MORI
Neil Smith	Resources for Change

Pandora Ellis	Demsoc
Paul Carroll	Ipsos
Perry Walker	Talk Shop
Pete Bryant	Shared Future
Riley Thorold	RSA
Rob Francis	Traverse
Sarah Brown	C2W Consulting
Sarah Toy	Freelance/City Global Futures
Stephen Frost	IPPR
Stephen Robinson	SJR Strategic Consulting Ltd
Susan Ritchie	Mutual Gain
Suz Lansdell	Involve Foundation
Tim Hughes	Involve Foundation
Tom Lord	Sortition Foundation