

Thinking of contracting stakeholder participation design and facilitation services? What you need to know...

1. Introduction

Good practice starts with the procurement process. We know from experience that we are able to do our best work when commissioning organisations:

- understand what good practice is
- recognise the value of a skilled and experienced designer and facilitator, and know the difference it makes
- write clear specifications that set the context without constraining good design
- know what to look for when evaluating tenders
- understand why working with a third party is a different kind of working relationship
- are realistic about budgets

We have written this guidance note to help.

2. Good versus poor practice

- **Good practice** results in many benefits: long lasting results, decisions well informed from multiple perspectives, enhanced understanding and collaboration, increased trust, greater momentum for delivery and better outcomes
- **Poor practice** has significant risks: poor decisions and weak if any agreements, damaged relationships and reputations, projects and processes stuck in legal challenges, disaffected stakeholders, and a legacy of suspicion that can last years and affect future work

3. What makes for a good stakeholder process design and facilitation service?

- Proven track record, a good client list and a positive reputation for approach and results
- Ethical approach - as a neutral third party working within the purpose of the participation but acting impartially and sensitively on behalf of all stakeholders, not just the sponsoring organisation.
- Emphasis on design of the whole process not just individual workshops. So that any facilitated events are set within the context and clearly related to the decision making process that leads to real outcomes
- Emphasis on the importance of design at three levels: the overall process, the workshops and the sessions within the workshops. This ensure the design is cohesive with sequencing of activities, information flows and decision points all mapped out.

- Understanding and skills to facilitate cooperative and collaborative working including when there are very different interests present.
- Knowledge of a wide variety of methods and techniques to bring out and record views and experience
- Experience of training and building capacity - to help your organisation develop skills and understanding in good practice.
- Visible commitment to best possible practice within the context
- A team of associates with a range of backgrounds and experience, but with a common training in the design process

4. What to think about when

Commissioning work

- **Budget** – design, facilitation and reporting for a single workshop takes days – good facilitators don't just turn up and facilitate. There is a lot of design and preparation before any face to face events, and processing of workshop outputs afterwards. A larger process will also need time spent on process design and project management to coordinate and integrate all the different engagement elements
- **Costs** – to get a team offering experienced and skilled facilitators, you should budget for average day rates higher than e.g. ecological consultancy
- **Timeframes** – don't constrain these unnecessarily: good participation needs time. This is for the facilitator to design and organise the process, and for stakeholders to learn from each other, develop their thinking, work at finding solutions and commit to action. Ideally, a one workshop event will need a lead in time of about 6 weeks to find venues, design the process, send out invitations and prepare. Longer is needed if you want senior people involved because their diaries are often booked up 8 weeks in advance. A larger process needs about 5 weeks between workshops to enable outputs to be processed in time to inform the design of the next workshop and to be used by participants to check progress with the people they represent
- **Capacity** – your team will need capacity to support the logistics and to be able to respond to unexpected demands thrown up by a dynamic process
- **Levels of influence** – there needs to clarity about whether the process is being designed to gather

information for a separate decision making process, or for stakeholders to strongly influence the decisions, or for them to make the decisions themselves. Bear in mind that participants will have more trust, buy in and commitment to change when they have greater influence - so aim to maximise this

- **Inclusion and deliberation** – it is possible to include far more people at lower levels of influence (e.g. thousands can respond to a questionnaire which gathers information for a separate decision making process). For stakeholders to have more influence deliberative negotiation is necessary and this means fewer people (generally under 60). Speak to a consultant before making a decision about what is best in your context
- **Impartiality** – bear in mind that the designer/facilitator is there as a third party to work on behalf of all the stakeholders in a fair and equitable way. They are not there to take your perspective and persuade others. Your role will be to brief them about the context and support the process but, unlike other kinds of service you may contract, it would be inappropriate for you to try to steer, control or insist. Their role as third party and their professional ethics require they resist any such attempts so they can remain neutral
- **Venues** – participatory workshops require much bigger spaces than other types of meetings as well as lots of clear clean wall surfaces to stick things to (and venues happy to allow this). Don't book a venue without speaking to your facilitators first
- **Dates** – Facilitators who are worth having will have some bookings months in advance. Don't book dates and venues and then ask for quotes – your preferred facilitator may not be available

5. What can you expect the designer/facilitator to do?

- Work hard to understand the situation – but not give a view on it
- Design an overall process, workshops and sessions within the workshops, and any other engagement
- Advise on venue and logistics
- Within workshops, facilitate constructive discussion and help everyone to contribute in an equitable way
- Record what people say clearly and transparently
- Process outputs
- Write resulting plans and strategies if required

6. Assessing the situation

- There are a number of things that characterise a stakeholder process and this affects the time it will take, the resources it will need and crucially the experience and skill of the designer/facilitator.

Easier to design and facilitate	Characteristics	More skill and experience needed
	Importance of the subject	
Minor	←→	Major
	Complexity	
Simple	←→	Complex
	Diversity of views	
Similar	←→	Diverse
	Level of trust	
Trust	←→	Suspicion
	Level of tension	
Low	←→	High
	Past history	
Good	←→	Poor
	Type of participants	
Internal	←→	External
	Number of participants	
Few	←→	Many
	Facilitator Experience required	
Trained	←→	Years
	Cost	
Less	←→	Higher

7. About us

dialogue matters works to deliver the best possible practice within available resources. We draw on a unique blend of methods and techniques informed by environmental psychology and we get great feedback from stakeholders and projects. To find out more about us go to: www.dialoguematters.co.uk