

## Tips for facilitating conversations

Conversations and feedback sessions are an ongoing part of volunteer relationships and partnership development. They are also an important tool in bringing people along with the overall Pathfinder strategy, for example you may want to introduce themes in volunteer meetings to hear views and gather feedback, or ask specific questions during referral partner networking meeting. These tips are to help you build skills and confidence in leading these conversations as you support a range of stakeholders from initial engagement to becoming confident advocates for the goal of ending the need for food banks.

### **Purpose:**

- To facilitate conversations and listen carefully to what is being said in a variety of contexts
- To find the common threads between conversations, and using that feedback to inform plans and decision-making.
- To support the cultural shift towards outcomes.

**Who:** Learning leads and all team members with a monitoring and evaluation remit

**Time:** Various

### **Step 1: Think about what the conversation aims to do**

Some conversations may come about naturally, whilst others will be more investigative in nature to bring in a range of views. Write two or three aims ahead of time to be clear about what you are aiming to do, and the type of conversation you want to have, e.g.:

- **Informal conversation** such as with a new referral partners to understand their decision-making processes and perceptions of the need for referrals
- **Closed question conversations** for example asking for client feedback or that of volunteers to understand their motivations for volunteering, their training needs and contributions
- **Open-ended discussions** such as with staff, volunteers and trustees about the progress being made towards the strategic goals of the food bank.

### **Step 2: Plan what you want to ask**

Sketch out, even in your mind, specific questions that you would like to cover. Draw on the examples of questions in this toolkit (Learning conversations – useful questions) and top tips are:

- Try to keep your questions as simple as possible
- Avoid using jargon or acronyms
- Set out one or two questions that will be answered by each participant in turn
- Use open-ended question forms to draw out the breadth of experiences eg
  - How did you ...? What happened when ... ? I wonder if ....?

### **Step 3: Your role in a group conversation**

At the start of any group conversation: check whether your aims meet the expectations of participants; set out how long you think the discussion will last (and try to keep to it!); say whether and how the conversation will be recorded and how this feedback will be used. It is important to gain participants' consent for this (see box below). Your chief role is then to:

- encourage involvement
- promote an understanding of the issues or themes being considered
- identify the next steps after the discussion

In encouraging involvement, be mindful of any language, hearing or other barriers to participation. You might like to introduce one or two participatory techniques for example the Postcard Activity (see Participatory evaluation and engagement tools) to help explore an issue or theme: these are designed to be inclusive and engage with different learning styles.

To promote understanding, think about first introducing an issue in a relatable way, and during the group conversation, pause to summarise what has been said before moving to the next point.

Being both a facilitator and note-taker is not easy and a second person may be needed to support the conversation. If this is likely to be in any way sensitive, raise this in a question to participants beforehand. Make use of the 'Capturing Conversations' template in this toolkit.

#### **Tips for obtaining consent**

There are two important questions to ask about consent to capture the conversation:

- Storing contact and conversation data: consent needs to be given to this for someone to take part in the conversation.
- Sharing conversation contributions: consent to this question is not necessary in order for a person to take part in a conversation, only if their views are to be shared more widely.

Once informed consent has been given by all participants, you can record a discussion by taking notes during the conversation to share afterwards or consider using a voice recorder.

#### **Step 4: Good group dynamics**

In any group conversation, you are likely to have people who speak up and others who are less confident. A key element is to make sure there is mutual respect and understanding particularly for conversations within a group. As facilitator, you can model active listening through positive body language, and avoiding interrupting before the end of a contribution.

Where conversations are to continue such as regular volunteer feedback sessions, you might find it useful to introduce ground rules, asking participants to build them together. At the start of a group conversation, ask for contributions to create a set of ground rules such as, "People should feel able to voice their opinion" and "Look for common ground". It can be useful to re-visit the ground rules occasionally and whenever new people join the group.

#### **Tips on "everyday ethics"**

'Everyday ethics' are the decisions that you may find you need to make when you are responsible for facilitating a conversation. They are guided by 4 common principles:

- As facilitator, you should feel able to take whatever decisions are necessary in order to avoid the conversation causing distress.
- All participants should give their informed consent, knowing what the conversation is for and how it will be carried out.
- All participants need to understand whether and how confidentiality and anonymity will be assured, including how personal data will be stored and used.
- Conversations should be conducted in a way that feels safe and secure for all participants.

### **Step 5: Ending well**

Keep an eye on your planned time so that you leave room to draw the conversation to a close. You can then invite everyone to share their reflections on what has been heard, or ask each person in turn to say one thing that they have learned or were surprised about.

Wherever possible, summarise and feedback on any emerging themes.

Final words are to thank everyone for being part of the conversation and to reiterate how their contributions will be used.

### **Resources and useful tools:**

Capturing conversations template

Learning conversations – useful questions

Participatory evaluation and engagement tools