## Friends don't let friends have rubbish meetings

#notwestminster #goodmeetings

**Workshop hosts: Louisa Thomson and Matt Clack**

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**Useful links**

Our slides are [here](#).
Civic Detectives [survey](#)
Meeting organisers [survey](#)
[Feedback](#) on our workshop if you attended



**Discussion - main points**

**INTRODUCTIONS**

We set out the **principles** of what we want to do and the aims of the session:

- We believe **public meetings** remain a **vital part of civic life** and a way to engage and influence local decision makers. However, too many are dysfunctional, poorly run and it's not clear what happens as a result.

- We are in the early stages of exploring whether a '**meeting standard'** could be developed and applied across a local area for all public meetings. At the moment we're keeping the definition broad - it includes a meeting you could find out about and go along to in your local area without necessarily being invited. This ranges from formal town hall meetings down to local resident groups.
- We figured that the Notwestminster audience probably has a **higher than average number of meeting attendees and organisers,** and it's the ideal place to discuss the idea further and decide if there's any value in it. We want to work together to explore how we can make meetings less rubbish.
- **Aims of the session** - share what we've done so far, start to develop the standards together and practical commitment to take to the Ideas Bazaar

We checked that people had either read the info in advance or had an abbreviated copy of this on the table in front of them.

We went round the room to ask people to introduce themselves (name, organisation, one word that sums up how they feel about meetings). The words we managed to scribble down were:

- *Frustrated, lack of respect, process driven, stressful, grandstanding, tick box, subversive, self indulgent, stop talking, being spoken at, closed, routine, control, misguided*
- *practical, social, underrated, hopeful, potential, untapped opportunity for fun, optimistic, rollercoaster, exciting.*

## BEST AND WORST EXPERIENCES OF MEETINGS

We had some flipcharts up throughout and asked people to write down their best and worst experiences of meetings. The responses were:



### *Best experiences*
- Good use of tech - e.g. collab, notes, chat
- New policy - put into relevant groups to decide how best to implement it
- Sitting in a circle with facilitator just part of the group
- A local ward forum about improving cycling - no big decisions coming up so was open and exploratory. We used world cafe to get people moving around. It was very productive, amicable and led to loads of good ideas
- Fun check-in questions to start
- Frome Town Council - councillors sit amongst the public, and discuss issues cabaret style. Then councillors vote
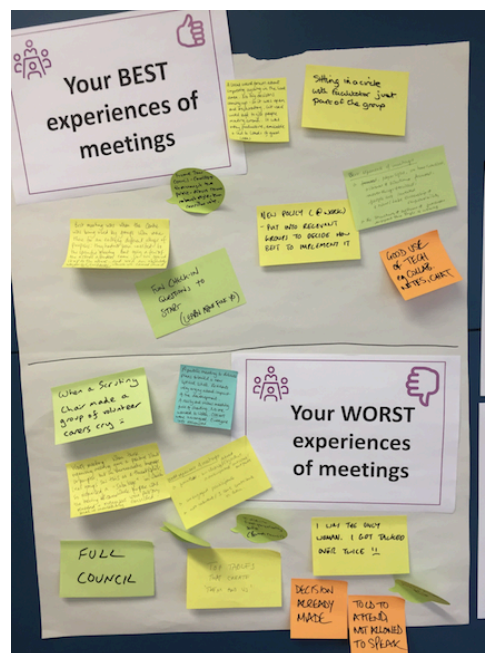
- Best meeting was when the centre was being used by groups who were there for an entirely different range of purposes. They hadn't been invited to a specific meeting. But only a few of the actual attendees came so we opened it up to the others - and we'd an absolutely wonderful exchange. Which we carried forward to future meetings.

*Worst experiences*
- I was the only woman - I got talked over twice
- Decisions were already made
- There weren't enough chairs
- Told to attend, not allowed to speak
- Top tables that create 'them and us'
- I didn't feel physically safe
- All day meeting - no way for public to get water
- Full Council
- When a scrutiny chair made a group of volunteer carers cry
- Pointless - no clearly defined objectives or anticipated outcomes
- Disengaged participants
- Not relevant - can't contribute or learn
- A public meeting to discuss plans to build a new special school. Residents very angry about the impact of the development. A nasty and vicious meeting full of shouting. No one wanted to listen. Officers were harangued. Everyone left exhausted.
- When those organising the meeting gave a positive slant to purpose but in bureaucratic language. Local groups saw this as a threat/plot so organised a sabotage in which the meeting's whole purpose was reversed. Organisers were put on trial and inevitably convicted

**GROUND RULES**

We shared three ground rules of what we would expect from meetings (they are also on the civic detectives business cards)
- I knew what to expect in advance and how I could contribute
- It was easy and convenient for me to attend
- It was clear what would happen next



We encouraged others to share which led to the following points:

*You will (as meeting organisers)*
- Provide a physically safe space

- Introduce ourselves and ask people if they want to speak
- Have ushers to welcome people (including late comers and update them)
- Allow a right to reply
- Be trusted by you (as attendees) to facilitate
- Have a code of conduct
- Create enabling conditions

***We will (as attendees)***
- Only turn up if you want to be there
- Be aware that it's not an easy task chairing/facilitating a meeting - don't be rough on people
- Let everyone who wants to speak
- Develop ground rules together at the start
- Provide some questions we want to ask in advance
- Discuss rather than making statements

**WHAT WE HAVE DONE SO FAR**

- We explained that we were both keen to do something after last year's NW - as you come away full of enthusiasm but it's up to all of us to keep up the momentum.
- Resonates with one of the Kirklees Democracy Commission findings - about changing meetings culture 'we need to say we're open for business and you're welcome', plus lots of the discussions from NW 2018 so far about face to face engagement still being important.
- Towards the end of 2017 the idea of doing something around public meetings emerged
- We felt it was important not to go away and just draft a standard - so did some reading, contacted people doing similar things, discussed the idea further - and then today is about beginning to co-design the standards.
- We launched the **civic detectives challenge** - asking people to go to a public meeting and fill in a short survey after.
- ***Headline findings from the civic detectives:***
  - People went to a variety of different meetings - from scrutiny commissions, cabinet, planning, licensing, ward forum, local level consultation.
  - Very London centric at the moment
  - Half were there as audience members -others as speakers, committee members or council officers
  - Some v well attended (175 at a ward forum) - but average 20 ish
  - Most were in the evening from 5pm onwards.
  - See slides for summary of what civic detectives told us about **timing, information, during the meeting and next steps;** words to describe the **atmosphere**, **behaviour of others and** their **overall feelings**; and the main things they found **irritating** (including unhealthy and noisy biscuits)

**DESIGNING AND USING THE STANDARDS**

- We introduced some of our thinking so far - that the standards should be high level principles, a checklist for organisers to sign up to, something attendees can use to hold to account, and that we didn't want to produce a guide to engagement (as this has already been done), or a set of rules on how to run a meeting as it might imply a particular format. However, in future, scope for some guidance, ideas to sit alongside the standards.
- We divided into three groups and each group spent time at the following 'stations'. Notes from the flipcharts below:

*What would you want to see before a meeting?*

Written info
- Clear, concise, accessible, welcoming friendly, succinct
  - Human and welcoming
  - Really positive invite (Like a party)
  - Festival flyers
  - Imaginative
  - Photos of people at last meeting
  - Reading group of citizens to check
- Agenda
- Focus
- Aims
- How it works - a general guide
- What to expect, not to expect
- Guide to who will be there - roles, expectations, who is invited

Actively encourage participation
- Video narrative - like the media
- Sharing through networks
- Publicity
- Directions, logistics, facilities, what is provided (e.g. bring your lunch), disability access, do you need coins for the car park

Feedback loop
- What happened since the last one
- How the last one made a difference

Involved but not there?
- Webcast?
- Can you contribute/feed in before?

Diversity
- Different locations
- See that a mix of people are taking part

Physical environment
- Big enough?
- Set out right?
- Temperature?

Do we need a meeting?
- Why are we here?
- Do we need a meeting?
- Is this the best way of doing x?

***What would you want to see during a meeting?***

- Appropriate space
- Go where people are for the meeting if possible

At the start
- Participants coming prepared
- Be on time
- Introductions for all - so everyone knows who each other is
- Recap at the start
- Milling time at the start so people can connect informally, feel more confident
- TImings on a board for each item
- Framing clearly
- Recognise types of participants (e.g. official, public)

Managing the meeting
- Human, experienced facilitating
- Great time management -
- Yellow card system if don't understand/want someone to come and talk to you
- Make rule set explicit - could share on cards?

- Moderating/challenging poor conduct
- Clarify what you can deal with elsewhere outside the meeting
- Ushers to deal with latecomers - explain what has happened so far

Good things to have
- Language - avoid jargon
- Refreshments - Bronze (water); Silver (tea and biscuits); Gold (fruit)
- Extend the space electronically if possible
- Non-threatening atmosphere

Content
- Clear aim- meeting-outcome thread
- Participation wherever appropriate/possible
- Make it clear what is for discussion/what is for decision
- Divide up responsibilities
- Focussed content.
- Variety of content

***What would you want to see after a meeting?***

Reminder of next meeting
- This will differ for different types
- Do we need anymore meetings? (Not if no actions yet)
- How can we keep the conversation going? Different if a decision has been taken

Feedback and briefing
- For those who had to attend as well as those who chose to
- How was it?
- You said we did
- Feelings
- What can we change about the meeting
- Say thanks
- If it wasn't good enough - what happens?
- Straight after - debrief - formal/informal

Demonstrating impact
- Proportionate to the aims

Different comms for people at the meeting
Published timely minutes

Actions
- Linked back to principles
- Reminder of actions
- Clearly agreed updates on progress


## IMPLEMENTING THE STANDARDS

We asked for some views on this whilst accepting it needs more time to explore more fully.  We're interested in
- where/how the standards could have most impact;
- how could we monitor their use? And keep them relevant?
- What else might be useful in the future?

*Responses*
- Reward good hosts (award, stickers)
- Kitemark rather than standards - e.g. a Plain English diamond
- Find a way of rating meetings - Booker Prize style and list the best ones
- Award a prize and publicise
- Avoid name and shame though…

(Please add to this!)

## NEXT STEPS

- Does it feel worth pursuing? Participants on the day seemed to think so.
- Can you fill in a civic detectives or meeting organisers survey? And encourage others to?
- We'd like to flesh out the standards more – test in Hackney at a workshop. Does anyone else have access to meeting organisers in different settings, so we don't get too London centric? Kirklees?

We finished by asking people at the workshop to fill in a short [survey](#) giving us feedback.

**OUR IDEA FOR SOMETHING PRACTICAL WE COULD DO NEXT**

Co-produce a set of principles for public meetings that form the basis of a kitemark for meeting organisers to work towards and for participants to hold them to account
1) Find more civic detectives
2) Hold co-design workshops to develop
3) Pilot the kitemark
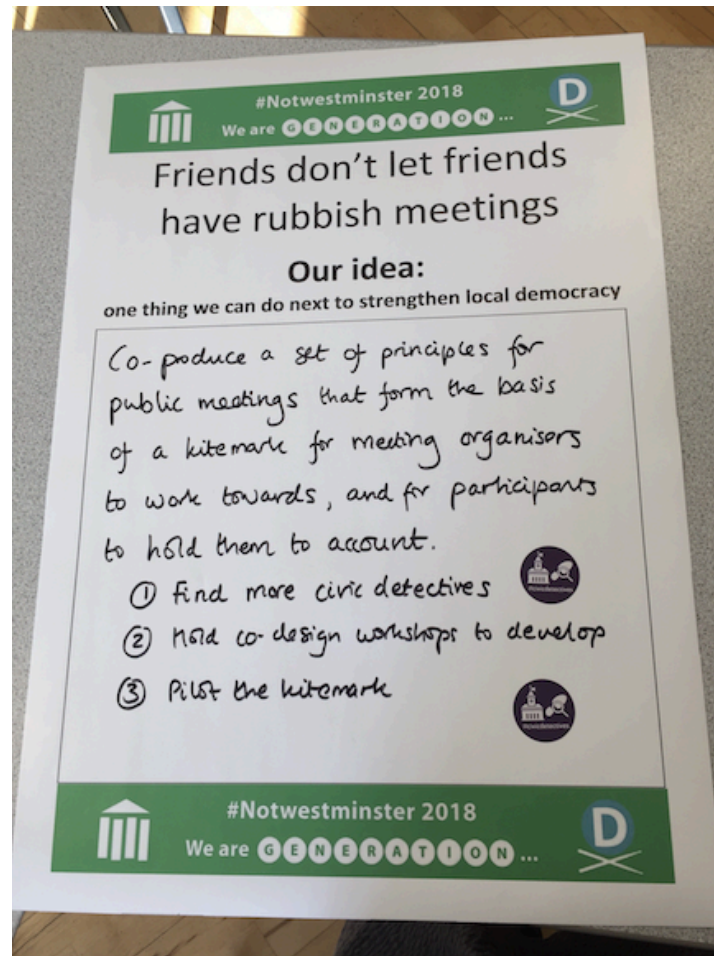


**Participants - if you were at the workshop, please add your name below - we didn't capture everyone.  c25 people were there**

| Name | Email address (if you'd like to be kept updated) |
|------|--------------------------------------------------|
| Neil Irving | neil@neilirving.co.uk |
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