Community Listening Session Guide

A Facilitation Guide for Participatory Needs Listening

Purpose of this tool

A structured facilitation guide for running a community listening session from start to finish. Use this before designing your project — to understand community priorities, assets, and aspirations in the people's own words.

How to use this document

This template is designed to be filled in directly — on screen or printed. Fields marked with a dotted underline are for your input. Sections in blue boxes are guidance or instructions. You can adapt the language to fit your local context.

Recommended group size: 4–12 participants

Recommended duration: 75–90 minutes

Materials needed: Flip chart or large paper, sticky notes (3 colours), markers, this guide

Setting: An informal, comfortable space — not a classroom or office if possible

Before You Begin

Your intention as a facilitator

Your role in this session is to listen, not to inform, present, or persuade. Come with genuine curiosity. Come prepared to be surprised. Your job is to create the conditions for people to share what genuinely matters to them — not to validate a project idea you already have.

My personal intention for this session (what I want to hold onto as a facilitator):

Preparing the space

- Arrange seating in a circle if possible — no tables creating barriers
- Prepare the flip chart with the session flow (see below) — this shows respect for people's time
- Have sticky notes and markers accessible to all participants, not just you
- Arrive early enough to settle yourself before others arrive

Session Flow

Opening (10–15 min)

Purpose

Create safety. Establish that this is a listening space, not a presentation.

1. Welcome participants by name if possible. Thank them genuinely for their time.
2. Briefly explain your role and the purpose of the session in plain language: "I'm here to listen. I want to understand what matters to this community — from you, in your words."
3. Establish one or two group agreements (e.g. "All voices are welcome here" and "We listen to understand, not to respond").
4. Open with a grounding question: "Before we start — can each of us share one word that describes how we arrive here today?" Go around the circle.

Notes from the opening (anything worth remembering):

Question 1 – Assets and Pride (15 min)

The question to ask

"What is one thing about this community that you are proud of, or that gives you energy?"

Allow a moment of quiet reflection before people respond. Do not rush to fill silences — they are thinking.

Listen for themes. Note them on the flip chart with the speaker's words, not your interpretation.

Key assets named by participants:

Question 2 – Challenges and Needs (15 min)

The question to ask

"What is one thing you wish were different here? What gets in the way?"

Listen without moving immediately to solutions. If someone offers a solution, note it gently and bring the group back: "And what is the underlying need behind that?"

Key challenges named by participants:

Question 3 – Unheard Voices (10 min)

The question to ask

"Who in this community has ideas or energy that is not currently being heard or used?"

Voices and groups named:

Question 4 – Forward Vision (15 min)

The question to ask

"If this community were exactly as you wanted in three years — what would be different? What would you see, hear, feel?"

This question often surprises people. Give it time. Use sticky notes here — ask people to write their vision and place it on the wall or floor. Then invite brief sharing.

Key vision elements shared:

Closing (10 min)

5. Briefly reflect back what you heard — not your interpretation, but the actual words and themes. "I heard you say... I noticed that several people mentioned..."
6. Ask: "Before we close — is there anything important that hasn't been said yet?"
7. Share your next step: "Based on what I've heard today, here's what I'll do next... and here's how I'll share back what we discovered."
8. Close with appreciation and a forward gesture: invite each person to share one word they're leaving with.

After the Session

Debrief with yourself (within 24 hours)

The three most important things I heard:

What surprised me — something I didn't expect:

How does this change or sharpen my project design?

Who do I need to follow up with?

Important: Close the loop

Within one week, share back a brief summary of what you heard with the participants. This can be a short message, a printed note, or a follow-up meeting. Closing the loop is one of the most powerful trust-building acts a facilitator can do.

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