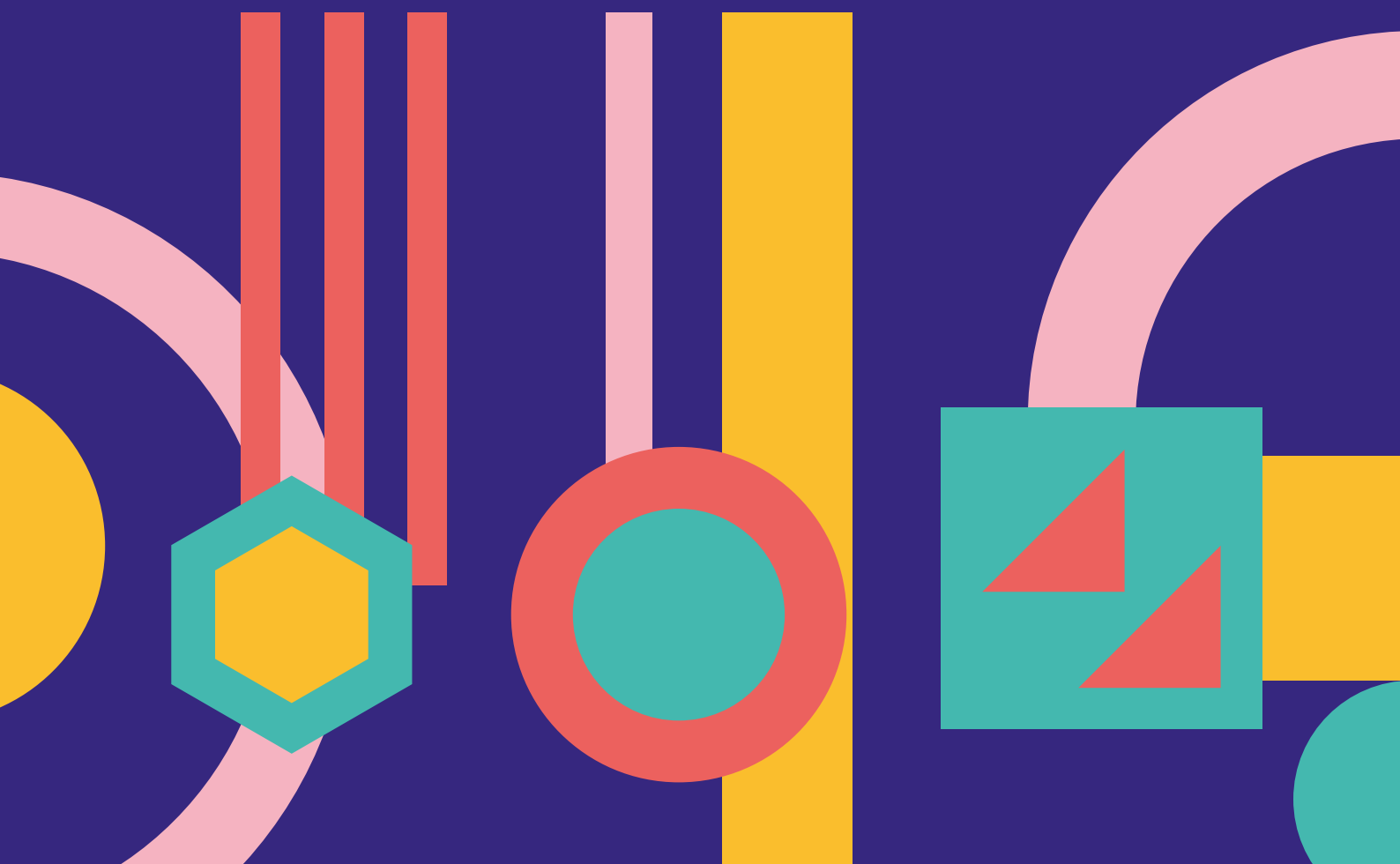




# Café Conversations

Planning and learning  
with communities



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## Purpose

**What Matters to You (WM2U) introduced a Café Conversation approach to provide opportunities for local people, local practitioners and strategic leaders to talk, listen, plan and learn together.**

Their focus is on how to improve the local community and the approach can be embedded into the planning structure. They are deliberately informal, are rooted in what is most important to community members and emphasise that everyone has a role to play in celebrating successes, identifying problems and developing solutions together.

Café Conversations aim to:

- ▶ Help local people and local workers to share their understanding of what is working well in their community and what could be better
- ▶ Provide an opportunity for local people and local workers to develop ways forward together to address local issues
- ▶ Encourage more community members to get involved by focusing on things that matter to them
- ▶ Embed a whole family approach into locality planning structures
- ▶ Ensure that leaders have opportunities to understand the situation in communities first hand and can use their influence and authority to remove barriers and facilitate change when needed
- ▶ Encourage and inspire leaders and practitioners by giving them an informal opportunity to experience the capacity in community members
- ▶ Provide an opportunity for funders to understand and follow community priorities

## How they work

**Café Conversations focus on what matters to those living and working in communities, not on what services can provide.**

They deliberately start with what is positive and working well in the community, to encourage a sense of pride in place and provide examples to build on. Everyone is there as an equal with an equal part to play in making a difference in the community.

Community members are, where necessary, supported to attend by workers who know them all, encouraging those who feel less confident to speak out.

Each conversation has a focus which is of concern to local people eg. environment or young people.

They take place approximately three times a year and the issues raised and actions identified feed directly into statutory planning processes rather than running alongside them.



## Essential elements



1

### Marketing

Café Conversations are marketed through social media channels and word of mouth invitations with an Eventbrite page to give an idea of numbers.



3

### Taking notes

Each table has a facilitator/note taker who ensures that everyone gets a chance to speak, conversations focus on the question and key points are noted.



5

### Presentations

If there are presentations they need to be short with a focus on informing the discussion and stimulating conversation.



2

### Set-up

Refreshments are provided and people are encouraged to sit around small tables of between six and eight people. Community members, local workers and strategic leaders are encouraged to mix up.



4

### Event facilitator

One person has the role of introducing the event and keeping everyone to time, asking for short feedback from each table before moving to the next question. A short action note is produced at the end.



6

### Working groups

Short life working groups can be set up to follow up actions. Each café conversation starts with a short summary of what has changed since the last one.

# Format

## Time

1.5–2 hours

## Venue

Relaxed community venue with a big enough room for 15-60 participants

## Programme

### Welcome and introductions

Round tables including a short summary of progress on the actions agreed at the last Café Conversation before introducing the theme for this one.

### Question 1

What is working well in our community in relation to (theme)?

### Question 2

What could be better and how could it be better?

### Question 3: Identifying actions

What would I like to do/get involved in?  
What do I think is a priority for someone else to do? (in pairs, preferably with someone from a different table)



## What Café Conversations have led to in Dundee

**The Café Conversation format has been operating in Dundee for the past two years and since then attendance by community members has doubled and by practitioners has tripled. It has now been adopted by the locality planning structure in Dundee.**

Café Conversations have contributed to a host of new initiatives involving both workers from across sectors and community members including: a group focused on suicide prevention (which includes local shopkeepers); a men's recovery group; a peer support group for families with neurodivergent children; young people putting in funding bids for the development of the neighbourhood park and asking to join the neighbourhood representative structure; intergenerational groups and groups focused on green space.



**What's refreshing is new working groups that have a clear focus taking forward ideas generated at the Café Conversation.**

**Communities officer**

Strategic leaders are keen to come to Café Conversations to test their ideas and receive honest feedback: they know that they will meet local people and the meetings are set up and facilitated to promote discussion rather than lobbying.



**There is more energy in it. I was blown away by the Chair of the Local Management Group. I had no idea that this much is happening. When I have been out to groups before they have just given me a grilling.**

**Strategic leader**

Informal discussions generate new solutions: one woman had written to a council employee suggesting her community group take over some gardening from the Council and was met with resistance for health and safety reasons. When they met in person and by chance at a Café Conversation they were able to work out a way forward together.

Housing officers realised that *'limited conversation is a problem, not limited information'*. Their manager initiated a restructure which focused on putting workers into communities and they are now deliberately using community venues to engage with tenants.

The Café Conversations have changed the culture and the focus of local community planning. Although they require more involvement from a wide range of partners, they offer an opportunity to focus on prevention and early intervention, saving time and resource in the longer term. Problem solving with community members is changing attitudes.



Café Conversations are uncomfortable but provide an opportunity to speak truth to power – without hearing it like that it wouldn't have the same impact.

Strategic leader



what  
matters  
to you



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