

PARTICIPATORY METHODS TOOLKIT  
A practitioner's manual

Planning Cell

## Colophon

Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual  
Method: Planning Cell

This is an extract of the publication 'Participatory Methods Toolkit. A practitioner's manual', a joint publication of the King Baudouin Foundation and the Flemish Institute for Science and Technology Assessment (viWTA).

The full version of the manual includes:

- Introduction about participatory methods
- General guidelines and tips for participatory methods
- Complete description of 13 participatory methods: 21st Century Town Meeting® ; Charrette ; Citizens Jury ; Consensus Conference ; Deliberative Polling® ; Delphi ; Expert Panel ; Focus Group ; Participatory Assessment, Monitoring and Evaluation ; Planning Cell ; Scenario Building Exercise ; Technology Festival ; The World Café
- Brief descriptions of 50 methods and techniques

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# PLANNING CELL

(Original German: Planungszelle)

## I. DEFINITION

The Planning Cell method engages approximately twenty-five randomly selected people, who work as public consultants for a limited period of time (e.g. one week), in order to present solutions for a given planning or policy problem. The cell is accompanied by two process-escorts, who are responsible for the information schedule and the moderation of the plenary sessions. A project may involve a larger or smaller number of planning cells. In each cell participants acquire and exchange information about the problem, explore and discuss possible solutions and evaluate these in terms of desirable and undesirable consequences. Experts, stakeholders and interest groups have the opportunity to present their positions to the cell members. The final results of the cells' work are summarised as a 'citizen report', which is delivered to the authorities as well as to the participants themselves.

## II. WHEN TO USE

The Planning Cells work best in a situation in which an urgent problem has to be resolved in a short period of time and when different options, each posing different benefits and risks, are available. The process works optimally when the issue is not too controversial and has not already polarised the attitudes of the affected population. However, Planning Cells can address even highly controversial issues if the majority of participants are selected by random process. The following criteria should be used to evaluate the suitability of the Planning Cells procedure for a given application.

When all or most are answered positively, the Planning Cell method will be suitable.

- Variability of options: Do the participants have the choice of selecting one option out of a variety of options that are all feasible in the specific situation?
- Equity of exposure: Are all groups of the community or the respective constituency exposed in some way to the potential disadvantages of the proposed options (to avoid a distinction between affected abutters and indifferent other citizens)?
- Personal experience: Do participants have some experiences with the problem and do they feel competent about giving recommendations after they are further educated about the problem and the remedial options?
- Personal relevance: Do participants judge the problem as serious enough to sacrifice several days of their time to work on solutions?
- Seriousness and openness of sponsor: Is the sponsor willing to accept, or at least carefully consider, the recommendations of the Planning Cell(s) or do they pursue hidden agendas?

### III. PROCEDURE

#### A. Overview

Preparation Phase:

- Recruit personnel
- Design programme
- Recruit citizen advisors
- Selecting and Recruiting Experts and Advocates
- Logistics

#### Conducting the Planning Cells:

General Programme for the Planning Cells of a Project

	Planning Cell 1 (25 persons)	Planning Cell 2 (25 persons)
Day 1	Work units 1 – 4 (maximum 4 per day)	Work units 1 – 4
Day 2	Work units 5 - 8	Work units 5 - 8
Day 3	Work units 9 – 12	Work units 9 – 12
Day 4	Work units 13 - 16	Work units 13 - 16
	As many units as necessary	As many units as necessary

Draft report written and sent to all participants for review.
Representatives of each Planning Cell (if multiple Cells were conducted on the same topic) meet to criticise and improve the report.
Final draft of report produced and disseminated.

Daily Programme for a Planning Cell

Planning Cell 1		
Day 1	<b>Work unit 1: Sub-theme A</b> (a specified task)	
	Phase I:	Plenary Participants receive information on sub-theme A through reports, videos, field tours, presentations by experts and/or interest-group representatives, etc.
	Phase II: Small groups	The Planning Cell divides into 5 small groups of 5 persons each. The subgroups work on an assigned task, first discussing the viewpoints and information and then generating recommendations.
	Phase III: Plenary	The results of the work of the small groups are presented to the plenary. The moderators collect these results on flipcharts. All participants evaluate each of the recommendations, using an agreed upon method.
<b>Break</b>		
	<b>Work unit 2: Sub-theme B</b> (a specified task)	
	Phase I	
	Phase II	
	Phase III	



	<b>Break</b>	
	<b>Work unit 3: Sub-theme C</b> (a specified task)	
	Phase I	
	Phase II	
	Phase III	
	*** A maximum of 4 work units can be conducted per day. ***	
Day 2	Work units 5 - 8	

**Final Report Production and Dissemination:**

- preparation of draft report
- critique and improvement session
- production of the final citizens' report
- dissemination of the citizens' report.

## **B. Preparation**

### **1. RECRUIT PERSONNEL**

It will be necessary to recruit an organisational committee and moderators for the Planning Cells.

*(a) Organisational Committee*

Several people will be needed to be responsible for the following tasks:

- assembling information on each of the sub-themes to be addressed in the work units
- designing the programme and schedule
- recruiting the citizen advisors
- finding a suitable location for the Planning Cells event
- recruiting experts and interest group representatives to present their opinions
- making travel, accommodation and catering arrangements
- publicising the event
- compiling the draft report and revising it according to the input of the advisors
- producing and disseminating the final report.

*(b) Moderators*

Recruit two moderators and a conference assistant (possibly someone from the organisational committee) for the duration of the Planning Cells.



## 2. PROGRAMME DESIGN

The organisational committee must develop a work programme. In order to do this it is first necessary to become familiar with the facts and the context of the problem(s) to be addressed. Request all required documents, plans, previously issued assessments, etc. from the appropriate authorities. Pursue discussions with the various interest groups and stakeholders in order to define the problem itself. A website can be established at which all persons are invited to inform themselves on the project development and to express their ideas and opinions already at this stage.

Once the problem is defined, the programme content and schedule needs to be established. The facilitator subdivides the proposed problem into distinct, thematically specific 'work units'. These units fill a methodological function by helping the advisors to address specific issues and questions before generating final recommendations. A maximum of four of these units can be addressed each day (thus 16 units can be addressed in four days). Depending upon the complexity of each work unit, it might be necessary to schedule fewer units and thus allow more time for some unit(s). Schedule the units across the span of several days, The number of days required will depend upon the number of work units and the time allotted to each, which vary with the complexity of the issue being addressed. The planning cells usually require three to five days, whereby four days are most often sufficient.

Essential to the validity of the results of the Planning Cell is that all camps and interests be equally represented in the information package and that they be allowed to present their own case. It is thus imperative that the organisational committee include in the programme as many diverse and controversial points of view as is possible. It is their job to ensure that all of the important topics are addressed and that the information is not partial to one perspective.

## 3. RECRUITMENT OF CITIZEN ADVISORS

An important characteristic of planning cells is the random selection of the participants. A planning cell consists of 25 citizens. These are selected from the pool of all citizens over the age of 16 in the relevant area, using a random chance procedure. This guarantees that every citizen has a chance to become one of the advisors and that the final advisory group will be heterogeneous and representative of the relevant population.

Arrangements have to be made to release all participants from their daily duties, both professional and personal (such as childcare). Those persons who do not have the opportunity to take a paid sabbatical must be compensated for any lost income as well as travel expenses. In addition, any costs to provide an alternative for the care of children, elderly or disabled family members must also be covered for the duration of the planning cells.

Refer to the General Guidelines for tips on recruiting participants.

[Sending initial materials to those considering participation.](#)

The day after the initial contact a packet of materials should be sent to the respondents who said they would or 'might' be interested in participating. The packet for potential jurors should include:



- a cover letter explaining the project
- a form to fill out and return
- a small stamped envelope for returning the form
- a fact sheet on the project.

When forms are returned, this should be indicated in the database and the corresponding control number should be clearly indicated on the form, which should be saved.

#### Selection of citizen advisors and alternates.

There will be a pool of people in each category who are willing to participate. The committee must then choose the participants and alternates needed for the right balance in each category and notify them that they have been chosen as citizen advisors or alternates. It is advisable to first call to confirm the selected citizen advisors and then arrange for the alternates (in case one does not show up). Alternates should be asked to come the first morning.

#### Notification of citizen advisors and alternates.

4 – 8 weeks before the Planning Cell begins, a phone call should be made to the selected citizen advisors and alternates, confirming their participation. In addition, a formal letter acknowledging their selection and providing detailed information should be sent. A sample information packet to a selected and confirmed juror includes:

- letter
- information sheet on duties for citizen advisors
- maps, if necessary
- lodging/parking/special needs information
- stamped return envelope, if necessary.

**TIP:** It is highly advisable to make one or more follow-up calls, including one on the week before the Planning Cell event.

A letter of thanks should be sent to those potential citizen advisors who were not selected for the jury. It should include a note about how to find information about the process.

## **4. SELECTING AND RECRUITING EXPERTS AND ADVOCATES**

Experts are resource persons, who introduce the citizens to the vocabulary and history of the topic and discuss all the options. Advocates represent interest groups that present their point of view.

The organisational committee must choose a balanced group of advocates, making sure to find experts and advocates to represent both (or all) sides of the issue. Two possible models include:

- separate experts present specific positions that they favour or
- panels of experts, both academics and practitioners, discuss all sides of the issues.

### Review of Criteria for Experts and Advocates.

In the planning stages the staff of the organisational committee may adopt criteria for selecting the experts and advocates. They should first brainstorm to define the full range of existing points of view on the topic at issue. An attempt should be made to include all points of view within the scope of the issue.

When selecting experts and advocates, the staff members need to know whether witnesses are supporting a particular position. It may also be necessary to consider criteria such as employment for a particular organisation that stands to gain financially from a particular solution.

Once key decisions are made about the method of experts' and advocates' presentation and the agenda, the staff needs to create lists of possible experts and advocates for each 'slot' in each work unit.

**TIP:** Advice on possible experts and advocates can be sought from many sources, in addition to the sponsors and organisational committee members, such as: academics from a variety of universities, professionals or policy makers in the field, legislators, private and governmental agencies, think tanks or institutes, business leaders or chambers of commerce, interest groups or lobbyists, reporters, special advocacy organisations.

### Recruitment of specific individuals.

It is recommended to make initial contact with a possible expert or advocate by telephone. However, one can also first send a letter or fax. Provide a concise description of the project and the role of the experts and advocates. The selection criteria should also be mentioned. Determine whether the person is interested and available on the date of the relevant work unit. If the person is interested, a cover letter with follow-up materials should be sent immediately.

**TIP:** Sometimes it is necessary to contact more experts and advocates than will actually be needed in order to have enough from which to draw a balanced panel and ensure they can all come on the day chosen.

Materials to send to experts and advocates.

The information packet for the selected witnesses can include some or all of the following:

- a covering letter
- information about the Planning Cell and the role of the experts and advocates
- details about the current project, including the main issue and each work unit
- information about the information the expert or advocate is being asked to cover in his/her presentation
- specific date(s) and time(s) for the expert's or advocate's presentation(s), as well as the time limit
- inquiry about the audio/visual equipment required by the witness
- request for background information and/or a brief position statement
- request for witness to prepare 30 copies of any presentation handouts
- request for a one-page summary of the expert's or advocate's position or a questionnaire
- information about the specific location of the hearings
- travel vouchers or reservation information
- information on any hotel accommodation that will be provided.





This information can be sent in two stages, if preferred.

Once a final selection has been made, any experts who are not needed or who are not available on the appropriate day should be contacted.

#### Confirmation

About a week prior to the hearings, the project director should call all experts and advocates to confirm their participation, remind them about the details, answer any questions, nudge them to return information and forms if they have not done so and to check on audio-visual equipment requirements.

### **5. LOGISTICS**

#### Site and equipment

The staff of the organisational committee is responsible for finding and reserving a meeting location, handling all the site details during the event and making hotel reservations for all persons who require accommodation.

The meeting room should be large enough to accommodate a U-shaped table set up to seat the citizen advisors comfortably. It should be large enough to allow the advisors to split up into five small groups or – even better – the site should have smaller rooms available for this purpose. The moderator, advocates and experts will sit or stand at the open end of the U-shape, so allow space for a podium, table and projector.

Refer to the General Guidelines for a list of materials and supplies.

#### Accommodation, Meals and Expense Reimbursement

Refer to the *General Guidelines*.

## **C. Conducting the Planning Cells**

Please refer to the table above for a summary of a typical sequence of a Planning Cell.

The schedule for the Planning Cells are organised into multiple ‘work units’, each of which addresses a specified task that is part of the larger issue or problem. Each work unit comprises three major components:

- Phase I: reception of information through lectures, field tours, videos, written material and other mediums
- Phase II: processing of information through small group discussions, plenary sessions and hearings; and
- Phase III: evaluation of the impacts of the options through small-group discussions, personal judgements and consensus-building exercises in the plenary.



Each of these phases is described in greater detail below. After all of these work units have been conducted, there is a final evaluation and then the summarising citizens' report is compiled.

These work units should not be seen as a sequence of separate decisions but rather as a progressive opinion-building process that is completed during the last units of the final day. The results of each unit can be seen as provisional results that can elucidate various parts of the final result.

#### Phase I: Information presentation.

Informing the participants about the policy options and their likely consequences is the most vital part of the whole procedure. Their common sense and lay understanding of the topics being addressed is supplemented with factual information and the perspectives of all interested parties.

At the beginning of each work unit, the citizen advisors are informed about various aspects of the issue by experts, interest group representatives and so forth in the form of reports, community visits or field tours, videos, lectures, written material, photographs, etc. Afterwards, the advisors have the opportunity to ask specific questions. This phase is facilitated by the moderators and assistant, who are responsible for steering the process in a timely fashion.

#### Phase II: Small group discussions.

The second major component of the Planning Cell procedure is the elicitation of values, criteria and attributes and the assignment of relative weights to the different value dimensions. This is the aim of the discussions between the citizen advisors subsequent to each information phase. The discussions take place in small groups of five persons, which enables less talkative persons to express their ideas. The constitution of the small groups should be changed at regular intervals and is determined by lottery, as this helps to prevent the dominance of any individual opinions. Each small group should be given a clearly defined task (pertaining to the current work unit) and time frame. The discussions serve to place all of the received information in relation to the advisors' personal experience and facilitate the formation of their opinions. In contrast to the plenary sessions, the moderators do not play a role in the small group discussions.

The small groups will produce a recommendation based upon their discussion and, if necessary, some kind of voting procedure. The members can choose their own method. In several cases, methods derived from Multiattribute Utility Theory have been used. In these procedures, the citizen advisors are first asked to rate each decision option on each criterion that they deem important. Each criterion is weighted against each other criterion, resulting in a matrix of relative weights and utility measures for each option and each criterion. Both tasks, the transformation in utilities and the assignment of trade-offs, are performed individually and in the small groups.

Based upon their discussions and any voting procedures, the small groups produce a recommendation on the specified task of the given work unit.

#### Phase III: Small group presentations to the plenary and evaluations.

The discussions in the small groups lead to various proposals and recommendations regarding the specified task for the work unit. The next step in each round is the presentation of the results of the small work groups to the plenary. The



moderators should collect all of the recommendations on flipcharts. These recommendations are subsequently evaluated by all of the citizen advisors.

The evaluations can take place in various ways. Some possibilities include assigning grades or points, filling out personal evaluation forms or having a plenum vote on the various proposed alternatives. The results of these evaluations are recorded by the moderators and assistant and will later be compiled into the final report.

## **D. Final Report Production and Dissemination**

### **1. PRODUCTION OF CITIZENS' REPORT**

The moderators have the task of summarising the initial results of the planning cell(s) in the form of a citizens' report. The report should include a description of the problem and task, a description of the entire procedure (selection of the advisors, process of the planning cells, voting process, etc.) and the results of each of the work units. The purpose is to make the entire process transparent and comprehensible.

Approximately two months after the conclusion of the Planning Cell meetings, the report is first presented to all of the advisors for their authorisation. All of the participants, or some representatives of each Planning Cell if multiple Cells were conducted on the same topic, meet once more to review, criticise and improve the report.

The organisational team incorporates the comments into the report and finalises it for publication.

### **2. DISSEMINATION**

The final citizens' report (the results of the planning cell) can be presented to the contracting party and published. The results can serve as a decision aid to relevant political institutions.

#### **IV. RESOURCE CONSIDERATIONS (TIME, BUDGET)**

Any given project may incorporate multiple Planning Cells, whereby each Cell additional to the first one will cost less. Each Planning Cell requires approximately two months of preparation, four or five days for the main event and two-three months afterward: a total of approximately five months. This will vary according to the complexity of the issue being addressed. The main budgetary items include:

- Personnel
  - organisational committee members
  - moderators
  - daily stipend for 25 participants, plus costs to free them from any duties
- Travel
  - for organisational committee members (if applicable)
  - for participants
  - for moderators
- Accommodation (only necessary for all-day and non-local events)
  - for organisational committee members
  - for participants
  - for moderators
- Food
  - meals and refreshments for each day of event
- Recruitment and Promotion
  - recruitment of personnel and citizen advisors
- Communications
  - printing costs to produce final report and any other information, as required
  - publishing and dissemination costs for final report
- Facilities
  - location for the Planning Cell to meet
- Materials and Supplies  
(See list provided)

#### **V. ADDITIONAL BEST PRACTICES AND POTENTIAL PITFALLS**

The advantages of the planning cell include:

- The random selection of the citizens increases the acceptance of the results because they are representative of the relevant population.
- The results of the planning cell are completely open. In contrast to some participatory methods, there are no pre-defined solutions. Rather, the citizen advisors develop their own solutions and recommendations based upon their experience in the planning cell process.



- The recommendations of the citizen advisors tend to clearly promote action in, and protect the interests of, the general community. Citizens do not try to push through their own individual interests but seek the well-being of the community as they understand it.
- Planning cells are processes of political education. As a side effect, the participants learn about various institutions, processes, pressures and constraints involved in political decision-making.
- Planning cells provide an opportunity to learn about the interests of others. By bringing together people of diverse ages, socio-economic and educational backgrounds, the process facilitates contact and understanding between people with very different perspectives, who otherwise might never meet each other.

*Drawbacks and Limitations of Planning Cells:*

Planning Cells are not well suited for issues that pose major inequities between different regions or social groups. In these cases, randomly selected citizens are not perceived as legitimate negotiators for the groups that face these inequities. In addition, decisions involving only a yes-no alternative are inappropriate for Planning Cells because participants tend to select the 'easy' solution of objecting to any new development, especially if the affected community does not equally share the benefits.

Another problem associated with Planning Cells is accountability and long-term planning. Since citizens are not responsible for implementing the final decision, they may make choices that are not financially or physically feasible in the long run. Although Planning Cells could be reconvened several times or different panels could be organised for the same subject over a longer period of time, this does not constitute the same public control as having elected officials who face elections and may be legally accountable for their actions. The question of how much authority these panels should be given was also a major point of criticism in a review of participation models by Fiorino (1990).

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