

Kitchen Table Conversation Hosting Kit

This kit was last revised in April 2024

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1. Summary of the KTC process

- A host gathers 5-10 people to two conversation sessions on one conversation topic.
- The conversations follow a set progression and participants are free to speak or not.
- The first conversation is to explore people's thoughts and feelings on the topic. The second conversation delves more into change that participants would like to see.
- One participant acts as scribe and takes brief notes of key points to be shared with all participants after each session.
- When someone is speaking, everyone else's job is to listen respectfully and well.

2. Why CAPaD recommends Kitchen Table Conversations

Members of the Canberra Alliance for Participatory Democracy (CAPaD) are interested in strengthening democracy in the ACT without pushing any particular agenda. We want to live in a society where people's voices are heard, respected and represented.

One of the ways we are working to improve the democratic process is by empowering Canberrans to own and plan for our common future and the common good. We see Kitchen Table Conversations as a way of strengthening our society and working towards a sustainable future together. The KTC process is simple and our feedback is that people enjoy it.

Here are some things participants have told us they valued about the experience:

- Feeling encouraged to speak up and tell my own story in my own way.
- A structured way of hearing stories uninterrupted, without needing to agree or disagree.
- Having deep, gritty conversations, in contrast to the superficiality of the media.
- Feeling enlivened!

3. How the KTC process works

This version of Kitchen Table Conversation consists of two gatherings of around five to ten people who meet to discuss a particular topic using a conversation guide (see examples in appendices). Participants are asked to put aside two hours for each conversation, with the first one exploring what people think about the topic and the second focussed on changes they would like to see. The KTC approach encourages respect for differences of opinion and values. It gives people the opportunity to talk together and really listen to each other on issues they care about.

The host may invite friends, neighbours, workmates, or any other community members, arranging to meet in a home, a café or club, or at work – wherever is easy and comfortable. A group made up of neighbours has the benefits of bringing a local community closer together and involving people who may come from a diversity of backgrounds. This can lead to very rich conversations.

The host requests the assistance of one participant as the scribe for each session. The scribe notes the key points made during the conversations for everyone's record.

Use of a talking piece is recommended. A talking piece is an object that is held by the person speaking, and signals that it is not an ordinary conversation where interruptions and argumentation might be welcome. The talking piece is placed in the centre of the group to begin with. When a person wishes to speak they pick it up and should be listened to without interruption until they place it back.

By the end of the second conversation, some groups choose to have more conversations and may even work together to change things. Others find that the experience of the two conversations is its own reward.

4. The courage to host

Many hosts find that inviting people, especially people they don't know well, is the most challenging part of the kitchen table conversation process. But take heart, for the consensus is that the results are well worth it, and participants express a lot of gratitude to hosts for their courage and for the contribution they have made to their community. Having a partner or co-host is one way to share the challenge of gathering a group. A host/scribe team might take this on together.

5. Conversation agreements

A simple set of agreements can go a long way to making sure the conversations stay respectful and productive. We suggest the following:

- We accept that everyone is entitled to have a say
- We accept that people have a choice of whether to speak or just to listen
- We will make the effort to listen to one another and not interrupt
- We will try to stay on track, stick to the purpose of the conversation and end on time
- We respect people's right to their opinions even if we disagree
- We will try at all times to be constructive, courteous and respectful.

6. The role of the host

Before the first meeting:

- Choose a conversation topic. See the conversation guides in the appendices, but note that they can be tailored to your, or your group's interests.
- Allowing a reasonable lead time, set a date, time and venue for the first conversation and issue your invitations with the aim of forming a group of five to ten people. Make it clear that this is an opportunity to share diverse ideas and opinions, and that everybody's ideas and opinions are important and will be heard.
- It can be a good idea to include the key questions for discussion (see the conversation guides) and the conversation agreements in your invitation.
- Include someone who is prepared to be the scribe and understands that role (see below).

At the start of the meeting:

- Briefly introduce the Kitchen Table Conversation approach. Explain that the purpose of these conversations is not to reach conclusions, but to listen in the first conversation to each other's ideas and opinions about the issues we care about; and to listen in the second conversation to how we think these issues could be addressed. It's fine to read out sections of this kit rather than speaking ad lib, if you prefer.
- Share the conversation agreements (listed above) and request participants' agreement to adhere to them during the conversations.
- You could give participants a copy of the conversation guide you are using.
- Introduce the talking piece if you are using one and explain its purpose.

- Explain that the scribe will take down brief dot point notes of the conversations as a record for participants. If your scribe would like to use an audio recorder, check whether everyone agrees to its use.

Hosting the conversation:

- Remember this is an opportunity for people to express their concerns, ideas and opinions in a safe environment. The group does not have to reach consensus. What is important is that people feel as though they have been able to contribute their thoughts and feelings.
- Initiate the conversation using the conversation guide.
- Make sure everyone has a chance to speak if they want to.
- Encourage a pause after each person speaks.
- If necessary, be confident at any time to respectfully draw people's attention back to any conversation agreement that is not being adhered to.
- Thank all participants and the scribe.
- Agree the date and time for the second conversation with the participants, if it hasn't already been set.

After the meeting:

- You might work with the scribe while the conversation is still fresh in your minds, to fill any gaps in the dot-point list of main issues and opinions expressed.

7. The Role of the Scribe

- Record the ideas and opinions expressed in the two conversations accurately and impartially.
- Work with the host soon after the meeting to fill any gaps in the dot-point list of main issues and opinions expressed.
- If available and with all participants' consent, an audio recorder could be used to assist in preparing the dot-point report. Note though, that this can create a lot more work than quickly capturing the main points during and immediately after the conversations. The benefit is that the scribe can participate in the conversation themselves more freely and fully.
- The report of each conversation need be only one and certainly no more than two typed pages of dot-points.
- Circulate the dot point report to the group soon after each conversation, and request confirmation of its accuracy. Make changes and recirculate if need be.

Attachment A

Kitchen Table Conversation Guide A

'Democracy in the ACT'

Conversation One

Preliminary: Setting the scene

- Welcome everyone and briefly describe the KTC process
- Explain and ask for agreement to the Conversation Agreements
- Introduce the talking piece
- Explain Scribe role, dot point reports
- Ask for permission to record the Conversation, if Scribe wishes to do so

Phase 1: Why are we here?

Answer the following question: Why did you decide to be part of this group conversation?

Phase 2: Our core values

Answer one or more of the following:

- What sense of purpose or key values guide you in life?
- What would your friends say about who you are and what makes you tick?
- What are your hopes and concerns for your community and/or Canberra, now and long-term?

Phase 3. Democracy in the ACT (our thoughts and feelings about how things are)

Answer one or more of the following:

- What are your thoughts and feelings about your ability to contribute to the decisions that our ACT politicians (MLAs) make on our behalf?
- Do you have any experiences of approaching an MLA or their departmental staff (either individually or as part of an organised group) about any issue? If no, what has stopped you? If yes, what was the experience like?
- What is most important to you about democracy in the ACT?

Phase 4. Reflection

Answer one or more of the following:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in the experience of this Kitchen Table Conversation?
- What new understanding or common ground did you find within this topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?

'Democracy in the ACT'

Conversation Two

Preliminary:

- Welcome everyone back
- Review conversation agreements
- Check everyone received and was happy with the dot point report from first Conversation.
- Permission to record Conversation, if Scribe wishes to do so.

Phase 1: Check in

Answer the following question: What are you looking forward to in this Conversation?

Phase 2. Democracy in the ACT (our thoughts and feelings about how we would like things to change)

Answer one or more of the following:

- What changes would you like to see in democracy in the ACT?
- How would you like engagement to happen in the ACT?
- What should be the main roles of MLAs and how will we know if they are doing them well?

Phase 3. Accomplishment and moving forward

Answer one or more of the following:

- Name one important thing that was accomplished here.
- Is there a next step you would like to take, individually or with others, based upon the conversation you just had?

[Host, please make sure your group members know that although this kitchen table conversation has been designed to go for only two sessions, some or all members could extend the group in whatever form they choose.]

Phase 4. Reflection

Answer one or more of the following:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in the experience of this Kitchen Table Conversation?
- What new understanding or common ground did you find within this topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?

Attachment B

Kitchen Table Conversation Guide B

‘What’s important to you?’ (ACT-region focus)

Conversation One

Preliminary: Setting the scene

- Welcome everyone and briefly describe the KTC process
- Explain and ask for agreement to the Conversation Agreements
- Introduce talking piece, if using (recommended)
- Explain scribe role and dot point reports
- Ask for permission to record the Conversation, if Scribe wishes to do so

Phase 1: Why are we here?

Answer the following question: Why did you decide to be part of this group conversation?

Phase 2: Our core values

Answer one or more of the following:

- What sense of purpose or key values guide you in life?
- What would your friends say about who you are and what makes you tick?

Phase 3: What’s important to you? (Canberra focus)

Answer one or more of the following:

What are your hopes and concerns for your community, Canberra or the Canberra region, now and into the future?

What is important to you more generally, but keeping the Canberra region focus in mind?

Phase 4. Reflection

Answer one or more of the following:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in the experience of this Kitchen Table Conversation?
- What new understanding or common ground did you find within this topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?

‘What’s important to you?’ (ACT-region focus)

Conversation Two

Preliminary:

- Welcome everyone back
- Review conversation agreements
- Check everyone received and was happy with the dot point report from first Conversation.
- Permission to record Conversation, if Scribe wishes to do so.

Phase 1: Check in.

Answer the following question: What are you looking forward to in this Conversation?

Phase 2. Changes we want

Answer the following question:

Reflecting on what’s important to you (discussed in conversation 1), what changes would you like to see in the Canberra community or region?

Phase 3. Accomplishment and moving forward

Answer one or both of the following:

- What is one important thing that was accomplished here?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?

Phase 4. Reflection

Answer one or more of the following:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in the experience of this Kitchen Table Conversation?
- What new understanding or common ground did you find within this topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?

Attachment C

Kitchen Table Conversation Guide C

Choose your own topic

Prior to inviting participants, or in collaboration with them but prior to the first conversation, select a specific conversation topic. For example:

Aged Care, Climate Change, Criminal Justice System, Drug Law Reform, Education, Health Services, Homelessness, Housing, Planning and Development.

Conversation One

Preliminary: Setting the scene

- Welcome everyone and briefly describe the KTC process
- Explain and ask for agreement to the conversation agreements
- Introduce your talking piece
- Explain scribe role and dot point reports
- Ask for permission to record the conversation, if scribe wishes to do so

Phase 1: Why are we here?

All participants are invited to answer the following question:

Answer the following question: Why did you decide to be part of this group conversation?

Phase 2: Our core values

Answer one or more of the following:

- What sense of purpose or key values guide you in life?
- What would your friends say about who you are and what makes you tick?

Phase 3: Policy area discussion

Answer the following question:

- What is important to you, or what concerns you, in the area of [chosen topic]?

Phase 4. Reflection

Answer one or more of the following:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in the experience of this Kitchen Table Conversation?
- What new understanding or common ground did you find within this topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?

Conversation Two

Preliminary:

- Welcome everyone back
- Review conversation agreements
- Check everyone received and was happy with the dot point report from first conversation.
- Ask for permission to record the conversation, if scribe wishes to do so

Phase 1: Check in.

Answer the following question:

What are you looking forward to in this Conversation?

Phase 2. Changes we want

Answer the following question:

- Reflecting on what's important to you (discussed in conversation 1), what changes would you like to see in [chosen topic]?

Phase 3. Accomplishment and moving forward

Answer one or both of the following:

- What is one important thing that was accomplished in these Conversations?
- Is there a next step you would like to take based upon the conversation you just had?

Phase 4. Reflection

Answer one or more of the following:

- In one sentence, share what was most meaningful or valuable to you in the experience of this Kitchen Table Conversation?
- What new understanding or common ground did you find within this topic?
- How has this conversation changed your perception of anyone in this group, including yourself?

Attachment D

Sample Kitchen Table Conversations Invitation Letter

[Feel free to use parts or change completely to suit your style and audience!]

Dear

Invitation to our 2-hour, 2-session Kitchen Table Conversations

Our democracy is based on the belief that each one of us can play a constructive part as citizens in strengthening our society and working towards a rich and rewarding future together. To do this well, it helps to have opportunities to express our opinions and listen to the opinions of others in a respectful way.

I would be really pleased if you can join me and up to eight other people for two Kitchen Table Conversations, each about two hours long. The purpose is to deeply listen to each other, while sharing ideas about our future and how we might influence it. Kitchen Table Conversations provide the opportunity for enriched conversations which respect differences of opinion and values from people with a diversity of backgrounds. Through these lightly structured conversations with neighbours, friends, new acquaintances and work colleagues, we can enjoyably exchange ideas and opinions in an informal setting, and consider ways to strengthen our democracy, our community, and our confidence in the future.

I hope you will be able to join us for what promises to be interesting and enjoyable conversation. The topic for discussion and some conversation agreements that will guide us are included below.

Date and time:

Place:

You can contact me to get a better idea of what it is about before you decide whether you would like to get involved.

Name/s of host/s:

Please RSVP by dd/mm/yyyy

Phone:

Email:

Theme for the conversations:

[Hosts please put in the letter the main topic theme you have chosen for discussion at your Kitchen Table

Conversations. You could list all questions or just the main topic, whichever you prefer.]

Conversation Agreements

Meetings with people with good intent can still come unstuck. A simple set of agreements can go a long way to achieving a friendly and productive Conversation. We suggest the following.

- We accept that everyone is entitled to have a say

- We accept that people have a choice of whether to speak or just to listen
- We will make the effort to listen to one another and not interrupt
- We will try to stay on track, stick to the purpose of the conversation and end on time
- We will have an open attitude, looking for common ground we can agree on and taking an interest in the differing beliefs and opinions of others
- We respect people's right to their opinions even if we disagree
- We will try at all times to be constructive and always be courteous and respectful