SFP GUIDE TO REMOTE COLLABORATIVE WORKING

A guide for organising and facilitating virtual meetings and participatory group sessions

Explanation

Successful and effective food partnership work and the delivery of local food strategies is dependent on listening to each other, sharing perspectives and opinions and collaborating on food initiatives. The Covid19 pandemic and subsequent lockdowns have meant that we have had to rapidly explore, adapt and adopt new ways to do this.

Throughout this year SFP food partnerships have been using different audio and video platforms to convene virtual or remote meetings to discuss how to continue to make progress on the delivery of food strategies and action plans as well as organising local alliances focused on emergency food provision. The SFP programme and the Network support team have also been using a range of approaches to remote working when reviewing programme strategy in light of the pandemic and supporting Network members to do the same.

Whilst keeping connected has been a key focus for the SFP Network and for member food partnerships it has also been possible to go further and begin using different tools and methods to facilitate highly effective and productive participatory workshops and strategic planning sessions.

It is now being recognised that perhaps we should have been making greater use of these tools and methods pre-Covid19 and that perhaps we should continue using them even when travel and meeting restrictions are relaxed.

Introduction

This guide describes the approaches used by SFP facilitators within the SFP programme team, with SFP Network members and by some SFP co-ordinators with their own food partnerships. The guide is neither exhaustive nor is it prescriptive – we are simply sharing our own experience and our thoughts on what works well for us in the hope that SFP members might benefit from our learning.

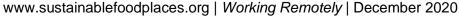The guide covers a range of topics under the key themes of:

1. Aims	what we hope and expect to achieve in a remote session
2. Tools	the key platforms and tools that can help to achieve these aims
3. Facilitation	basic tips and rules for facilitating the sessions
4. Structure	planning and structuring productive and effective sessions

1. Aims

- In a remote session it is important to recognise that your key aims are essentially **the same as in a workshop session, in person, in a room**: inclusion, participation, connection, mutual respect, engagement, productivity and enjoyment.

- It is often important that a session helps to **build and strengthen working relationships** and connections between participants – particularly when this is not possible in person.

Managing expectation

- **A virtual session is usually second best** to actually meeting in a room together.

- However, **in some situations a remote session may work better**. Participants will not need to travel to the session and it may therefore be cheaper, less time-consuming and easier to schedule.

- **Be patient and consider using regular short sessions** to gradually build relationships. The more often you meet the easier and more productive each session will be as participants become used to the technology, the process and to collaborating remotely.

- **Be realistic and don't set your expectations too high** for how much can be achieved in a remote session. Make sure you allow yourself enough time to deal with each theme adequately.

- **Limit the hoped for outputs for each session**, both in terms of the number of themes addressed as well as how deeply you can go into them. You probably won't get through as much as you think you will so keep the number of questions or topics down.

Creating a conducive remote space

- **Establish an accessible, engaging and participatory environment** where participants feel they can contribute as much or as little as they like.

- Ensure, as far as possible, that there is a level playing field – that **all participants can be seen, heard and can interact equally with each other**.

- Ensure that you can **hear everyone equally.** Differences in sound quality and volume that you hear at your end will be similar to those heard by other participants. Ask for louder microphones (especially those attached to headsets) to be turned down and quieter mics turned up or moved closer (particularly on built-in laptop mics).

- Encourage all participants to **use video when speaking** if at all possible and if their internet connectivity allows. We get a great deal of meaning of what's being said from what we see and this is particularly important in remote sessions.

- During discussion try to **keep all participants on your screen** at the same time – on 'gallery view'. This allows you to pick up on other participants' visual cues and reactions (head nods, twitches and body language) that establish a more natural feeling environment.

2. Tools

- To make a remote session productive, engaging and enjoyable make sure you are using the right tools for the job – this includes the **meeting platform** as well as **interactive tools**.

Virtual meeting platforms

Microsoft Teams video calls are effective for regular virtual team meetings, because:
- o it allows greater integration with other MSTeams communications tools such as 'chat' and 'calls',
- o it simplifies document sharing and collaborative editing within the teams
- o however, the number of participants you can see on screen at one time is limited to yourself and 4 others (those who spoke most recently).

Zoom is the best platform for facilitating interactive participatory workshop sessions. The key reasons for this are:
- o you are able see a large number of participants in 'gallery view' all at the same time
- o you can easily split your group into smaller discussion groups or 'breakout rooms'
- o using the chat function adds an extra dimension to participatory sessions, and
- o the use of a combination of different additional facilitation tools is straightforward.
- o but remember, Zoom free account sessions are limited to 40 minutes duration.

Interactive tools

- A participatory workshop session using **Zoom** can be very effective if well facilitated and thoughtfully structured (see **Sections 3 and 4** respectively). However, a participatory session really comes alive when using a combination of Zoom's basic meeting functions with additional interactive tools.

Miro Board
- o Miro Board is an extremely effective and versatile remote, interactive, participatory tool.
- o It allows facilitation of participatory sessions in a way that closely mimics the activities and methods used in an in-person workshop.
- o Miro Board is an interactive whiteboard that allows participants to collaborate and share thinking, live.
- o It is cloud-based tool (you access the tool via a website rather than by installing an application), it is extremely user-friendly and allows facilitators to create and share bespoke 'boards' with participants without the need for complicated sign-in procedures or expensive user accounts.
- o The **Miro Board website** includes excellent guides on a range of different functions.

Top tip. Post a question on a Miro Board before the session begins
- → *Email the Miro Board URL and instructions to participants – in the week before*
- → *Ask them to respond to a starter, zoning-in question you have posted before the session. This allows participants to get used to the basic functions, ask questions for support, avoiding time-consuming training during the session, and the responses provide you with a useful starting point for the session itself.*

Mentimeter
- o Mentimeter is an excellent tool that allows you to carry out an instant survey with your participants during a session.
- o This is a useful way to begin a discussion or consolidate thinking following a discussion.

- Mentimeter allows you to: gather participants' responses and display survey outcomes on specific multiple choice questions; rank different response options against each other; present one word responses as a 'word cloud'; or to share everyone's short phrase responses to a specific open-ended question.
- An instant survey can inject energy and a change of pace into your session and then provide a useful starting point for discussion on the survey outcomes.
- When mixed with facilitated discussion and interspersed between different questions/topics on a Miro Board the Mentimeter surveys can add an extremely valuable dimension to your session, keep the session lively, and generate a useful output that can be shared in reports.

Top tip. *Avoid overwhelming participants with too much new technology in one go.*
→ *Introduce one new tool per session to begin with.*
→ *Over time, as participants become more adept in using the new tools, they can be used successfully and effectively in combination.*

- Alternative tools are available and can be used to achieve similar, though less effective, results to those described above. For example **Google JamBoard** or shared **Google docs** as well as Teams' and Zoom's own **Whiteboard** and **in-meeting polling**.

3. Facilitation

- Remote session facilitation can make the difference between a session that leaves participants exhausted and questioning what has been achieved and one that motivates and engages participants and produces meaningful outputs.

- To make sure your remote session goes smoothly and is productive **set and share some basic ground rules.** For example – ask participants to:
  - join the call 5 minutes before it is due to begin
  - eat before the call – not during
  - be considerate – listen to others and don't dominate the call
  - remember – the call is a group conversation and is about sharing
  - say at the start if you need to leave early, and consider
  - if you have nothing to add, then add nothing

- Ask participants to **talk slowly and clearly**, using short sentences and leaving pauses in what they say to allow others to jump-in, add comments and contribute

- Ask everyone to quickly **introduce themselves** at the start of the session

- Establish some **simple hand signals** for participants to use. For example:
  - raising your hand to get attention or interject/jump-in
  - thumbs up or click fingers to agree with a point
  - pointing to your ear if you can't hear
  - pointing to your mouth if you think others can't hear you.

- If you hear/see someone miss a 'jump-in' (e.g. they get talked over), **go back** to them at the next opportunity to allow their contribution to be heard and included

- It may be useful to **establish a speaking order** for the group allowing you to go-round the group asking for individual contributions, one-by-one, on issues.

- Give a **5-minute warning** before the session ends to allow any last points to be raised and then **summarise and check** the call's key outputs before ending the call

- If participants are flagging use a **really quick energiser** – e.g. ask everyone to get up and quickly find something (e.g.) red, and bring it back.

  *Top tip. Work with **multiple co-facilitators** on each session.*
  - → *One or more co-facilitators should be focused on **supporting participant engagement** and contribution to the session – e.g. documenting discussion on the Miro Board, monitoring questions posted in 'chat', ensuring raised hands are responded to, transcribing comments from chat to Miro (if needed) and facilitating 'breakout rooms'.*
  - → *An additional co-facilitator with **technical support** – e.g. organising 'breakout rooms', managing screen-sharing, and posting instructions and web links in 'chat'.*

  *Top tip – If at all possible, use **2 screens**, particularly if you are using a Miro Board.*
  - → *2 screens/monitors allow you to view and facilitate discussion between participants on the Zoom screen whilst also facilitating the activity and adding comments on other tools such as Miro Board or Mentimeter.*

4. Structure

- Carefully consider a sequence of questions that create a coherent flow from start to finish.

- Start with broad, open questions that lead on to a more detailed exploration of specific topics and end with an opening out again to consider key outputs. For example:
  - o **Welcome and introduction**: purpose of the session
  - o **Who's who**: quick introductory go-round the group
  - o **Zoning-in**: broad question to establish focus (could be posted before the session)
  - o **Sharing perspectives**: explore and the range and differences in perspectives
  - o **Digging deeper**: more detailed exploration of specific issues/challenges/factors
  - o **Actions**: focus on what needs to happen, who does what, how, why and when?
  - o **Conclusions**: summarise key outputs and headlines, what has been learned
  - o **Next steps**: who needs to do what?
  - o **Evaluation**: how was the session?

- Allow participants to **try out new tools,** such as Miro or Mentimeter, before the session starts by sending out preliminary questions and instructions in the days before the session.

- Introduce **one new tool per session** to avoid overwhelming participants with new tech.

- Try to **schedule sessions after 10am** – most participants will be more alert, less distracted by emails and will find it easier to engage if you don't start first thing in the working day.

- **Limit each section of your programme to 30 or 40 minutes** at the most.

- Create a dynamic atmosphere by **mixing it up,** using a variety of ways of responding to questions – different graphics on the Miro Board or splitting the group into **breakout rooms**

- **Avoid scheduling sessions that last more than 2 hours**. Even with effective dynamic facilitation, regular short breaks and an energising mix of tools, participants are likely to feel stressed after about 2 hours.