

Guidelines for OPEN LISTENING EVENTS

Aim: *Open Listening* provides a simple framework to help a group of people listen to a range of views on a divisive issue.

Ethos: Conflict polarises debate and puts pressure on people to take sides or defend a position, rather than explore the complexities of the situation. When emotions run high, conversation can become abusive. We tend to belittle and demonise those with who do not share our opinions, making assumptions about their views and intentions, rather than listening to what they are actually saying. None of this helps transform the conflict.

(Re)building relationships across divisions caused by conflict requires us to learn to see our "opponents" as equally human, to understand why other people think differently to us, and to be open the complexities of situation that gave rise to the conflict.

By enabling a complex picture of different views to emerge *Open Listening* creates the possibility for participants to see their own views in a wider context, without getting trapped in fruitless argument or having to seek agreement.

Process:

1. Participants sit in a circle (with more than one row if necessary). In the centre a "speaking place" is marked out (with a microphone if necessary).
2. There are no guest speakers or agenda. The convenor introduces the *Opening Listening* event by going through the guidelines in this paper.
3. Anyone who wishes to speak goes to the speaking point. The convenor will decide the order if several people want to speak simultaneously.
4. Silences may occur, and in our experience it is best to hold these until someone chooses to speak.
5. At the end of the agreed time (usually no more than one hour) there is no attempt to draw any conclusions. It is important to offer participants the opportunity for informal conversation over refreshments after the session.

Ground Rules:

- a) All participants have equal status, and no-one is invited specifically in the role of "expert" or "speaker"
- b) *Open Listening* works best when participants speak for themselves ("I" not "we" or "they") and draw on their own life experiences.
- c) Speakers can respond to points already made or ask questions of the group as a whole, but not engage in a one-to-one discussion with individual participants.
- d) A time limit for individual statements (3 minutes?) should be agreed and enforced by the convenor (e.g. by ringing a bell).