

Community Conversation Kit



Practical guidance, templates and tips to help you plan, host and learn from the conversation topics your community wants to have

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Section 1: Welcome



Across Somerset, communities hold a huge amount of knowledge.

Every day, people share experiences, ideas and concerns in village halls, community centres, cafés, support groups and countless other places where people come together. These conversations help people make sense of what's happening in their lives, support one another and identify ways to make things better. Too often, though, those conversations stay within the room.



As a VCFSE organisation, you're already part of these conversations. You build trusted relationships, understand your communities and create spaces where people feel able to share their experiences honestly. Community Conversations build on those strengths by helping you listen with purpose, explore what matters to people and capture local knowledge in ways that can inform future ideas, projects, services and decisions across Somerset.

Whether you're exploring a local issue, developing a new idea, improving an existing service or wanting to better understand people's experiences, this kit will help you plan, host and learn from Community Conversations. You'll find practical guidance, templates and tips that you can adapt to suit your organisation, your community and the conversations you want to have.

We've designed this kit to be practical and flexible. Rather than reading it from cover to cover, dip into the sections that are most relevant as you plan and run your conversation. You'll notice that some key principles appear in more than one place, making them easy to find whenever you need them.



Section 2

What's this kit for?



Throughout the kit you'll find practical guidance, tips, templates and examples that you can adapt to suit your own community and way of working.

You might not have done a **"Community Conversation"** before – but you have conversations in your community all of the time!

The difference is that this kit provides some practical tools to help you plan them, facilitate them confidently, and make sense of what you hear afterwards.

an expert in the topic you're exploring. The aim isn't to find the "right" answer or carry out formal research. It's to create opportunities for people to share their experiences, ideas and perspectives, and to think about what they might mean for your community or organisation.

Section 3

Why host a Community Conversation?



While every conversation is different, hosting can help you:

- Understand and evidence community need through lived experience and local knowledge
- Co-design projects, services and activities with the people who will be affected by them
- Strengthen relationships within your community
- Identify opportunities, challenges and ideas for change
- Build new connections with local organisations, partners and networks
- Celebrate the strengths and achievements of your group or organisation
- Build confidence, skills and visibility for your organisation
- Understand and demonstrate impact by exploring what has changed and what people have gained.

Section 4:

Choosing your conversation topic

Community conversations work best when they're focused on something that feels relevant, important and useful to the people involved.



Your topic could be:

- A challenge affecting your community
- An issue or topic that you'd like to understand better
- An idea, project or service you've developed – or thinking about developing
- A change that's happening locally
- Something people have been talking about, asking for, or struggling with.

You don't need to have all the answers before you start. In fact, community conversations are often useful when you're curious about what people think, feel or experience.

A few questions to help you get started:

- **What would you like to explore?**
Think about the issue, opportunity, question or idea you'd like to better understand.
- **Why does it matter?**
Why is this conversation important to your organisation, community or the people involved?
- **What would you like to learn?**
What are you hoping to understand from the conversation?
- **What might happen as a result?**
How could the information, ideas or experiences that people share be used to help inform future decisions, projects, activities or plans?



Keep it simple

You don't need lots of questions.

One good topic and three or four open questions are often enough to start a meaningful conversation. Open questions work well because they encourage more detailed responses, for example:

- What do people think about...?
- How does [...] affect people?
- Tell me about your experience of...
- What would you like to see happen in the future?

We've included some example questions and prompts in **Appendix 3**



If you're running a conversation as part of a wider project, the topic, questions and purpose may already have been provided in a Project Brief. In that case, you can use this section as a reference and move on to planning and hosting your conversation.

Section 5

How to run your conversation

Community conversations do not need to be complicated. The most important thing is to create a welcoming and accessible setting where people can explore a topic and share their thoughts, experiences and ideas.

Getting ready



Familiarise yourself with the sections of this kit that are most relevant to your conversation.

The appendices also include templates that you can adapt to suit your needs.



Choose a friendly, easy-to-reach place that is familiar or welcoming to the people taking part.

This could be a community space, café, church or somewhere outdoors. Think about whether it is within walking distance, has parking nearby or can be reached by public transport.



Consider whether the setting will work for people with mobility, sensory or other access needs.

Are there steps?
Is there a lift? What is the lighting and noise like?
Is there clear signage?
Are accessible toilets available?
It can be useful to include information about travel and accessibility when inviting people.



Invite people to the conversation.

You could use the invitation template, speak to people directly, share information through your organisation, or advertise through social media or community noticeboards.

See the Invitation Template in **Appendix 1**



Choose a format that will feel natural for the people involved.

This might be a group chat over a cuppa, a conversation while walking, or talking alongside a creative or practical activity. Section 6 includes some different conversation styles you could try.



Think about how you will capture what is shared.

You could make notes, ask someone to act as a note-taker, audio-record the conversation with people's agreement, or invite participants to write or draw their ideas. If you use a creative activity, think about whether the things people make could also help capture the conversation.

Section 5

How to run your conversation continued



Hosting the conversation

Use whatever feels natural for your group. Prompt cards, photographs, creative activities or everyday objects like Lego can help to get people talking.

Encourage open sharing and listening to help understand what people really think.



Introducing the session

Welcome everyone and briefly explain the purpose of the conversation. Use the guidance in Section 8 to explain how the session will work, how learning will be captured and used, and people's choices about taking part.

If it feels appropriate, you could invite people to introduce themselves





During the conversation

Use open prompts such as:

- Can you tell us a bit more about that?
- How has that affected you?
- Who else is impacted by this?
- Has anyone else had a similar experience?
- What do other people think?

A few things to keep in mind:

- Make sure everyone has opportunities to contribute, especially people who are quieter
- Gently bring the discussion back if it moves too far away from the topic
- If something important comes up outside the planned topic, make a note of it. It may be useful to explore later
- Pay attention to how people are responding. If someone appears unsettled or withdrawn, check in and offer them the chance to pause or step away
- Do not pressure anyone to speak or share more than they want to.



Wrapping up

As the conversation comes to an end, summarise the main themes you have heard. This gives people an opportunity to correct anything you have misunderstood and add anything that feels missing or particularly important.

Ask whether anyone has final thoughts, ideas or reflections they would like to share.

Check that people know what will happen next and who they can contact with any questions or concerns. Where the topic has been difficult or personal, make sure anyone who needs additional support knows where they can find it.

Finally, thank everyone for taking part.

Section 6:

Choosing your conversation style

There's no one-size-fits-all. Choose a style that fits your group and the way you usually connect. Here are some ideas:

Group Chat

Great for groups of people who are happy to chat together.



One-to-One

Perfect for personal conversations or where someone might prefer a bit more privacy.



Not everyone is comfortable speaking in a group

Consider offering other ways for people to contribute, such as:

- Anonymous feedback forms
- A feedback box
- QR codes linking to an online survey
- Sticky notes or comment cards
- Follow-up conversations.

Providing multiple ways to contribute can help ensure quieter voices and people who prefer anonymity are included.

Creative Conversation

Get talking through art, drama, singing, writing, poetry, crafting, photography or other creative activities.



Busy Hands

Chat while doing an activity you'd be doing anyway – knitting, gardening, cooking, walking, woodwork or sharing a meal.



Objects, Photos & Prompts

Use photos, objects, postcards, newspaper headlines, prompt cards, Lego or everyday items to spark conversation. Ask people to choose something which connects to their experience, thoughts or ideas.



You could think about mixing and matching.

The best conversation style is usually the one that feels most natural or familiar for the people taking part.

It might be an activity that you already do?

Section 7:

Conversation roles

It helps to be clear about who's doing what.

Below are some roles you might find useful. One person can take on several of these roles – especially in smaller conversations.



Host

- Leads the conversation
- Explains the purpose
- Supports participation
- Coordinates follow-up.

Note-taker & timekeeper

- Records themes, ideas and agreed actions
- Does not attempt to capture every word
- Keeps an eye on the clock so things wrap up in good time.



Community members

- Join in, share their thoughts and listen to others
- Help create a friendly and supportive atmosphere
- Bring their own experiences, ideas and perspectives to the conversation.

Section 8:

Starting the conversation



Before the conversation begins, make sure people understand:

- Why the conversation is taking place
- What will happen during the session
- How notes, recordings or other learning will be captured
- How the information might be used afterwards
- That taking part is voluntary
- That they can choose not to answer a question
- That they can take a break or leave at any time
- Who they can speak to if they have questions or concerns.

You could say something like:

“We’re having this conversation to better understand people’s experiences of [topic]. We’ll record the main themes and ideas rather than every word that is said. Any learning we share afterwards will usually be summarised without names or identifying details. We’ll ask for your permission before sharing an identifiable quote, personal story, photograph or recording. You can choose what you want to share, skip any question, take a break or leave at any time.”



Give people an opportunity to ask questions before you begin.

For more information about storing information, protecting privacy and asking permission to share identifiable material, see

Section 13: Looking after people’s information



Section 9:

Ground rules

A few ground rules can often help – things like:



Take turns and listen to each other

It's okay to have **different views** - everyone's experience matters

People can choose **not** to answer things that they don't want to

Make space for quieter voices

If someone tends to talk a lot, you can **gently step in** to bring others into the conversation

Be respectful of personal experiences and different perspectives.

Section 10:

Making sense of the conversation

Before sharing what you've learned, it can be helpful to spend a little time reflecting on the conversation. This is different from summarising what people discussed. It is about your experience as a host: what worked well, who was heard, what was difficult and what you might do differently next time.

The prompts below are designed to help you identify the themes, insights and next steps that matter most.



A few questions to help you reflect

What did people tell us?

- What were the main ideas, experiences or messages that came out of the conversation?
- Were there any common themes or topics that people kept coming back to?



What surprised us?

- Did anything challenge your assumptions or make you think differently about the topic?
- Were there things people talked about that you weren't expecting?



What ideas or suggestions came up?

- Did people suggest ways things could be improved?
- Were there any opportunities, solutions or new ways of doing things that emerged?



What should happen next?

- Is there anything you, your organisation, or others could do as a result of the conversation?
- Are there questions that need exploring further?
- Are there people or organisations who should hear what was identified?



Remember... Not every conversation needs to lead to a huge project or major change. Sometimes the most important outcome is simply that people have had the opportunity to feel seen and heard.

Whatever the outcome, taking time to reflect on what you've learnt can help to

make sure that the conversation doesn't end when the chairs are packed away. You may also find it useful to think about how the conversation went from your own perspective, or perhaps your organisation.

You could use the Reflection Template in **Appendix 4** to help with this.



Section 11:

Share what you've learned

Once you've reflected on the conversation, think about who might benefit from hearing what you've learned.

There is no single "right" way. The best approach will depend on your audience and what you hope will happen next. You might share your learning with community members, partner organisations, local decision-makers or colleagues.

Things you could do:

Write...

You could record key themes

Use the Conversation Summary Template in **Appendix 2**



Create...

A poster, presentation or briefing



Record...

A short voice note or video



Ways to use learning:



- Hold a follow-up conversation or event
- Improve an existing service or activity
- Explore a new idea, project or partnership
- Share the learning with your colleagues, local VCFSEs, networks, forums or staff from health and statutory services.

Section 12:

When things don't go to plan



What if someone gets upset during the conversation?

Sometimes conversations touch on personal experiences, challenges or difficult topics.

If someone becomes upset:

- Pause the conversation and check in with them privately if appropriate
- Offer a break or a chance to step away
- Let them know they don't have to stay or answer anything they're not comfortable with
- Avoid putting pressure on them to continue talking
- If the topic may bring up difficult experiences, identify relevant support options before the conversation.

Most importantly, respond with kindness, patience and respect.



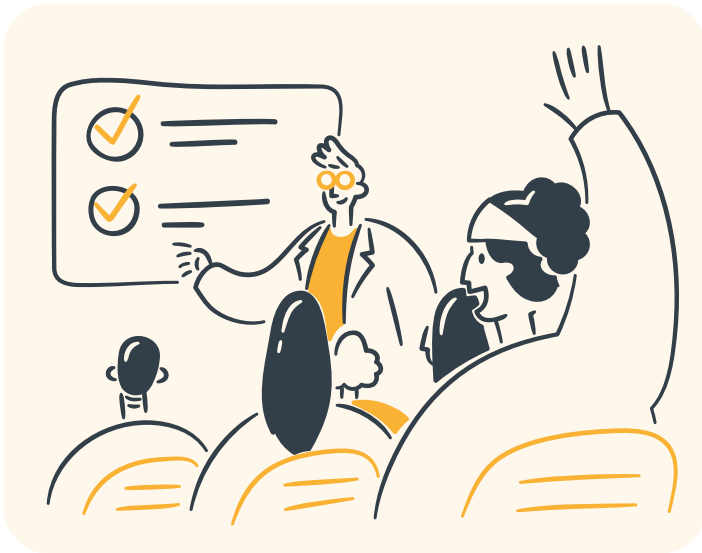
What if I don't know the answer to a question?

That's okay.

Your role is to facilitate the conversation, not to be the expert. It's perfectly fine to say:

"That's a really good question. I don't know the answer, but I'll make a note of it and try to find out."





What if one person dominates the conversation?

Sometimes one person may contribute more than others. It is important to acknowledge their contribution while creating space for different voices.

You could try:

"Thank you, that's really helpful. I'd like to hear what others think too."

"Let's pause there and check whether anyone else would like to add something."

"We've heard one perspective. Are there any different experiences in the room?"

"Let's go around the group so everyone who wants to can contribute."



What if the conversation goes off track?

You can gently bring people back to the agreed topic:

"That's an important point. I'm going to make a note of it and bring us back to..."

"Let's come back to our main question."

"I'm conscious of time and want to make sure we explore..."



Section 13:

Looking after people's information



All conversations will have different requirements depending on the topic, who is involved, and how any information will be used afterwards.

As a general rule:

- Collect only the information you genuinely need – explain why you're collecting it
- Avoid recording names or identifying details unless there is a clear reason
- Store notes, recordings and contact details securely
- Limit access to people who need it
- Agree when information will be deleted
- Ask explicit permission before sharing identifiable quotes, stories, photographs or recordings

If you're running a conversation as part of a wider project, follow any data protection, privacy or consent guidance provided by the project lead or commissioning organisation. If you are unsure, reach out to them to check.

Section 14:

Checklist

- 
- ☒ Chosen a topic/questions/prompts
 - ☒ Checked the venue, activity or format is accessible
 - ☒ People invited
 - ☒ Agreed who will host, take notes or provide support
 - ☒ Any additional resources, refreshments or materials required
 - ☒ Planned what participants need to know about taking part and how learning will be used
 - ☒ Thought about what might happen after the conversation

Section 15:

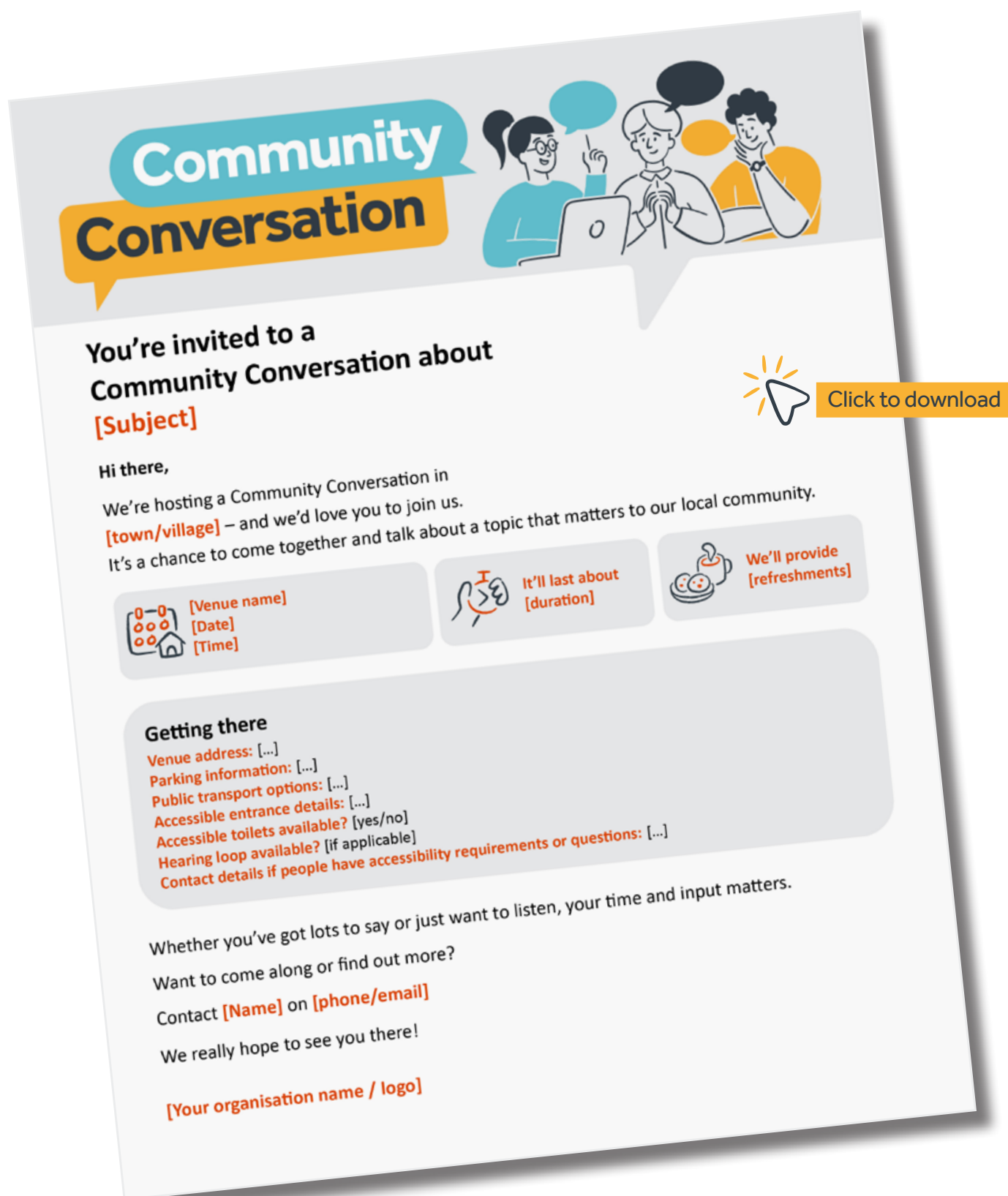
Appendix/Templates

The following templates are practical starting points, not formal documents or fixed ways of working. Use whichever ones are helpful, and feel free to adapt, simplify or combine them to suit your community, your organisation and the conversation you are hosting.



Appendix 1:

Invite Template



Community Conversation



You're invited to a Community Conversation about [Subject]

 [Click to download](#)

Hi there,

We're hosting a Community Conversation in **[town/village]** – and we'd love you to join us.

It's a chance to come together and talk about a topic that matters to our local community.



[Venue name]
[Date]
[Time]



It'll last about [duration]



We'll provide [refreshments]

Getting there

Venue address: [...]
 Parking information: [...]
 Public transport options: [...]
 Accessible entrance details: [...]
 Accessible toilets available? [yes/no]
 Hearing loop available? [if applicable]
 Contact details if people have accessibility requirements or questions: [...]

Whether you've got lots to say or just want to listen, your time and input matters.

Want to come along or find out more?

Contact **[Name]** on **[phone/email]**

We really hope to see you there!

[Your organisation name / logo]

Appendix 2:

Conversation Summary Template

What did participants say?

This template is intended as a simple example. Feel free to adapt it, shorten it, expand it – or create your own version to suit your conversation and community.

You don't need to capture everything that was said. The aim is to record the key ideas, experiences, reflections and potential suggestions that emerged.

Appendix 2: Summary template

Community Conversation



What did people say?

This template is intended as an example. Feel free to adapt it, shorten it, expand it or create your own version. You don't need to capture everything that was said. The aim is to record the key ideas, experiences, reflections and potential suggestions that emerged.

Overview

Organisation / Group:

Topic:

Date:

Number of people/who was involved:

What did people tell us?

- What were the main things people talked about?
- What messages, experiences or ideas came up more than once?

What stood out?

- Was there anything surprising, unexpected or particularly powerful?

Any quotes, stories or examples?

- If people were happy for them to be shared, add any quotes, stories or examples that help bring the conversation to life.

Were there any ideas or suggestions?

- What did people think could be improved, changed or explored further?

What should happen next?

- Are there any actions, questions or opportunities that have emerged from the conversation?

Any other thoughts/comments or things you'd like to share?



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Appendix 3:

Example Conversation Prompts

Every conversation will be different. These examples are intended to help spark ideas and show the types of questions that can help get people talking. You don't need to use these questions exactly as written – adapt them to suit your topic, community and conversation.

Community & Belonging

- What helps people feel connected to their community?
- Are there places, groups or activities that bring people together?
- What would help people feel more involved?

Local Services & Support

- What works well at the moment?
- What challenges do people experience?
- What would make the biggest difference?

Young People

- What is it like being a young person in this area?
- What opportunities are available?
- What would young people like to see happen in the future?

Health & Wellbeing

- What helps people stay healthy and well?
- What gets in the way?
- What support or activities would people find helpful?

Volunteering & Community Action

- What encourages people to get involved?
- What makes volunteering easier or harder?
- What would help more people take part?

Places & Spaces

- Which local places matter most to people?
- How are these spaces used?
- What would make them even better?

Looking Ahead

- What would you like to see happen next?
- What opportunities should be explored?
- Is there anything important that we haven't talked about?

Appendix 4:

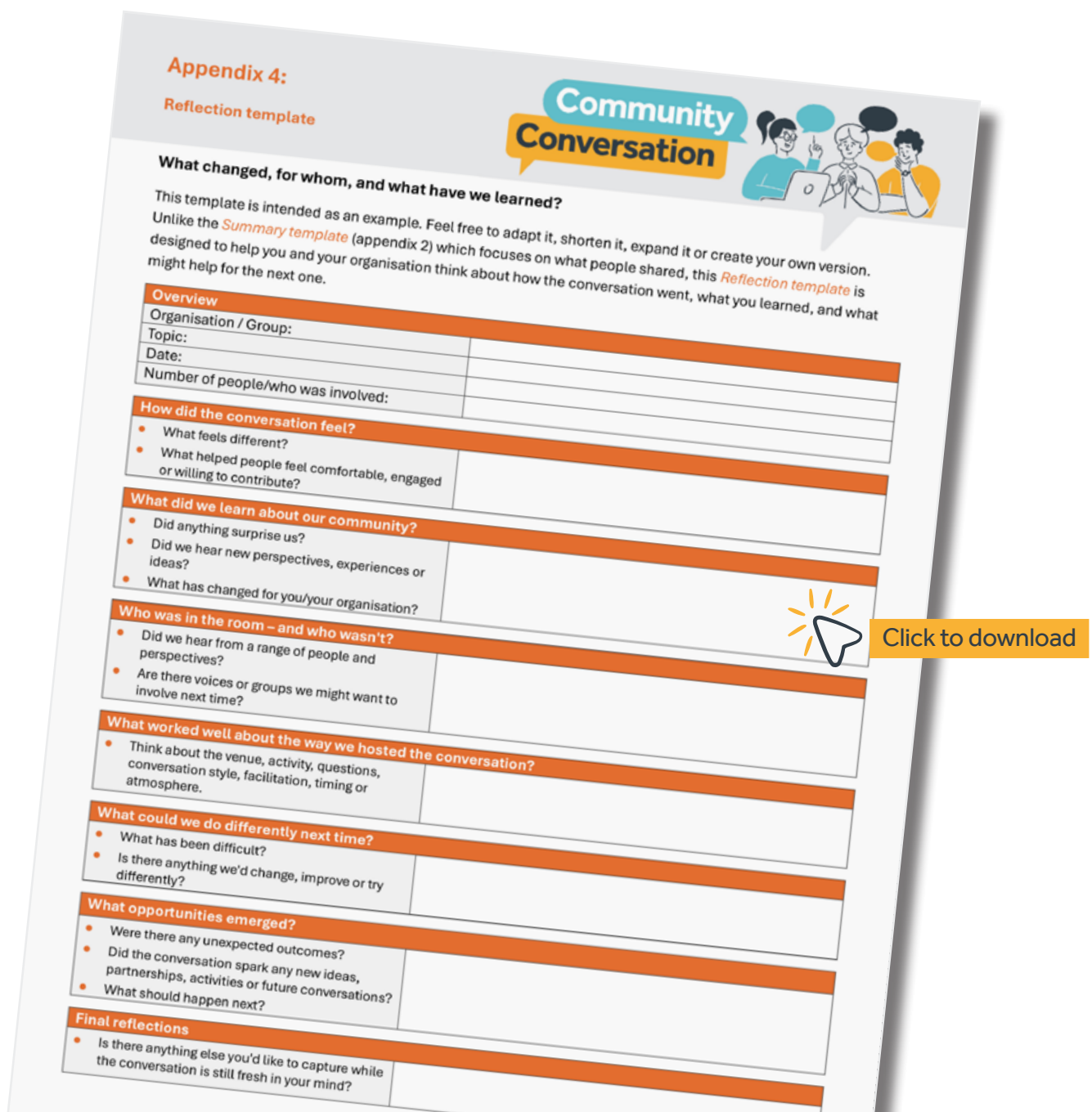
Conversation Reflection Template

What did we learn as hosts?

This template is intended as an example. Feel free to adapt it, shorten it, expand it, or create your own version.

Unlike the Conversation Summary Template [Appendix 2], which focuses on what people shared during the conversation, this reflection template is designed to help you and your organisation think about:

- how the conversation went
- what you learned from the experience
- what worked well
- what you might do differently next time
- any opportunities or next steps.



Appendix 4:
Reflection template

Community Conversation

What changed, for whom, and what have we learned?

This template is intended as an example. Feel free to adapt it, shorten it, expand it or create your own version. Unlike the *Summary template* (appendix 2) which focuses on what people shared, this *Reflection template* is designed to help you and your organisation think about how the conversation went, what you learned, and what might help for the next one.

Overview

Organisation / Group: _____

Topic: _____

Date: _____

Number of people/who was involved: _____

How did the conversation feel?

- What feels different?
- What helped people feel comfortable, engaged or willing to contribute?

What did we learn about our community?

- Did anything surprise us?
- Did we hear new perspectives, experiences or ideas?
- What has changed for you/your organisation?

Who was in the room – and who wasn't?

- Did we hear from a range of people and perspectives?
- Are there voices or groups we might want to involve next time?

What worked well about the way we hosted the conversation?

- Think about the venue, activity, questions, conversation style, facilitation, timing or atmosphere.

What could we do differently next time?

- What has been difficult?
- Is there anything we'd change, improve or try differently?

What opportunities emerged?

- Were there any unexpected outcomes?
- Did the conversation spark any new ideas, partnerships, activities or future conversations?
- What should happen next?

Final reflections

- Is there anything else you'd like to capture while the conversation is still fresh in your mind?

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Acknowledgements

This **Community Conversation Kit** was developed through Somerset's Research Engagement Network (REN) development programme, bringing together partners from across Somerset to strengthen community participation, engagement and involvement in research.

We are grateful to everyone who contributed their time, ideas and experience to help shape this toolkit, particularly the organisations and individuals who shared feedback throughout its development.

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- NHS Somerset

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