Planning Cell

A Planning Cell is a participatory method in which randomly selected citizens work together to develop solutions for societal or planning-related challenges. Over the course of several days, participants explore a topic in depth, receive information from experts, and collaboratively develop recommendations. Participants act as citizen assessors, building their understanding of the topic through expert presentations, discussions, and changing small-group sessions. The process concludes with the preparation of a Citizens' Report, which contains concrete recommendations for policymakers and public authorities.

Participation Depth	Participate, Have a say
Project Phase	Project Planning
Goals	Developing Ideas
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 Day - 1 Week
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Organised Actors
Group Size	Medium Group up to 30
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of a Planning Cell is to involve citizens intensively in addressing societal or planning-related issues.

Through discussions in changing small groups and access to diverse expert perspectives, participants develop a shared understanding of the topic and formulate concrete recommendations for policymakers and public authorities.

The method also encourages perspective-taking and promotes balanced, well-informed deliberation.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the topic and guiding question
Select a clearly defined topic for the Planning Cell.

The guiding question should:

- be easy to understand
- be manageable within the available timeframe
- provide genuine opportunities to influence future decisions

Examples include:

- "How can public transport be improved?"
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"How should this neighbourhood develop in the future?"

- "Which measures could reduce traffic problems?"

2. Select participants
Participants are selected through a random selection process.

This typically involves:

- using the municipal population register
- inviting a large number of residents
- randomly selecting a smaller group from those who respond

Important:

The participant group should represent a broad diversity of backgrounds and perspectives.

Since only a proportion of invited residents usually agree to participate, significantly more invitations should be sent than the number of participants ultimately required.

3. Organise the framework
Prepare:

- suitable venues
- catering
- facilitation
- workshop materials
- a detailed schedule

Important:

Participants invest several days of their time. Good organisation, comfortable working conditions, and transparent communication are therefore essential.

Participants are often provided with:

- financial compensation
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leave arrangements where appropriate

- support with childcare or travel expenses

4. Prepare expert input
Prepare:

- background information
- presentations
- expert contributions
- supporting materials

Important:

The process should present a balanced range of perspectives, including differing opinions and controversial viewpoints.

Contributors may include:

- representatives of the public administration
- researchers
- community initiatives
- directly affected stakeholders
- interest groups

5. Prepare the facilitation
The facilitation team is responsible for:

- guiding discussions
- managing the schedule
- coordinating group rotations
- documenting results

Facilitators should remain neutral and avoid influencing the content of the discussions.

Execution

1. Introduction and orientation
At the beginning of the process, the facilitation team explains:

- the purpose of the Planning Cell
- the overall process
- the guiding question
- the rules for collaboration
- the schedule

Participants also receive:

- introductory background information
- supporting materials
- an opportunity to ask questions

2. Building shared knowledge
Participants receive expert input throughout the process.

This may include:

- short presentations
- discussions with experts
- personal testimonies from affected individuals
- site visits

Important:

All participants should develop a common knowledge base before beginning deliberations.

The information provided should present:

- different perspectives
- competing viewpoints
- advantages and disadvantages of possible solutions

in a balanced and transparent manner.

3. Working in rotating small groups
Participants work in small groups over several days.

The groups are regularly reconfigured so that participants work with different people throughout the process.

This helps to:

- introduce new perspectives
- prevent fixed alliances from forming
- maintain open discussions

Within the groups, participants:

- discuss issues
- prioritise ideas
- develop solutions collaboratively

Individual working sessions typically last 1–2 hours.

4. Plenary presentations
After each small-group session, the results are presented in plenary.

Participants:

- share ideas
- identify common ground
- discuss differing viewpoints
- organise proposals

Results are commonly documented using:

- flipcharts
- pinboards
- digital collaboration tools

5. Prioritisation and recommendations
As the process continues, participants:

- combine similar proposals
- group related topics
- establish priorities

Methods may include:

- facilitated discussions
- dot voting
- simple voting exercises

The objective is to develop a shared set of recommendations.

6. Prepare the Citizens' Report
The results are compiled into a Citizens' Report.

The report typically includes:

- recommendations
- supporting arguments
- summaries of key discussions
- identified priorities

Participants review the report before it is finalised.

Evaluation

1. Finalise the Citizens' Report
The report should be:

- clearly structured
- written in accessible language
- supported with visual elements where appropriate
- prepared as the final documentation of the process

2. Publish the results
The Citizens' Report is presented to:

- policymakers
- the public administration
- the wider public

It should be communicated transparently:

- which recommendations will be adopted
- what the next steps will be
- how unresolved issues will be addressed

3. Share the outcomes with participants
Participants should receive:

- the final Citizens' Report
- supporting documentation
- information about the next stages of the process

Providing this feedback strengthens trust, transparency, and appreciation for participants' contributions.

Source: https://mobilitaetsplanung-hessen.de/methodenkoffer-partizipative-planung/

WHEN USEFUL?

- addressing complex or controversial issues
- incorporating a wide range of perspectives
- developing well-informed recommendations
- dealing with issues of public interest
- citizens should participate intensively and on an informed basis
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WHEN NOT USEFUL?

- decisions need to be made within a very short timeframe
- there is no genuine scope for influencing outcomes

- there are insufficient resources for a multi-day participation process
- the topic is relatively simple or limited in scope

TIPS

- Allow sufficient time for participants to build knowledge and engage in meaningful discussion.
- Present different perspectives on an equal footing.
- Rotating small groups encourage fresh viewpoints and help prevent entrenched positions.
- Formulate the guiding question clearly and in accessible language.
- Be transparent about how the recommendations will be used after the process concludes.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- short-term decision-making processes
- topics with no genuine scope for action
- purely symbolic participation processes in which the results will not be considered further

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/planungszelle