Citizens' Council (Wisdom Council)

A Citizens' Council based on the Wisdom Council model brings together a small group of randomly selected citizens who spend one to two days discussing societal challenges and developing shared recommendations. Using the facilitation method of Dynamic Facilitation, participants often generate new perspectives and creative solutions that go beyond conventional discussion formats. The recommendations are then presented publicly and serve as a starting point for further dialogue with policymakers, public authorities, and the wider community.

Participation Depth	Participate, Have a say
Project Phase	Onboarding
Goals	Exchange & Discourse
Format	Analogue
Duration	1 Day - 1 Week
Target Group	Directly Affected, Interested Public, Hard-to-Reach Groups, Organised Actors
Group Size	Small Group up to 15
Characteristics	Structured, Activating

GOAL OF THE METHOD

The goal of a Wisdom Council is to bring together diverse perspectives and develop shared recommendations. The method creates space for creative solutions, strengthens democratic participation, and promotes dialogue between citizens, policymakers, and public authorities.

PROCEDURE

Preparation

1. Define the guiding question
Begin by selecting the topic to be explored.

The guiding question should:

- address an issue of public relevance
- relate to people's everyday lives
- be open enough to encourage different perspectives

Examples include:

- *"How can our town centre become more vibrant?"*
- *"What is needed for a good quality of life in our neighbourhood?"*
-

"How can young people become more involved?"

Avoid:

- highly technical questions
- overly specific topics
- issues that have already been decided
- questions without any scope for action

2. Select participants
Invite 12–16 citizens through a random selection process.

Aim for a diverse group representing differences in:

- age
- gender
- place of residence
- educational background
- life circumstances

Important:

Participants contribute their own views rather than representing organisations or interest groups.

3. Create the right conditions
Prepare:

- a quiet meeting space
- facilitation materials
- documentation tools
- refreshments
- sufficient breaks

The atmosphere should be open, respectful, and welcoming.

4. Ensure political follow-up

Before the process begins, clarify:

- Who will receive the recommendations?
- Who will consider them?
- How will decisions about implementation be made?

Participants should know that their contributions will be taken seriously.

Execution

1. Introduction and getting to know each other
Begin with introductions and explain:

- the purpose of the Citizens' Council
- the overall process
- participants' role
- discussion guidelines

Creating trust from the beginning is essential.

Helpful opening questions include:

- *"What motivated you to participate?"*
- *"What experiences do you bring to this discussion?"*

2. Collect topics and perspectives
Participants describe:

- challenges
- concerns
- observations
- wishes
- ideas

The facilitator records every contribution visibly using four categories:

- Problems

- Solutions
- Concerns
- Information / Perspectives

Important:

All contributions are accepted without immediate evaluation.

3. Apply Dynamic Facilitation
The facilitator follows the natural flow of the conversation rather than steering it toward predetermined outcomes.

(Dynamic Facilitation is described separately as its own method.)

The facilitator's role is to:

- listen actively
- record contributions visibly
- encourage different viewpoints
- ask clarifying questions
- support the natural development of the discussion

Helpful questions include:

- *"Why is this issue important?"*
- *"What is behind this concern?"*
- *"What idea could emerge from this?"*
- *"What could be a first step?"*

Avoid:

- early voting
- rushing the discussion
- judging contributions

4. Develop a shared statement

At the end of the process, the group prepares a joint statement.

It should include:

- key insights
- desired changes
- recommendations
- possible next steps

Important:

The statement is jointly owned by the entire group rather than written by individual participants.

5. Present the results publicly
The recommendations are presented in a public event, for example:

- a Citizens' Café
- a public forum
- another community dialogue event

Representatives from politics and public administration should attend and respond to the recommendations.

Evaluation

1. Document the results
The documentation should include:

- the joint statement and recommendations
- key discussion topics
- remaining open questions

The results should be publicly accessible.

2. Establish a response group
After the Citizens' Council, it is helpful to bring together a follow-up group consisting of:

- public administration
- policymakers

- process facilitators
- selected representatives of the Citizens' Council

Together they discuss:

- Which recommendations can be pursued?
- Which steps are necessary?
- Who will take responsibility?

3. Provide feedback
Participants should be informed about:

- which recommendations have been taken forward
- which actions are planned
- which recommendations cannot currently be implemented

Regular repetition of the Wisdom Council process helps create an ongoing dialogue between citizens, policymakers, and public authorities.

Source: https://partizipation.at/partizipation-anwenden/methoden/

WHEN USEFUL?

seeking fresh perspectives on societal challenges

initiating public dialogue

directly involving citizens in political processes

addressing complex issues without obvious solutions

strengthening civic engagement and shared responsibility

developing initial recommendations for policymakers or public authorities

WHEN NOT USEFUL?

detailed technical concepts need to be developed

there is no commitment to follow up on the results

the issue has already been fully decided

no neutral facilitator is available

TIPS

- Work with an experienced Dynamic Facilitation facilitator.
- Allow sufficient time for open conversations.
- Create a trusting atmosphere.
- Document all contributions visibly.
- Ensure a diverse group of participants.
- Plan follow-up activities before the process begins.
- Organise a public presentation of the recommendations.
- Repeat the process regularly to encourage long-term learning.

NOT SUITABLE FOR

- developing detailed technical plans
- situations where solutions have already been decided
- processes without commitment to further action
- situations where the recommendations have no political or organisational follow-up
- processes without neutral facilitation

View online: https://methoden.urbankit.de/en/methods/buerger-innenrat-wisdom-council