## Facilitating Consensus Decisions: a Process for Greens Meetings

Janet Rice        January 2012

This process refers to both actions to be taken by the facilitator and also actions that need to be taken by participants in a meeting. The easiest meetings to facilitate are those where everyone is taking responsibility to help the meeting run well.

**At the beginning of the meeting**

- In general a circle works best for the physical shape of the meeting. It in itself facilitates focus, togetherness, the ability to be able to see everyone, and helps to ensure no bystanders, with everyone committed to the conversation. ( If people are distracted by phones, facebook, twitter, email then the question has to be asked whether the discussion is really on track.)
- Butchers paper/ whiteboard – to keep track of issues and make sure people are heard. Writing stuff down where everyone can see it means that people know they've been heard and understood, and that their views aren't going to be forgotten.
- Check in – what's going on in people's lives – this may need to be taken into account
- Agenda check. Does anything need to be added or changed? Is it realistic? Can everyone stay until the designated time that the meeting is planned to end?

**For each item**

- Clarify the purpose of discussion.
- Confirm the time available, and appoint a timekeeper.
- Assess whether there really is likely to be enough time to reach the desired outcome.

**Start by discussing the issue at hand, not a proposal of how to deal with it**

- Articulate what people's views on the issue are ( eg through one or more rounds)
- How much do people care about this issue – if it's something that most people aren't that worried about then maybe it shouldn't be being discussed at the meeting – it probably should be sent off to a working group to determine a course of action.
- Are there misunderstandings? Things that can be clarified?
- Are there differences of opinion?
- Does everyone understand everyone's views?
- Are there things that other people think that you disagree with? Try not to be scared to articulate them! Consensus is NOT about pretending you agree when you don't, or feeling pressured to stay quiet, or thinking well if everyone else thinks the same way maybe I'm wrong even if I don't really think I am.

After an initial period of discussion, check to see whether there still are ( and summarise if there are)

- misunderstandings?
- different judgements as to what might be the consequences of a course of action?
- unknowns – does more information needs to be gathered before a decision can be made?
- other people that should be in the room to help make the decision – does there need to be more consultation? Maybe the decision should be put off for this reason.
- fundamental differences in values ( unpack these– ask questions, dig deeper)

**Forming a proposal**

A proposal should only be formed once there is clarity about what everyone's views on the issue are.

- People need to be able to put themselves in other people's shoes. Try and think of a way forward that you'd be happy with, and that you think would overcome other people's concerns.

  **It's everyone's job to get to a course of action that everyone can live with.**

  **Conversely it's not a consensus process if people stand their ground and are not willing to shift. People blocking a proposal need to be able to articulate why, and others need to understand why they are blocking. If it has been clarified that the difference is deep and fundamental only then should the decision be made whether to go to a vote, or not make a decision.**

- If you can, propose something. Let it fly, but be ready to see it changed. In a healthy meeting culture people will feel safe to offer a half formed idea that someone else may build on.

**Do we have consensus?**

- If not, are we on the right track? Why or why not? What are the good things about this proposal? What are its weaknesses?
- Do we persist in trying to modify this proposal, or see if there is another way forward?
- If there aren't really any major disagreements but just that the way forward needs a lot of thinking about, then it might be a good idea to send the issue off to a working group to devise the way forward, drawing upon the knowledge they have gained about peoples' views.
- It can be valuable to brainstorm/ articulate all possible ways forward that people can think of. Write them on the butchers paper/ whiteboard.
- Keep going, forming and modifying proposals till you get there!

**Running out of time**

- Don't skip or stint on spending time *understanding* everyone's points of view. Otherwise it makes it very difficult to formulate proposals *that take account of* everyone's points of view.
- Does the decision really need to be made now?
- Can an item be sent off to a working group to try and formulate a way forward after the meeting has heard and understood everyone's viewpoints?
- Facilitation will need to be firmer to make sure that people aren't spending time unnecessarily – eg by repeating what others have already said, repeating what they have already said themselves, or going off the track. There may also need to be more active facilitation – more summarising, much chopping people off  when they are waffling ,more bringing people back to the point.
- Clarify what the consequences are of not making a decision, compared with the consequences of making a decision that not everyone agrees with, or feels ready to make.
- Can you make an interim decision and come back and revisit it?
- What else on the agenda can be put off?
- If you do agree to extend the time ( in the understanding that that either means other items won't be dealt with or the meeting will go longer) then set a new time limit, and stick to it, going through a 'running out of time' process when you get reach it
- If you are persistently running out of time then you have two options – more frequent or longer meetings, or discussing less at meetings – the critical question to be asked is whether it really is necessary to discuss an item in this forum. Can it be discussed elsewhere? Can a working group process be used, after the initial discussion stage to bring a proposal back to the full group?