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# VOICES INTO ACTION: GUIDELINES FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION WITH LEARNERS IN FOCUS GROUPS OR INTERVIEWS

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The following principles underpin effective communication:

- Establish and maintain a good relationship with the learner.
- Enable the learner to communicate in their preferred way and listen carefully to their point of view.
- Ensure communication styles are suitable for the learner's age, ability, language and preferences.

Establishing a relationship requires the interviewer to show respect, genuineness and empathy towards the interviewee(s). It also involves recognising and overcoming barriers to communication.

- **Respect:** behaviour that makes others feel they are important, worthwhile and special.
- **Genuineness:** behaviour that conveys that 'you are human, trustworthy and have nothing to hide'.
- **Empathy:** behaviour that shows that you try to understand the other person's world as they are experiencing it. In other words, you try to 'see it their way'.

These behaviours include:

- introducing yourself and remembering the other person's name;
- explaining the purpose of the meeting;
- asking questions tactfully and clearly;
- showing you are listening and asking questions to clarify and check understanding;
- not interrupting or talking over the person;
- being aware of your own and others' body language and the emotions that this may convey;
- responding as naturally and as honestly as you can;
- avoiding being defensive.

## Working with a group of learners

When working with a group of learners, it is important to establish the ground rules at the outset so that everyone in the group can express their views. These can be discussed and agreed between learners and those leading the session, using language appropriate to the group. During the session, it can help to use familiar symbols or pictures to reinforce the ground rules.

**Table 1. Examples of ground rules**

Version one	Alternative version
Let each person speak / Listen quietly to what others have to say	Listen to each other without interruption
You don't have to speak if you don't want to	All contributions are voluntary
You can ask for help to share your ideas / You can ask someone to repeat or explain something	Ask for an explanation if a meaning is unclear
[Put up your hand] when you want to speak	Indicate by [...] if you wish to speak

## Overcoming barriers to communication

It is not always easy for participants to share, and there may be many reasons for this. Those leading group or individual interviews should use the following approaches to encourage learners to participate:

- Use straightforward and suitable language that everyone can understand.
- Explain ideas clearly and be prepared to rephrase or adjust your approach if needed.
- Be aware of, and responsive to, any health issues, sensory impairments or any communication aids the learners may use.
- Be aware of, and responsive to, any specific difficulties which may impede concentration.
- Consider involving an adult, who the participants know and trust, to be present and to support the group, or any individual learner.
- Involve specialists and experts who know the participants and are familiar with additional accessible technology systems, if participants use these as their preferred (or only) means of communication.

- Clearly explain the purpose of the activity and state that the participants' views are an important part of it.
- Ask learners what they would like to discuss and what is important to them.
- Ensure everyone knows that they do not have to be there, do not have to speak, and can leave at any time.
- Thank all participants for being part of the activity.

## Asking questions

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The way you frame a question can result in a range of different responses. 'Closed' questions result in a yes or no answer, or a specific piece of information. 'Open' questions allow for more detailed information and personal thoughts. Closed questions are often easier for participants to answer and can be a good starting point before asking open questions that need more reflection from participants.

Some points to consider when formulating questions:

- Ask one question at a time.
- Allow time for the learners to respond, including 'thinking time'.
- In group sessions, encourage participants to work together to think about the question and their answers, such as 'think by yourself, talk to the person next to you, share with the group'.
- Some group questions can be answered by 'hands up' or 'thumbs up', a written or drawn answer on a personal white board or by using picture cards with a smiley face (or other agreed symbol).
- Make sure everyone in the group has a chance to contribute if they would like to.
- Use visual aids or symbols to support understanding of the question.

## Reference

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This document has been adapted from:

Estyn, 2021. *Supplementary guidance: Listening to learners on inspection*.

[www.estyn.gov.wales/supplementary-guidance/supplementary-guidance-listening-learners-inspection-september-2021](http://www.estyn.gov.wales/supplementary-guidance/supplementary-guidance-listening-learners-inspection-september-2021) (Last accessed April 2022)