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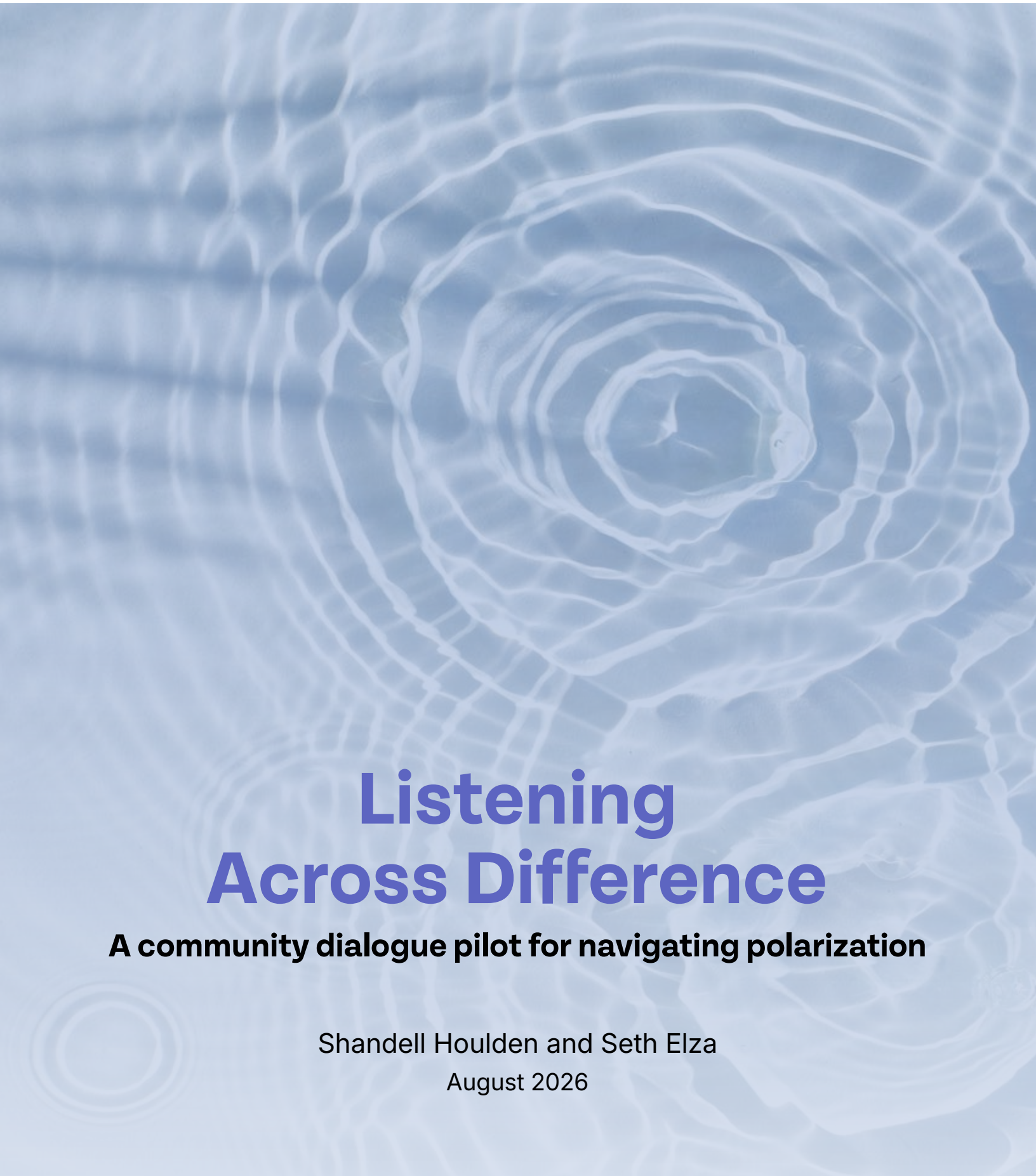

Listening Across Difference

A community dialogue pilot for navigating polarization

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Executive summary

Together for Sooke was a pilot project conducted in the fall of 2025. The project set out to test whether a structured facilitation method called presencing could support more productive civic conversation in a community navigating the pressures of rapid growth, climate planning, and local conflict. Working with Fireweed Learning Commons and funded by the ACET initiative, facilitators convened six small-group dialogues with Sooke residents over three weeks. Developed by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer, the method guides participants from the surface of positional debate toward a deeper engagement with lived experience, underlying needs, and shared aspirations.

The headline finding is promising but qualified. In facilitated groups of up to seven residents, presencing produced a different kind of conversation: one in which people openly described their lives in Sooke, surfaced what they value and what they fear, and named shared aspirations — even on contested issues. Pre-workshop surveys confirmed real affective polarization on climate-related questions, alongside lower trust in local government than in fellow residents. The qualitative analysis of session transcripts organized findings into four themes: the symbolic and material weight of Sooke's bottleneck geography; tensions between longer-settled and newer residents over belonging and recognition; a sense that governance is neither transparent nor responsive to ordinary participation; and widely shared aspirations for better civic conversation, accessible third spaces, and development that holds growth, services, and ecological protection together. Across all six sessions, participants expressed a clear appetite for more of this kind of engagement.

What the method could not do, in a single 75-minute session, is measurably reduce affective polarization or move participants toward concrete solutions. Presencing deepens with repeated practice; the relational trust it depends on does not develop fully in a single encounter. One-off dialogues are best understood as a tool for surfacing community narratives and generating credible inputs for planning processes, not as a standalone intervention.

The pilot also has a significant limitation that shapes what can be claimed as the sample was politically skewed. Of participants who reported their federal vote, none had voted Conservative, in a district where 37 percent did in the 2025 election. Because the method is designed to bridge political differences, that gap leaves the central question, that is, whether it can do so, unanswered.

Three priorities follow for future work. First, recruiting across the political spectrum, so the method can be tested against the problem it is designed to solve. Second, testing longer and repeated formats that allow the relational depth that presencing requires to actually develop. Third, and most ambitiously, integrating this approach into formal deliberative structures such as citizens' assemblies, where random selection addresses both the diversity problem and the question of whose voices shape decisions. The report includes a full facilitation guide designed to support practitioners in other communities who want to adapt the method to their own contexts.

1 Introduction

Local governments and community-based organizations are increasingly running into a wall of opposition and conflict. Climate, energy, and land-use plans that seem good on paper are rejected before they can be implemented, often because the community has lost the shared trust needed to work through differences constructively. Engagement processes often draw the same handful of voices, while conspiracy-fuelled grievances can derail council meetings. Online discussion polarizes before anything constructive can take root. And organized actors, sometimes local, sometimes not, increasingly amplify and exploit these dynamics to defend vested interests, turning planning questions into proxy battles over identity and belonging.[1]

These challenges to the proper functioning of local democracy are increasingly driven by what researchers call **affective polarization**: not ordinary disagreement about policy, but the degree to which people *dislike, distrust, or avoid* people they see as opponents. Affective polarization is about how people think about and relate to those who believe differently (Harel, Katz Jameson, & Maoz, 2020). In communities where it runs high, even technically modest decisions can trigger conflict, because every decision becomes a referendum on who the community is and whose voice counts (Iyengar et al., 2019; Druckman, 2025).

Affective polarization threatens municipalities' ability to advance climate action and clean energy planning—two issues that have merged as lightning rods for community conflict (Huddart et al., 2025). Climate and energy plans manifest locally as decisions about density, transit, building codes, zoning, and growth, issues that tend to evoke concerns about identity and place. Even where technology is mature and affordable, the work of building durable local support for climate and energy transformation initiatives depends on a community's capacity to deliberate well under pressure. Expanding that capacity is a governance challenge as much as a technical one.

While common depolarization approaches can treat depolarization as an information deficit—assuming that simply communicating facts will change minds—we approach it as a community governance challenge to be resolved by establishing processes and practices that improve how people relate to one another, how they make sense of shared issues, and how they work together despite disagreement. *Together for Sooke* set out to test a small-group facilitation method that, at scale, could answer this governance challenge.

Together for Sooke was a pilot project conducted in the fall of 2025 by the Cascade Institute at Royal Roads University in partnership with Fireweed Learning Commons, a local Sooke education non-profit. The Accelerating Community Energy Transformation (ACET) initiative, a national, multi-partner research program that supports community-led clean energy transformations, provided funding. Over five sessions, the project tested whether a facilitated dialogue method called *presencing*—designed to

1 For Canadian context on rising affective polarization and declining institutional trust, see Angus Reid Institute (2025), Ling (2023), and Stockemer & Gaspard (2025). On the increasing role of organized and astroturfed campaigns in local planning fights, see, for example, Dembicki (2022), White (February 2026), White (April 2026), and Wayne & MacIsaac (February 2025) on coordinated opposition tactics in Canadian municipal contexts.

move conversations from positional argument toward shared understanding and collaborative planning and action—could create the conditions in which residents are able to listen to one another, articulate shared values, and explore possible futures for the community. *Presencing* is a facilitation method designed to help a group of people build their capacity to work together towards mutually agreeable solutions through a shared understanding of one another's perspectives and concerns.

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Sooke is a district municipality of roughly 15,000 people on the southwest coast of Vancouver Island, in the traditional territories of the T'Sou-ke and Scia'new First Nations. Connected to Greater Victoria by a single highway, Sooke is among the fastest-growing centres in the region, with most working residents commuting to work elsewhere. These conditions make Sooke a useful test case for this work. Local climate and energy questions tend to manifest through land-use and growth decisions: zoning, density, transportation, watershed protection, and the Official Community Plan. Each of these decisions is widely expressed as a question of what kind of place Sooke is becoming, and for whom. This is the exact terrain on which the flames of affective polarization can catch and spread. Residents often say the community feels divided, which makes Sooke a fertile testing ground for a method that seeks to reduce affective polarization.

This report has two intended audiences. The first is practitioners of local democracy—municipal staff, elected officials, community-based organizations, planners, and engagement professionals working on climate, energy, and other contested local issues. For this audience, the report describes the method, what worked, what did not, and its adaptability to other circumstances. The appendix provides a facilitation guide designed to be picked up and used by practitioners in other communities. The second audience is researchers who study democracy, polarization, and climate engagement, who will find in the report an honest account of a successful pilot with important limitations.

The headline finding is promising but qualified. The presencing method led participants into a different kind of conversation—one in which people described their lived experience, surfaced underlying needs, and named shared aspirations, even on contested local issues. It did not, in a single 75-minute session, produce the deeper relational shift that Scharmer and Kaufer's framework points toward, which appears to require sustained or repeated practice. The pilot is therefore best read as a positive early signal rather than a definitive result: we have developed a method that is worth refining, testing in further contexts, and bringing into the toolkit of local democracy and energy planning practitioners.

2 Background

Researchers studying polarization increasingly distinguish ordinary disagreement about policy from **affective polarization**—in which people come to dislike, distrust, or avoid those they see as being on the other side. The distinction matters in practice. Communities can disagree productively about a development proposal, a transit route, or an emissions target if the disagreement remains about the substance of the question. They struggle when disagreement becomes a clash over competing notions of identity, belonging, or moral worth. In affectively polarized contexts, even modest policy prescriptions can be experienced as threats, and the public sphere tilts toward suspicion and escalation rather than problem solving (Iyengar et al., 2019; Druckman, 2025). The strength of these effects is contested in the research, and varies considerably across contexts (Broockman, Kalla, & Westwood, 2022). But for applied work, the practical point is consistent: when distrust runs high, communities lose their ability to hold disagreement without it spilling into open conflict.

Understanding affective polarization in these terms transforms our understanding of how to address it. Many depolarization efforts treat the problem as informational—access to facts, clearer messaging, less exposure to polarizing media (Holliday et al., 2025). Such approaches play an important role. But they cannot, on their own, restore what affective polarization disrupts: the everyday capacity for people to listen to one another and recognize a common interest in resolving shared challenges. In other words, they cannot help people stay in difficult conversations long enough to bridge differences in identity or worldview. That capacity depends on how people engage with one another, not just on their access to facts.

Together for Sooke applied a method called **presencing**, developed by Otto Scharmer and Katrin Kaufer (2025), to test what happens when civic conversation about shared challenges and potential solutions is structured so as to anchor participants in a common understanding of their community. Presencing guides participants through a sequence:

- Start with **what people are already noticing**—the recurring stories and pressures they live with day to day;
- Encourage participants to slow down to **listen for deeper, common themes beneath those stories**—the underlying needs, values, fears, and hopes that simple statements of opinion tend to obscure;
- Connect those themes to the **lived experience of place and community**—the moments and attachments that anchor people in a shared location; and
- Ask participants **what could be different** in the community and how to improve it.

The premise is that conversations structured this way create conditions different from those that polarization typically produces and that often serve to worsen polarization. Rather than rewarding the loudest or most confident voices, they reward attention and understanding. Rather than asking people to defend their positions, they ask people to describe what they are seeing and what they care about. This pilot set out to test whether such a facilitated process can shift the relational dynamics that affective polarization depends on—even modestly or temporarily.

3 Methodology

We designed this project as a real-world test of the method in a community setting, not a controlled experiment. The aim was to learn what the approach could offer practitioners in conditions they face, including small budgets, short timelines, voluntary participants, and a community already navigating the pressures the method was meant to address.

3.1 Design and research questions

We combined two information-gathering methods: a pre/post participant survey and a qualitative analysis of the dialogue transcripts. Six dialogue sessions were held in late 2025 over three weeks, on varied weekdays, weekends, and times of day, to reduce barriers to participation. The study passed an ethics review at Royal Roads University in August 2025.

The pilot was designed to answer three questions:

1. Is there evidence of affective polarization in the community?
2. What recurring narratives about the community are circulating?
3. What desires and ways of relating with each other become visible when residents engage in a presencing-informed dialogue?

3.2 Recruitment and composition

We recruited participants through a public project website, posters in community spaces (e.g., the local recreation centre, coffee shops, the public library), and posts the community partner shared on local Facebook groups. We closed sign-ups once sessions had filled. Each participant received a $50 e-gift card.

In total, 36 people registered, 24 completed the pre-workshop survey, 23 attended a dialogue (one registrant withdrew due to illness), and 16 completed the post-survey. The sample skewed older, with a median age of about 55 years old. Of participants who reported how they voted in the most recent federal election, none reported voting Conservative, in a community where 37 percent did in the 2025 federal election. This lack of Conservative-identified participants is a significant limitation when interpreting the results of the pilot: while a sample drawn only from one side of the political spectrum may be able to test a method's ability to reduce feelings of active polarization *within* that group, it fails to demonstrate its ability to bridge differences more widely.

Groups were intentionally kept small, with no more than seven participants and two facilitators. Each ran for about 75 minutes, and opened with facilitators proposing group agreements or ground rules that emphasized listening without interruption and sharing without pressure.

The dialogue itself followed a five-question arc, designed with Fireweed Learning Commons community facilitators to implement the presencing method described in Section 2:

The first two questions invite participants to describe what they are seeing in the community. The third asks them to connect what they are seeing to their lived experience. The fourth and fifth questions ask them to consider what could be different and how to get there.

Noticing narratives: *What stories do you notice coming up in our community over and over again?*

Sensing shared desires: *What do you sense this community actually wants for itself?*

Connecting to place: *Can you recall a moment when you felt deeply connected to this community or land?*

Articulating a future: *What do you want to be able to say about this community five years from now?*

Continuing the conversation: *How can we keep this kind of conversation going beyond today?*

3.3 What the surveys measured

The pre- and post-session surveys were designed to test whether a single short dialogue could produce measurable shifts in three areas:

- **Trust**—in local government, local elected officials, and fellow community members, measured on a four-point Likert scale.
- **Affective polarization**—measured using a 0–100 "feelings thermometer," a standard instrument in the polarization literature, asking participants how warm or cold they feel toward people who disagree with them about climate change.
- **Perceived community norms**—including a question on the respondent's willingness to contribute one percent of household income each month to address climate change, and an estimate of what percentage of the broader community would share their views. These items were designed to test for *pluralistic ignorance*, the common pattern in which people underestimate how widely their own views are shared.

3.4 Recording, transcription, and analysis

With participant consent, we recorded sessions and uploaded them to Cortico.AI, an AI-assisted community dialogue analysis platform, for automated transcription.[2] A research team member then reviewed the transcripts for accuracy.

The qualitative analysis prioritized interpretive depth over frequency counts. Rather than treating mentions as data points to be tallied, we read the transcripts for the narratives, tensions, and patterns that surfaced across sessions, organizing excerpts into four themes: bottleneck geography, demographic tensions, governance and communication, and desires for the future.

2 Cortico.AI is an online conversation platform for researchers and communities to understand their communities through a collaborative sensemaking process.

3.6 Strengths and limitations

Because the sample was small and not demographically representative, this pilot was exploratory, surfacing plausible patterns, tensions, and hypotheses worth investigating further. But it cannot support strong population-level claims about Sooke residents, nor causal claims about the method's impact. The pre/post survey was useful for learning about the community, but not sufficient to detect changes in affective polarization with statistical confidence. That type of finding would require larger samples, control groups, and longer-term monitoring.

The pilot is therefore best read as a first test of what a presencing-informed dialogue can reveal about a community, and how practitioners might apply the method at scale.

4 Findings

4.1 Pre-workshop survey

The pre-workshop survey asked participants about their experience of local government, their trust in different actors, their views on how Sooke is developing, and their feelings towards people who disagree with them about climate change. The patterns most relevant to the report's findings are summarized here.

Highly engaged, but unsure if participation matters

Participants described themselves as relatively engaged: most reported following local government, knowing how to get involved in local decisions, and feeling comfortable taking part in public meetings or consultations. But their answers diverged sharply on one item. Asked whether local decision makers listen to "people like me," only 37.5 percent agreed or strongly agreed; the rest were split between disagreement, neutrality, and uncertainty. The same pattern held in the trust questions: trust in fellow community members was relatively high—two thirds agreed that residents are willing to work together—but trust in local government and elected officials was low, with half of participants disagreeing that local politicians make the best decisions for the community. Taken together, these results describe a group that knows how to participate but doubts that their participation matters.

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Perceived consensus that growth is off-track

When asked whether Sooke is developing in a sustainable way that balances growth, protecting the environment, and protecting cultural heritage, participants overwhelmingly disagreed: only one of 23 respondents agreed, while 18 disagreed or strongly disagreed. Asked what percentage of the community would share their view, most respondents estimated that at least half—and often 60-80 percent—of the community would agree with them. Whatever participants thought about how development was going, they did not perceive the community as sharply divided on the question. They saw a community made up of people who broadly agreed with them that the community was heading in the wrong direction.

Cool feelings toward climate disagreement

Participants were asked how worried they were about climate change (most reported being very worried) and then, on a 0–100 feelings thermometer, how warm or cold they felt toward people who do *not* share their perspective on climate change. Most ratings fell in the cold half of the scale: of the 22 participants who described themselves as worried or very worried about climate change, only six rated those who disagreed with them at 50 or above. Seven rated them at 25 or below. In

other words, most participants viewed their community as relatively united in opposition to local development—but they reported significant emotional distance from people who think differently than they do about climate change. Thus, the data provide a strong signal of affective polarization on some issues, despite perceived alignment on other issues.

A note on the survey design: Several participants told us they found the pre/post questions difficult to answer because the response options did not leave room for the complexity of how they felt. Notably, a pre/post Likert scale and a 0–100 thermometer can capture some signals about polarization, but they may flatten the very kinds of relational complexity the dialogues were designed to reveal. It is possible, in other words, that *measured* affective polarization is partly an artifact of measurement instruments that do not allow for the ambivalence and contingency people feel toward those who disagree with them. This is a methodological limitation of pre/post surveys, and highlights the importance of the more nuanced evidence emerging from the dialogue sessions.

4.2 The workshops

Where the pre-workshop survey gave a partial picture of the relational environment in Sooke, the dialogue sessions added more depth, revealing participants' own stories about how the community feels to residents. In small, facilitated groups, participants described what they value about Sooke, what they hope is possible, what pressures shape everyday life, and what people argue about.

The four dominant themes emerging from the six sessions are presented below as interpretive syntheses rather than as sweeping characterizations of "what Sooke thinks" (the sample is too small and too non-representative for that). These syntheses offer a credible picture of the patterns and tensions a presencing-informed dialogue surfaces in polarized communities.

1. Bottleneck geography

Participants repeatedly remarked upon Sooke's geography as both a material constraint and a cultural symbol. The "one road in, one road out" nature of the town was described as a daily stressor experienced through commutes, emergency access issues, fatigue, and also as a symbol of constrained agency: things happen to Sooke that residents cannot change. At the same time, some participants said the bottleneck is part of what protects Sooke's character, slowing the kind of growth that has reshaped neighbouring communities and keeping the town affordable relative to Victoria.

A recurring loop also ran through these conversations: limited local employment forces residents to commute, commuting causes traffic and fatigue, fatigue depresses local engagement, and weak local engagement makes it harder to address the underlying problems, which forces more commuting. Population growth and development pressures then compound the loop. Participants described development as inevitable, but said infrastructure and services were not keeping pace. They also pointed to visible environmental losses to watersheds, salmon streams, and forests, as both ecological harm and as a loss of what makes Sooke recognizable to itself.

This theme reveals that polarized surface positions ("widen the road" versus "don't become Langford") reflect an interlocking set of underlying needs: mobility, safety, affordability, belonging, ecological integrity.

2. Demographic tensions and the unevenness of "community"

Participants described Sooke as having unusually rich community assets: dense volunteer networks, strong arts scenes, and tangible mutual aid in moments of need. But they also

described those assets as unevenly distributed. Many residents experience social life in Sooke as thin or age-stratified, and several recurring tensions have surfaced.

The most prominent tension was framed as a divide between "Old Sooke" and "New Sooke"—longtime residents, often with deep ties to logging, fishing, and land ownership, versus newer arrivals, drawn by nature, affordability, and small-town feel. Participants did not treat this as a simple binary. They described contradictions in both directions: long-time landowners seeking development opportunities on their own land but not wanting new people coming to Sooke; newcomers wanting to protect what attracted them while also needing the services and housing that growth would bring.

The second pattern was succession. Volunteer-led organizations, which participants described as one of Sooke's greatest strengths, were also described as fragile. Many noted that leadership is aging out and younger families are too time-pressed (work, commuting, caregiving) to take on what is being handed down. Participants also described the lack of services for teenagers who have few unstructured public spaces and limited programming. Several participants linked these patterns to a structural driver—car-dependence—that reduces the everyday encounters through which local familiarity and intergenerational connections get built.

What these tensions reveal is not disagreement about facts but unresolved questions of belonging, recognition, dignity, and continuity across generations. Communities do not depolarize themselves through better arguments about old versus new. Rather, they depolarize through addressing the everyday conditions that make different kinds of people meaningfully part of the same place.

3. Governance and communication

Participants described local governance not just as formal decision making but as a felt experience of being heard, represented, and able to influence decisions. A recurring narrative was that power and influence in Sooke are unevenly distributed. Some residents said they could engage with council but doubted whether engagement made a real difference. Others located the difficulty further upstream, at the provincial level, where housing mandates and road jurisdiction sit beyond local control—leaving residents unsure where power resides.

Participants also framed polarization itself less as a left/right split and more in relation to how information moves through the community. They described echo chambers ("we talk to the people who already agree with us because we're consuming the same things"), the negative tilt of popular local online forums, and the way that misinformation—and in some cases deliberate disinformation—makes meaningful dialogue harder. As one participant put it, "It's really hard to have a meaningful dialogue if what they're saying is something that you know to be untrue." Several participants described a basic split between two other ideas of what Sooke is: the negative, contested, often anonymous Sooke they encountered online, and the more cooperative Sooke they experienced in everyday life.

What participants are calling for here is not better messaging. It is what we might call stronger civic containers—clearer participation pathways, credible local channels for shared information, and structured settings where disagreement can be thoughtfully held.

4. Desires for the future

The final dialogue question asked participants how they could continue the conversation. Their answers, predictably, leaned heavily toward "more conversations like this one," which reflects a particular form of bias (participants were asked to imagine further conversations, and they

responded by imagining a continuation of the current conversation). But a wider pattern of aspirations also surfaced about what kind of place Sooke could become, and what concrete steps could move it in a good direction.

Five shared aspirations recurred across sessions, with participants offering practical suggestions for each.

1. ***A healthier civic culture of conversation***. Participants want Sooke to be a place where disagreement does not automatically escalate into conflict. They described a hunger for frequent, well-facilitated community conversations that:
    - engage across differences;
    - begin with lower-stakes topics and move toward contested ones as trust grows;
    - use structured dialogue formats (e.g., "conflict cafés," "human library" encounters) that make disagreements safer to navigate;
    - use listening-first formats, especially where one group has felt unheard; and
    - occur in everyday social spaces to reach residents who do not attend public meetings.
2. ***Visible and accessible "third spaces" for community life.*** Participants want places and routines that make community life feel real—spaces beyond home and work, that are relational rather than transactional, and that mix people with different identities and political leanings. Examples of third spaces shared during the dialogues include:
    - connection-through-activity gatherings (meals, outdoor activities, shared projects) explicitly designed to mix sub-communities;
    - youth-centred space and programming, including unstructured hangout space, treated as core community infrastructure; and
    - community centres, public art-making spaces, and other accessible places that give residents routine reasons to gather across differences.
3. ***Governance that feels navigable, legitimate, and transparent.*** Participants want clearer pathways into municipal decision making, more transparency about how decisions get made, and more honesty about what is and is not within local control. Specific aspirations include:
    - a simple public participation guide explaining how decisions get made, when to participate, and what happens after input is given;
    - more public access to deliberations, including making the deliberative process more visible to the public, with plain-language summaries and routine reporting;
    - issue-specific working sessions on hot-button topics (e.g., transportation, walkability) that produce a public-facing synthesis for decision makers; and
    - a targeted effort to identify and remove barriers to participation.
4. ***A community trajectory that holds development, services, and ecological protection together.*** Rather than being "for" or "against" growth, participants want development that is visibly balanced, with infrastructure that keeps pace, environmental protections that hold, and a town that supports walkability and a vibrant downtown. Some specific suggestions from participants include:
    - improvements to infrastructure that reduce daily friction, such as safe crossings, downtown improvements, and pedestrian and cycling networks;
    - green space and waterfront access initiatives that reinforce place attachment; and
    - sustainability planning upgrades that make local climate responses feel concrete and trackable.

5. ***Local resilience through practical supports.*** Participants described local change not only in terms of growth, development, or environmental loss, but in terms of whether daily life in Sooke feels manageable: whether people can afford to live there, find support when they need it, get around safely, and stay connected to one another. Their suggestions therefore focused on practical forms of support that could reduce everyday strain while strengthening connections:
    - practical mutual-support infrastructure (tool libraries, share sheds, repair/reuse) that combines cost relief with connection; and
    - local job fairs and training opportunities that make it easier for residents to live, work, and stay in Sooke.

What the four themes suggest, taken together

Reading across all four themes, a consistent picture comes into view. The main barriers to durable local decision making in Sooke are not simply gaps in information or disagreement over particular issues. They are conditions that determine whether residents can hear one another at all: how and where people are heard, where shared spaces exist, how information circulates or does not, and whether disagreement has somewhere productive to go. These are exactly the conditions that affective polarization erodes, and they are the conditions that a presencing-informed dialogue is designed to begin to rebuild.

4.3 Post-survey: How participants experienced the dialogue

The post-survey (n = 16) was not designed to detect statistical change—the sample was too small, and the survey was anonymous, which prevented tracking individual participants' responses before and after. The purpose of the survey was to reveal how participants experienced the dialogue itself, and whether they were interested in continuing the conversation.

Fourteen of the 16 respondents said that being in conversation with other community members was valuable. The most common reason, expressed by 11 participants, was hearing a wider range of perspectives—encountering, as one participant put it, "the dynamic reality of others living in the community" rather than the version filtered through their existing networks. A smaller group emphasized the experience of being heard themselves: "the opportunity to be heard is crucial." Others highlighted the value of understanding others' frustrations and emotions, the shared care for the community that surfaced even amid disagreement, and the simple opportunity to meet new people across the divides participants had named.

Thirteen of the 16 participants said they would like to see more such events in Sooke. Asked how community connection could be strengthened, suggestions clustered around bridging divides between Old and New Sooke; more structured dialogue opportunities (including a participant suggestion to "develop a series of neighbourhood dialogues, culminating in a community-wide dialogue"); use of existing third spaces (e.g., coffee shops, brew pubs) to host dialogues; and improvements to communication, transparency, and education in how local decisions get made.

The post-survey reinforces the central hypothesis of the pilot: participants found value in hearing from others, in feeling heard themselves, and in encountering a version of their community that was wider and more complex than the one they typically encountered. They wanted more of it. That preference, expressed by participants who had just spent 75 minutes in a structured conversation with strangers, is a meaningful signal in its own right.

5 Lessons for governance, planning, and civic engagement work

5.1 The method and its limitations

The dialogue method yielded specific, usable insights. Instead of immediately litigating policy solutions such as those connected to housing and transportation, the presencing-informed approach encouraged participants to describe their lived experience in Sooke: how bottleneck geography, commuting, housing pressure, ecological change, and life roles (e.g., as parents, as retirees, etc.) interact in their daily lives. This approach created space for participants to name tensions they were already living with, to surface the basic needs underpinning polarized positions, and to articulate shared aspirations with more specificity than dialogue at this scale typically produces. The ingredients of constructive engagement are consistent with what the presencing approach is designed to do, and the dialogues have successfully fostered such constructive engagement under genuinely difficult community conditions.

The method also surfaced common narratives about Sooke that community and governance stakeholders found useful. The four themes in Section 4.2 are not just topic categories—they describe the social and relational conditions that shape Sooke's collective capacity, including legitimacy, trust, information distortion, and the specific forms of disconnection that make local problem-solving difficult. In an energy transformation planning context, where the binding constraint is increasingly social coordination rather than technical feasibility, this kind of credible community knowledge is a critical input for planning.

What the method did *not* do, in a single 75-minute session, was measurably reduce affective polarization or arrive at concrete solutions. The pilot made meaningful progress through the early stages of the framework—participants heard each other's concerns and identified related patterns. But the move towards action requires more time than a single short session typically allows. In practice, this showed up as a gap between a rich description of the problem and the deeper relational work needed for participants to recognize legitimate needs across difference and act on that recognition.

A key methodological constraint helps explain this limitation. Each session worked with new groups that had no established baseline of trust and no ongoing connection. Presencing is partly cumulative: psychological safety, conversational norms, and the trust that enables vulnerability all strengthen over repeated contact. In part, this is because the pilot's timeline meant the type of engagement the method aims for could not be supported over multiple encounters with the same participants. Repeated sessions are likely needed for shared commitments and concrete next steps to emerge.

The implication for practice is clear. One-off dialogues are useful for surfacing community narratives, building initial relationships, and generating credible inputs for planning processes. But they are unlikely, on their own, to be sufficient to shift the underlying relational dynamics that affective polarization depends on—which likely requires either longer (full-day or multi-day formats) or

repeated sessions with the same cohort. Both approaches are often used in citizens' assemblies, deliberative juries, and other sustained deliberative formats. The method tested here is fully compatible with those structures.

The presencing approach may, in fact, be most powerful when integrated into such structures. Citizens' assemblies in particular open an additional door that open-call recruitment in this pilot did not: random selection from the community, which addresses both the political-diversity problem (discussed below) and the legitimacy problem of whose voices are represented in deliberation that shapes policy.

5.2 What we learned about small-group depolarization exercises

Five practical lessons stand out, which may be relevant for practitioners looking to conduct similar dialogues in their communities.

Lesson 1: **Recruit for political diversity.**

Open calls and convenience recruitment draw people who are already politically and civically engaged. For most kinds of community engagement, this is a mild limitation. For depolarization-oriented work, it could be fatal. A sample drawn from one side of the political spectrum can describe what polarization feels like from inside one political or identity group, but it cannot test whether the method bridges differences across divisions—which is the question the method seeks to answer. Despite recruitment across multiple channels, the participant pool in *Together for Sooke* ended up skewed: of those who reported recent federal voting behaviour, none reported voting Conservative, in a community where almost 40 percent of voters did so.

The practical implication is that recruitment for this kind of work needs to be treated as integral to the design of the dialogues, not as an administrative task preceding the intervention. That means segmented outreach to different social and political groups—homeowners' networks, trade associations, unions, parents' groups, outdoor recreation groups, service clubs, faith communities, longtime residents, newcomers—and recruiting through trusted intermediaries who are credible messengers within those groups. Invitations should be framed in a way that emphasizes diverse civic purposes (e.g., community wellbeing, decision-making power, and practical problem-solving) rather than identity-coded language that signals who the space is *for*. When feasible, random selection (as used in citizens' assemblies) is a stronger solution, particularly when participation is supported with childcare and compensation for people's time.

Lesson 2: **Community partners are essential.**

Local knowledge of history, relationships, informal networks, and political tensions shapes what is feasible and how invitations are interpreted. Strong local partners increase a project's ability to vet recruitment materials for tone and unintended signalling, find appropriate venues, and design a process that fits local norms. In *Together for Sooke*, recruitment relied substantially on a community partner's reach and relationships.

The lesson goes beyond having one partner, however. Logistical failures are costly in this kind of work: a partner withdrawal, a venue change, or a single recruitment channel failing to reach a particular community segment can each compromise delivery. In this pilot, an early partner withdrew because of perceived political risk associated with the topic of polarization itself—a useful reminder that community engagement can feel politically charged to local actors in ways that aren't always predictable in advance. The practical implication is that organizers should maintain at least two active partnerships with different networks and constituencies, so that recruitment does not become "selection by relationship," and so that the project is resilient to changing conditions.

Lesson 3: **Design the space for the kind of conversation you want.**

Our design used small groups (no more than seven participants and two facilitators)—enough time for everyone to contribute without it feeling like the process was lagging. We established group agreements at the start of the session that emphasized listening without interruption and sharing without pressure. Practitioners adapting this approach should resist pressure to increase group size or rush the selection process, both of which are likely to reduce the effectiveness of a method.

The choice of the room itself can also signal who the space is "for"—as can the choice of host organizations, the venue, and the comments that frame the conversation. Land acknowledgements are one example: their presence signals one set of values, their absence signals another, and either choice will affect who self-selects in or out. There is no neutral choice here. The practical implication is that practitioners should think intentionally about what the presentation of their workshop setup signals (and to whom), particularly when working in communities with active political fractures.

Lesson 4: **Use technology as an augmentation, not a substitution.**

AI-assisted tools were genuinely useful in this pilot for transcription and for organizing raw data. They did not—and could not—replace facilitation skills, trust-building, ethical judgment, or the interpretive work of qualitative analysis. Over-reliance on such tools also creates fragility: if a tool underperforms or participants mistrust it, participants may hold back or withdraw. In *Together for Sooke*, one participant withdrew after learning that AI technology would be part of the workflow.

A practical implication is that organizers should choose tools based on concrete needs (accuracy, exportability, security, ease of correction); maintain alternatives for critical functions where appropriate (recording, transcription, coding); and be transparent with participants about what the technology does and does not do, and where human verification occurs. Facilitators need to understand the tools well enough to explain them confidently and answer questions—including from participants who do not want their voices processed by AI.

Lesson 5: **Plan to adjust the method to serve the group.**

What works in the first session will not be exactly what works in the fourth. Participants will bring concerns the team did not anticipate; venues will fall through; a question may land differently than expected. Treat the facilitation guide as a living document. Keep track of what is changed and why—both to protect credibility (the project needs to be evaluable later) and to build a method that can be improved over iterations rather than restarting from scratch each time.

This is also an ethical question. A rigid plan that cannot respond to local realities can overburden partners, narrow inclusion, and produce design choices that look right on paper but feel wrong in the room.

5.3 Directions for future work

Three priorities stand out as the most useful directions for further work.

The first is to test the method in more diverse and more politically representative samples—particularly samples that include the conservative-leaning residents this pilot did not reach. Without political representation, the central question—whether the method can bridge political differences—remains unanswered.

The second priority for future work is testing longer and repeated formats. Full-day sessions, multi-session series with the same participants, or integration of presencing-informed dialogue into existing deliberative structures (e.g., citizens' assemblies, deliberative juries, multi-stage Official Community Plan processes, or community energy planning) would allow the transformative potential of presencing to prove itself. A method that produces useful outputs in 75 minutes is genuinely useful; a method that produces durable, long-term shifts in how a community navigates disagreement would be more useful still.

The third and most ambitious priority points back to where this report began. The clean energy transformation will be won or lost in part through local planning fights—over density, transit, building codes, watershed protection, zoning—and these are exactly the fights that organized polarization campaigns are increasingly fuelling. Conventional public consultation has limited capacity to absorb such pressure. A community with frequent, well-facilitated public engagement infrastructure—running ongoing dialogues rather than only when a controversy erupts—may be better placed to recognize and metabolize such pressure when it arrives. The findings of this pilot suggest, but were unable to test, whether sustained civic infrastructure of this kind could inoculate communities against organized polarization campaigns. This promising method deserves further study and experimentation.

6 Conclusion

Together for Sooke demonstrates that presencing-informed community dialogue can surface rich, actionable knowledge about a community's social field—the relational conditions that make collective decision making easier or harder—even under real-world constraints of time, budget, and imperfect participation. The pilot pointed to the reality of affective polarization in Sooke and illuminated the interlocking pressures behind it: geography and growth, uneven belonging, and governance environments that tend to reward the loudest voices rather than the most representative ones. At the same time, it revealed genuine assets, including strong mutual aid, deep place attachment, and a desire for more and better civic conversations that a sustained dialogue practice could build on.

The clearest next steps are also the hardest: recruiting across the political spectrum, working with the same participants over several sessions to foster the relational depth the presencing framework requires, and establishing structured dialogue as a community infrastructure foundation. Communities that take these steps will be far better able to navigate the clean energy transformation that climate change requires.

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Appendix:
Implementation resources

This guide describes how to run a presencing-informed community dialogue of the kind tested in the *Together for Sooke* pilot. It is written for local democracy practitioners, including municipal staff, planners, elected officials, community-based organizations, and public engagement professionals who are working on contested local issues and looking for a structured way to support residents in listening across differences.

The guide is informed by what the *Together for Sooke* team learned in delivering six sessions in late 2025, including what worked well, what didn't, and what we would do differently. Lessons specific to the pilot appear throughout in callout boxes; the rest of the guide is intended to be adaptable to other communities and other issues.

A note before you begin. This guide tells you how to run a session. It cannot, on its own, make you a good facilitator. If you have not run small-group, facilitated processes before, partner with someone who has. The quality of these dialogues depends substantially on the skill and presence of the people in the facilitator chairs. The method is most useful when:

- Your community is navigating a contested issue, and conventional consultation is producing more heat than light.
- You want to understand the narratives, tensions, and underlying needs in the community before designing a planning or engagement process, not just collect positions on a specific proposal.
- You have time for something beyond a single open house or council presentation.
- You can recruit a politically and demographically diverse group, or are willing to work hard to do so.
- You have access to skilled facilitation.

1.1 Resourcing

A realistic estimate of what running this method requires.

Time	• Two to four weeks of recruitment, ideally longer for a politically diverse sample • Seventy-five minutes per session minimum (90+ is better); plan for six sessions to start • Two to four hours of facilitator preparation per session • Eight to 12 hours of analysis time per session if you are doing qualitative analysis of the transcripts • Additional time if you are integrating the output into a planning process
People	• Two facilitators per session (one to guide, one to track) • A community partner or partners with access to the populations you want to recruit • A note-taker or transcription process • An analyst (can be one of the facilitators) for the qualitative work
Budget	• Participant honoraria: budget $40–$75 per participant if possible to compensate people for their time and participation. • Venue costs (where applicable). Many community spaces (e.g., libraries, recreation centres, faith-based halls) can be accessed at low or no cost. • A small budget for coffee, tea, and light snacks. People like snacks! • Transcription where applicable. • Recruitment costs (posters, social media, paid local advertising)
Skill	• Group facilitation experience, including an ability to manage both silence and conflict • Familiarity with qualitative analysis if you intend to use the transcripts as data • Cultural and political literacy of the local context, either from the facilitators directly or through community partners

Lesson from Sooke. Our budget was modest, and our timeline was three weeks for session delivery. Both were workable but tight. If we ran it again, we would give more time to recruit for diversity, particularly among politically under-represented communities, before sessions started. We would also budget more time for facilitator preparation before each session.

1.2 Setting it up

Recruit deliberately for diversity

Open calls draw the already engaged. For a method designed to bridge differences, this is the single biggest thing to get right.

- **Map your community before you recruit.** Identify the social, political, and demographic publics you want to reach: longtime residents, newer arrivals, homeowners, renters, parents of young children, retirees, trade associations, unions, faith communities, outdoor recreation groups, service clubs, residents from different parts of town.
- **Recruit through trusted intermediaries.** A flyer in the library reaches people who use the library. To reach others, work through people who are already credible inside their networks. Ask partners for warm introductions.

- **Frame invitations around shared civic purposes,** not identity. "Help us understand what this community is navigating" works; "Join a conversation on climate justice" filters in advance.
- **Track who is signing up and who isn't,** and adjust recruitment accordingly. If after the first week you notice a particular community segment is missing, do something specific about it before you proceed.
- **Consider random selection** if your context allows. Citizens' assemblies and similar deliberative formats use random sortition for a reason: it solves the recruitment-skew problem at the root.

Lesson from Sooke. Despite multi-channel recruitment, our final sample was politically skewed: of participants who reported how they voted federally, none had voted Conservative. This significantly limits what we can claim about the method's capacity to bridge across political differences. If you are running this method to test or address polarization, treat recruitment as the design problem, not as administrative work.

Find the right partners

It's good to have at least two, in case one has to withdraw.

- **Look for partners with access to different parts of the community.** A civic group plus a service organization. A neighbourhood association plus a faith community. The point is that recruitment shouldn't depend on a single set of relationships.
- **Vet recruitment materials with partners** for tone, framing, and unintended signalling—especially anything that might read as politically coded.
- **Have a plan for partner withdrawal.** Local conditions can shift; a partner who was enthusiastic in month one may not be by month three. Build-in resilience.

Lesson from Sooke. An early partner in our pilot withdrew because of perceived political risk associated with the topic of polarization itself. This is worth being honest about: the work can feel sensitive to local actors in ways that aren't always predictable. Maintain redundancy.

Choose a venue that signals openness

The room itself shapes perceptions about the nature of the work.

- **Neutral ground:** Neutral or community-coded venues work better than venues associated with a specific political or institutional position. Public libraries, recreation centres, community halls. Be cautious about venues that are themselves the subject of community contention.
- **Circle up:** Round tables or chairs in a circle—not auditorium seating, nor a long boardroom table, if possible.
- **Quiet down:** Avoid spaces with foot traffic, loud HVAC, or thin walls. Participants need to be able to hear each other and feel that the conversation is contained.
- **Choose rituals with care:** Land acknowledgements, decor, host organization branding, opening remarks—these all signal who the space is "for." Any choice will affect who self-selects in or out. There is no neutral default; be intentional and be honest with yourself about the trade-offs of what you choose.

Schedule for participation, not for convenience

- **Vary days and times** across the series. Working parents, shift workers, and commuters will have different windows of availability.
- **Avoid scheduling sessions back-to-back** in the same week. Facilitators need recovery time; participants need scheduling flexibility.
- **Keep sessions to 75–90 minutes.**
- **Build in 15-minute buffers** at start and end. People will arrive late and want to talk after.

Communicate clearly and proactively about technology choices

- **Decide what gets recorded, transcribed, and analyzed,** and how.
- **If you use AI-assisted tools** (transcription services or dialogue platforms with relevant cloud storage and privacy), name them in the consent process and explain what they do. Some participants may opt out; design for that possibility.
- **Always have a low-tech backup,** such as a second recording device, a way to take notes by hand, or a process for capturing the session if technology fails.

Lesson from Sooke. One participant withdrew from our pilot after learning that AI-assisted transcription would be part of the workflow. This is a legitimate response, not a failure. The lesson is to be transparent up front and to be prepared for some participants to decline on this basis.

Prepare your facilitators

Two facilitators per session is ideal, and their preparation matters as much as their presence on the day.

- Review the question arc together.
- **Practice holding silence.** This is the skill most often missed. After a question, participants need time to think. Premature speaking from a facilitator flattens the depth the method depends on.
- **Discuss in advance what to do if** someone dominates the conversation, someone gets emotional, someone becomes hostile, the conversation veers off-track, or no one speaks. Each of these can realistically happen.
- **Agree on roles.** One facilitator typically leads, the other tracks group energy, watches the time, and supports as needed. Switch leads between questions if both are skilled.
- A presencing-informed dialogue is not a script you deliver. It is a process you hold. Done well, it requires the facilitator to:
- **Do their own listening work.** Facilitators who arrive with strong views about the topic—and most facilitators of climate or planning work will have strong views—need to put those views aside. For some, this can be harder than it sounds.
- **Manage the arc, not the answers.** Your job is to hold the structure of the conversation so the group can explore it. It is not to lead the group toward a particular conclusion. If you find yourself nudging the conversation toward what you wanted to hear, stop.
- **Hold silence.** A long pause after a hard question or heated response is not a failure. It is the space in which something more interesting than the first answer becomes possible.
- **Resist the temptation to fix or solve.** Participants may name pain, frustration, grief, or anxiety. Your role is not to resolve any of it. It is to receive it, hold it, and let the unfolding conversation do the rest of the work.
- **Read the room.** Who has spoken and who hasn't? Who looks ready to say something and is waiting? Whose body language has shifted?
- **Stay grounded.** If the conversation gets difficult, your job is to remain present. Participants will follow your nervous system more than your words.

1.3 Running the session

What follows is the structure of a session, with facilitator notes for each step. The script in the templates section at the end of this guide is more granular; this section is the operating logic underneath it.

Before participants arrive (15 minutes)

- Set up the room. Chairs in a circle or around a round table. No podium. Materials within reach: name tags (first names only), water, light refreshments.
- Test recording equipment, including the backup. Confirm the AI-assisted transcription tool, if you're using one, is connected and ready.
- Walk through the arc with your co-facilitator one more time. Confirm who leads which questions.
- Greet each participant individually as they arrive. This matters more than you may think. The first 90 seconds with a participant shape what they will and won't share later.

Welcome and consent (3–5 minutes)

A short opening that does three things: makes participants feel welcome, explains what's going to happen, and confirms consent for recording. The script in the templates does this in a particular way; what matters is that participants:

- Know who you are;
- Know what the session is for and how the material will be used;
- Have an opportunity to confirm they consent to being recorded and the name they are identifying with;
- Understand they can leave at any time, though their contributions to the recording up to that point will remain.

Don't rush this part. A participant who feels unclear about consent will not participate fully, and their reluctance will affect everyone else in the room.

Group agreements (2 minutes)

Speak the agreements aloud. The agreements that worked in the Sooke pilot:

- Listening without interruption.
- Sharing without pressure (you can pass).
- One person speaks at a time.
- What's said in the room stays in the room (with the recording exception clearly noted).
- Take care of yourself; step out if you need to.

Ask the group whether anyone wants to add or change anything. They rarely do, but the asking matters.

Connecting question (8–10 minutes)

A light opening question, asked round-robin. The Sooke pilot used What's something you think is cool about, or in, this place?

The point of the connecting question is not the content. It's to:

- Establish the round-robin pattern (each person speaks; no one is forgotten)
- Let everyone hear their own voice in the room early
- Lower the stakes before the harder questions arrive

Both facilitators should answer the question themselves. This models length, register, and willingness to be specific. Don't go first as a facilitator unless you're prepared to keep your answer short.

The five-question arc (50–60 minutes)

The heart of the method. Each question gets approximately 10 minutes. Hold the structure but follow the conversation: if a question lands deeply and the group is still working on it at minute 12, give them another 90 seconds before moving on.

The five questions, with facilitator notes:

QUESTION 1: Noticing narratives.
What stories do you notice coming up in our community over and over again?
This question asks participants to describe what they're observing rather than what they think. They don't have to share their opinions; instead they get to share what they've heard in the community, whether or not they agree with it.

QUESTION 2: Sensing shared desires.
What do you sense this community actually wants for itself?
The shift from question 1 to question 2 aims to take participants into a deeper engagement with how they understand the community.

Question 3: Connecting to place.
Can you recall a moment when you felt deeply connected to this community or land?
By being asked to recall an experience of deep connection, participants are invited to ground into what they love about their community.

Question 4: Articulating a future.
What do you want to be able to say about this community five years from now?
A forward-looking question that asks participants to commit to specifics. The phrase "want to be able to say" matters. Framing the question in this manner allows people to imagine themselves in the future, rather than simply asking what they want to happen.

Question 5: Continuing the conversation.
How can we keep this kind of conversation going beyond today?
This is a practical closing question. Participants will give you a range of answers—some about the dialogue method itself, some about what their community would need for sustained civic conversation, some that go in unexpected directions.

Closing (3–5 minutes)

Don't summarize what was said. Instead:

- Thank participants briefly and specifically.
- Remind them what happens next (post-survey, gift card, when they'll hear from you).
- Stop the recording explicitly, in the room.
- Offer space for any final comments off the record.
- Let people linger if they want to. The post-session conversation between participants is often where something else happens.

Things that can go wrong

Someone dominates the conversation. This is the most common failure mode. One participant takes more airtime than the others, often without noticing. A round-robin format helps prevent this, but it doesn't eliminate it. What to do: name the structure, not the person. "I want to make sure we hear from everyone—let's hear from [name of participant who hasn't spoken yet]." Don't apologize for redirecting; participants who haven't spoken will be grateful, and the dominating speaker is rarely as offended as facilitators fear.

Someone becomes hostile. Less common, but it happens—especially if a participant disagrees strongly with what someone else has said or with the framing of a question. What to do: don't engage on the substance. Acknowledge the feeling ("I can hear this is frustrating"), reaffirm the agreements ("we're listening without interrupting here"), and offer the person who reacted strongly a way back into the conversation ("can you tell us more about what you're noticing?").

No one speaks. You ask a question and get nothing. Your instinct might be to fill the silence, but instead, let it sit. If after 30-45 seconds no one has spoken, you can offer a small invitation ("take your time"), but resist the urge to rephrase the question or answer it yourself. Participants are thinking.

Someone gets emotional. Question 3 (connecting to place) can bring up strong feelings, sometimes unexpectedly. What to do: don't make it bigger or smaller than it is. Here, too, "take your time" works. The other participants in the room will hold space if you do.

1.4 Analyzing the results

A 75-minute session generates a lot of material: an audio recording, a transcript, observation notes from both facilitators, and the post-session impressions you'll want to capture before they fade.

How you choose to use this material depends on your motive for running the sessions in the first place. A few common cases:

If the dialogue is feeding into a community planning process:

- Identify the recurring narratives across sessions, the underlying needs participants surface beneath those narratives, and the future aspirations they articulate.
- Bring these to the planning team as input alongside the technical and statutory work—not as a replacement for it.
- Consider a public-facing synthesis (a short report, a community presentation) that lets participants and others see what came out. People who participated want to know what their words contributed to.

If the dialogue is testing the method itself or studying community dynamics:

- Plan for qualitative analysis time. Reading transcripts well takes longer than people expect.
- Consider having two analysts code independently and compare, to surface what each is noticing and missing.
- Be transparent in any reporting about sample composition and what it does and doesn't allow you to claim.

If the dialogue is the start of developing ongoing civic infrastructure:

- Tell participants what's next, and follow through. Trust is built by showing up again.
- Consider mixing the same participants and new ones across subsequent sessions. The method strengthens with sustained practice; some continuity matters.
- Document the method as you adapt it locally. What's in this guide is a starting point, not a fixed recipe.

In all cases:

- **Share something back with participants.** A summary, a thank-you, a heads-up when something they said shows up in a public report. This shows respect for the time they gave you and builds trust over time.
- **Treat the recordings carefully.** Identifying material can come from many small pieces of context, especially in small communities. Anonymize aggressively when reporting, and check with participants if you're unsure whether a particular detail might identify them.

2. Templates and starting materials

The following materials, adapted from the *Together for Sooke* pilot, are starting points for your own implementation. Each will need to be tailored to your project, your partners, and your community.

Participant consent form

Project title:
Research lead:
Contact:

Purpose of the project
The [Project Title] are part of a research project studying how communities can strengthen understanding and reduce polarization around complex issues relevant to the community. The project aims to identify practices that support constructive dialogue and build shared understanding in [community].

What participation involves
You are invited to take part in a small-group dialogue lasting approximately **60–75 minutes**. The session will be audio-recorded to help us analyze patterns of conversation and community values. During the session, you'll be invited to share your experiences, perspectives, and hopes for the community. Participation is voluntary, and there are no right or wrong answers.

Use of data
[Project lead] and their research partners will use recordings and transcripts for research and learning purposes.

Your data may be analyzed using **[name of platform or tool]**, which helps identify themes and insights from conversations. **[Name of platform or tool]** will only access de-identified audio and transcripts for processing.

Findings from this project may be shared in public reports, presentations, and academic publications. Any quotes used will not include your name or identifying details.

Data storage and privacy
- Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on XXX
- Only the research team will have access to identifiable data.
- De-identified data may be retained for future research on dialogue and community engagement.
- Voluntary participation and right to withdraw
- Your participation is completely voluntary. You may choose not to answer any question or to leave the dialogue at any time.

Please note: once the recording has started, while you may leave the session, it will **not be possible to remove your contributions** from the group recording or transcript. However, we will exclude any identifiable comments from public reports if you request it before the data is analyzed.

Consent
Please read the statements below and check each box to indicate your consent:
I have read and understood the information above.
☐ I understand that participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time.
☐ I consent to the audio recording of my dialogue session.
☐ I consent to my de-identified data being analyzed and used for research and public reporting.
☐ I consent to my data being processed using [name of platform or tool].

Name: _____
Signature: _____
Date: _____

Contact with questions or concerns
If you have any questions about this project or your participation, please contact:
If you have concerns about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the **Research Ethics Board** at [REB contact email/phone].

Email templates

First contact

Subject: [Project title] participation confirmation

Hi [Participant Name],

Thanks so much for signing up for the [Project Title]. You're confirmed for:

When:
Where:

Sessions run 60–75 minutes (depending on group size). Everyone will have a chance to participate, and snacks and refreshments will be provided.A few days before your dialogue, I'll email you a short pre-survey (5–7 minutes) and a consent form so you know exactly how we'll use the ideas we gather.

If you have any accessibility needs, questions, or if your plans change, just hit reply—I'm happy to help.

Looking forward to being in conversation with you,
[Project lead]

Pre-survey/consent

Dear [Participant Name],
Thank you again for joining the [project]. We're looking forward to your session on:

Date: [Insert Date]
Time: [Insert Time]
Location: [Insert Location]

As part of the process, please complete the short pre-survey **before** your session. It helps us better understand the community's experiences and perspectives.**Pre-survey link:** XXX

Attached is the **consent form** for your participation in your dialogue. You have two options for signing:

Sign digitally (e-signature or scanned copy) and email it back to us at XXX.
OR
Sign a hard copy in person when you arrive at the session.

If you have any questions about the project or the consent process, feel free to reach out.

We appreciate your time and your willingness to participate in this community dialogue.

Warmly,
[Project lead]

Post-event email and survey

Dear [Participant Name],

Thank you so much for your participation in the recent [project] session. The last step in the research process is to complete a post-event survey, with the following link: XXX Upon completion, I will send a final email with an e-gift card.

Thank you so much for your contributions. They are deeply appreciated and will be used to better understand and support our community. When we complete the report, we will circulate it to participants, likely [give a date range].

Warmly,

[Project lead]

3. Recruitment

Recruitment framing

A few principles for invitation language that work better than the alternatives:

- **Lead with the community, not the topic.** "Help us understand what this community is navigating" works better than "Join a conversation on climate change."
- **Be specific about what participants will do.** "A 75-minute small-group conversation with up to 6 other residents" is clearer than "join a dialogue."
- **Name the honorarium.** People want to know they're being compensated and what for.
- **Avoid identity-coded language.** Words like "justice," "climate change," and "transition" all signal who the space is "for." Where possible, use language that doesn't pre-filter your participants.
- **Make it easy to sign up.** A short web form, three or four fields. Don't ask for demographic information at sign-up unless you're going to use it for targeting ongoing recruitment.

Recruitment materials: Website landing page copy

Building the future of [community] together

How can we move forward as a community—even when we don't all agree?
His project explores that question by creating space for deeper listening, respectful dialogue, and collective visioning in [community].

At a time when many communities are struggling with division, [host] is piloting a new way to strengthen democracy from the ground up. Working in collaboration with [partner], this initiative supports inclusive public dialogue around [community's] future—especially in the context of [specific issues].

What's this project about?
This project creates a **local conversation network**—a process where [community] residents can:

- Share their views and values in safe, small-group settings
- Listen deeply across differences
- Explore what matters most for [community]'s future
- Build trust and mutual understanding
- See their voices reflected in the visioning process

Together, we're creating opportunities for democratic participation that go beyond town halls and public hearings—offering a more inclusive, relational, and community-driven way to shape the future.

Join us
Whether you're hopeful, frustrated, curious, or concerned—we want to hear from you. Sign up for a dialogue session and help shape the future of [community].