



# The Commonwealth Conversation

HOSTED BY THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY

## HOW TO CONDUCT A COMMONWEALTH CHAT

### 1. INTRODUCTION

The Royal Commonwealth Society (RCS) would like to engage as many people as possible around the world in the Commonwealth Conversation. One important way that you can help us to do this is to facilitate a 'Commonwealth Chat' in your local area. What you discuss in your chats will then be fed into the wider Conversation and eventually into recommendations that we will present to all Commonwealth Heads of Government at their meeting in Trinidad & Tobago in November 2009.

By facilitating a Commonwealth Chat, you will be helping to make sure your community's voice is heard in the Commonwealth Conversation – this is your chance to help shape your Commonwealth in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

You also have the chance to win exciting prizes as a facilitator. The facilitator of the best Commonwealth Chat report will win up to £200 worth of Amazon.com vouchers!

This document tells you how you could conduct a Commonwealth Chat of your own, and how to tell us what was said.

### 2. WHY DO WE NEED A COMMONWEALTH CONVERSATION?

Sixty years ago, as the modern Commonwealth was born, brave decisions were taken by its founding fathers to raise a free and equal association of states committed to democracy, development and diversity from the ashes of Empire. Since its remarkable beginnings, the Commonwealth has achieved much of which it can be rightfully proud. Yet, in an increasingly crowded marketplace of international associations, the Commonwealth must reevaluate how it can live up to the lofty ambitions of its earliest beginnings.

In 2009, both the Commonwealth's 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year and its Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), offer the perfect opportunity for the Commonwealth to revisit how it can continue adding value to the international community in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Encompassing two billion people the world over, the Commonwealth's true potential lies in its continued relevance to its citizens. With this in mind, the RCS, the oldest and largest civil society organisation devoted to the Commonwealth, is facilitating a global public consultation on the future of the association. This is the Commonwealth Conversation.

### 3. WHAT IS A COMMONWEALTH CHAT?

A group of 6-8 people brought together by a **group facilitator (you)** in an open-ended discussion for around 1 ½ hours to gain an understanding of their diverse personal experiences, knowledge and opinions on a particular topic.

### 4. WHO CAN TAKE PART IN A COMMONWEALTH CHAT?

The beauty of hosting a Commonwealth Chat is that anyone can take part. If you bring together a group of people who are very knowledgeable about the Commonwealth, we'd love to hear what they think. However, if you are able to form a Commonwealth Chat with people who know nothing at all about the Commonwealth, their views are just as important.

We see two main types of people that you could ask to be involved in your Commonwealth Chat:

- *People you already know well:* these could be colleagues from work, people from your place of worship, your local sports club, music group, business network, youth group, political association, other interest group or club, or even just your friends.
- *People you don't know well:* if you feel confident, it would be very interesting if you could facilitate a discussion with a group of people that you do not know well. For example, if you are member of an RCS branch, why not approach a local community group and ask if you can facilitate a discussion among their members?

When selecting the 6-8 people to take part in the Commonwealth Chat, please only include people over 16 years old. We also suggest that you choose people who are broadly similar in terms of age, interest areas, to make the chat easier for you.

If you would like to engage people under 16 years old, there is a specific exercise available on the Commonwealth Conversation website for young people to think creatively about the topic. This would probably be more appropriate for them.

[www.thecommonwealthconversation.org/get-involved](http://www.thecommonwealthconversation.org/get-involved)

Please remember you can organise more than one group. Any time you can spare would of course be much appreciated, but if you have time to facilitate two, three – even four – that would be excellent!

### 5. WHAT IS YOUR ROLE AS A GROUP FACILITATOR?

- To identify 6-8 people who would be willing to take part in a discussion. The RCS is happy to offer guidance in how to recruit participants for your group if necessary.
- To arrange a room where a discussion can be held for around 1 ½ hours.
- To familiarise yourself with the discussion guide, to be provided by the RCS in London.

- Use the discussion guide to facilitate the discussion. You should make sure everyone feels comfortable and contributes to the discussion. You should introduce a topic area, listen carefully to the responses (what is said as well as *how* it is said) and go along with the conversation, while gently controlling the discussion so all the central issues are covered.
- To tape, digitally record, or write up notes from the discussion. If you do record the group, you will need to make sure that you inform participants what the recording will be used for, and ask them all to sign a consent form. This will be provided with the discussion guide that will be provided by the RCS.
- To provide basic information about the people who took part in your Commonwealth Chat.
- To send us a report of your discussion (see point 10 below).

## 6. HOW MUCH DO I NEED TO KNOW ABOUT THE COMMONWEALTH?

There is no requirement for Commonwealth Chat facilitators to become experts in the Commonwealth overnight! You may know a lot about the Commonwealth as a member of a Commonwealth association, group or network, or you may know very little about it at all. We want as many people to get involved as possible – no matter how much you know, or even like, about the association.

That said, as the facilitator of the Commonwealth Chat, it is important that you have a basic understanding about Commonwealth and the aims of the Commonwealth Conversation project. The Conversation website is a good starting point for you to find out more. In particular, there are resource materials about the Commonwealth, and a leaflet about the Conversation available to download. The discussion guide that will be provided by the RCS in London will give you a good idea about the type of questions to ask, a format for the discussion, and information about the Commonwealth to give out to your participants. See here for more information: [www.thecommonwealthconversation.org/get-involved](http://www.thecommonwealthconversation.org/get-involved).

In addition, the Useful Links section of the website has links to a number of other Commonwealth websites that should be helpful: [www.thecommonwealthconversation.org/useful-links](http://www.thecommonwealthconversation.org/useful-links).

## 7. THE DISCUSSION

**Introduction** – it is important that all the participants are made to feel comfortable and that ground rules are set out. It is best that chairs are organised in a circle and that everyone has been offered refreshments. ‘Rules’ might include allowing everyone time to speak and respecting everyone’s opinions. It is important to let participants know how long it will last. If you have the equipment and are going to record the discussion, please also let them know, but assure them that their comments will remain confidential.

**Ending** – before the last set of questions, you should inform the group that it will end soon. After that last question, you should ask the group if they have any questions or anything further to add before asking them to complete the questionnaire and thanking them.

**Group Dynamics** – the group will go through a ‘lifecycle’ as people get to know each other.

- Forming –the group is just getting started and might be a bit shy. You should make everyone feel at ease.
- Storming – individuals in the group will adopt roles, which you should be aware of. Who is the chatterbox and who is shy?
- Performing – the group is most productive and will talk freely about their experiences and opinions. You can challenge or promote debate at this point.
- Mourning - after you announce the group is about to end, the group becomes a bit downbeat. They have enjoyed it and do not want to go!

## 8. PARTICIPANTS

All participants are different – their differences make the discussion interesting and everyone needs to be heard. Below are a few types of participants you might come across and tips for dealing with them:

- *Chatterbox* – either withdraw eye contact or turn away from them, or:
  - acknowledge contribution – ‘Thank you John, an interesting opinion’
  - remind them of the facilitator’s role – ‘As I said earlier, my job is to make sure everyone gets their point across, so can I hear from others now?’
- *Shy respondent* – ask open ended questions and reward their responses ‘that’s really interesting’. Do not fill their silence for them: they need space to talk.
- *Negative/critical respondent* – acknowledge their criticism but ask them to suggest a constructive contribution, ‘Great, I’ve heard the downside of the XXX, what would you suggest to make this better?’

Above all, start early by smiling and getting people’s eye contact. Make a note of people’s names at the beginning and address them personally throughout the discussion.

## 9. TIPS ON FACILITATING

- If you have one, ensure the tape/digital recorder is working before the discussion starts.
- If you don’t have a tape recorder, make sure you identify someone else to write notes during the discussion – you won’t have time when you are facilitating.
- Ask open-ended questions (Who, What, Why (interrogative), Where, When, How) not (are..., is..., do..., did...).

- Be careful that open-ended questions are not leading. Avoid asking questions like 'What do you think makes the Commonwealth so terrible at XXX?'
- The discussion guide is just a guide – you don't need to stick to it. If a question is covered in another section, do not repeat it. Try and memorise the main points so that you can bring the discussion back if it wanders off too far.
- Use 'active listening' to go with the flow of conversation – build subsequent questions on what you hear and what you do not (including body language).
- Use probes and prompts to find out more (tell me more about..., I wonder what..., that's interesting..., uh huh..., why do you say that...?)
- Get others in the group involved ('what kind of feelings do people have about...?', what does everyone think about...?, how general is this view...?)
- Summarise the key points made at the end of topic areas, but be careful that you don't put words into peoples' mouths and give them space to confirm or disagree ('what I'm hearing is..., I'm picking up a sense of...).
- Be open-minded, empathic and non-judgmental – there are no right or wrong answers in your mind.
- Give people permission to disagree but make sure they respect what everyone else says. Do not block 'active listening' by identifying too strongly with one person.
- Do not worry if there are pauses or silences. This is not necessarily a bad thing as the participants may just be thinking about a question.
- Be fully engaged and full of curiosity!

## 10. SENDING THE INFORMATION TO THE RCS

You can let us know the results of your discussion in a number of ways:

- If you have a video or audio recording of your discussion, you can email it through to Zoë Ware at [zoe.ware@thercs.org](mailto:zoe.ware@thercs.org) (if it is small enough)
- You can also post your reports and recordings to Zoë Ware at the Royal Commonwealth Society, 25 Northumberland Avenue, London, WC2N 5AP. If possible, please make sure they are in digital format on a CD ROM.
- If you do not have a recording, please write up a report of your Commonwealth Chat, highlighting the key discussion points and findings. You can email this through to Zoë Ware at [zoe.ware@thercs.org](mailto:zoe.ware@thercs.org). Some guidance about how to write up your report will be given in the discussion guide to be provided by the RCS in London.
- In all cases, please make sure that you give a brief summary about the type of people that took part in your Commonwealth Chat. If you don't know this information already, asking it at the start of the discussion might be a nice ice-breaker, to get people to introduce themselves. You should NOT give us the names of the people who took part in the discussion. Please collect the following information:
  - How many people took part?
  - What nationalities are the participants?

- What age range are they from? Please indicate the numbers of people from each of the following age ranges: 16-18; 18-30; 30-40; 40-50; 50-60; 60-70; 70+
- What do participants do for a living?

## 11. HOW WILL THE RESULTS BE USED?

The results of your Commonwealth Chat will be used in the following ways:

- Ideas and conclusions from your group will be used in the drafting of the recommendations from the Commonwealth Conversation to Heads of Commonwealth Governments at CHOGM.
- Extracts from your discussion may be uploaded onto the Commonwealth Conversation website, for others to comment on. However, nothing will be reproduced without the permission of your participants.
- Examples from your discussions may be used as case studies in the final report of the Commonwealth Conversation which will be completed in January 2010.

## 12. TIMEFRAME

The Commonwealth Conversation will be running from 20 July 2009 until the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Trinidad & Tobago at the end of November 2009. In order to make sure that the results of your Commonwealth Chat are fed into the recommendations that we take to CHOGM, please make sure that you send us the results of your discussions by **FRIDAY 30 OCTOBER 2009**.

## 13. PRIZES

After 30 October 2009, we will look at all the recordings and reports submitted by Commonwealth Chat facilitators from across the Commonwealth. The top three Commonwealth Chat reports will be judged by the Commonwealth Conversation project team. The facilitators who wrote the best records will be awarded prizes:

- First prize = £200 Amazon.com vouchers;
- Second prize = £100 Amazon.com vouchers;
- Third prize = £50 Amazon.com vouchers.

## 14. FURTHER QUESTIONS

If you have any further questions about facilitating your own Commonwealth Chat, or you would like to discuss the Commonwealth Conversation project in more detail, please contact Zoë Ware on +44 (0)20 7766 9240 or [zoe.ware@thercs.org](mailto:zoe.ware@thercs.org).

**THANK YOU VERY MUCH FOR YOUR INTEREST IN THE COMMONWEALTH CONVERSATION.**

**WE LOOK FORWARD TO HEARING WHAT YOU AND YOUR GROUP HAVE TO SAY!**