NOT ANOTHER BORING MEETING!

When exploring ideas and making decisions consider alternatives to general discussions.

 If you want to keep people interested (particularly in a community setting where people are likely to be attending a meeting on their own time) it is important to keep a meeting lively and interactive.

To do this you could try using some of the following techniques:

Brainstorming
List as many ideas as quickly as possible. Don't stop to evaluate, discuss or criticise. It is surprising how many ideas can be generated and how even the most off-the-wall ideas can spark creative thinking and inspire something really useful;

Pairing off and small groups
Talking something through in small groups or pairs offers people the opportunity to listen to each other and a less threatening space to give their views. It is a good way to make sure everyone feels heard and a useful way to deal with a difficult issue, since people are more ready to listen once they have had a chance to speak their mind. Someone from each small group can then give a summary report on their discussion.

Round-Robin Reporting
Go around the group asking each person to respond to the question or proposal at hand. This technique gets everyone's input and helps keep anyone from dominating a discussion.

Another possibility is to get each person to write down several ideas, then go around the group and let each give one idea.

Straw Polls
When faced with a list of options, straw polls provide an alternative to voting. Try giving each person two to four votes (depending on the length of the list and number of people) to distribute among the choices. This helps to get the sense of the group without forcing a decision and encourages people to express support for more than one idea. Eliminate ideas with little or no support and focus on the remaining options.

Listing Pros and Cons
This is a good way to evaluate an idea and helps people see both sides of a proposal. Divide a flip chart page into 'pros' and 'cons' and let people list all the advantages and disadvantages they can think of.

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Spider Diagrams

Spider diagrams can be useful for brainstorming exercises but often they do not produce very detailed or structured information and ideas. One way of increasing the level of detail and structure into the technique is to look at the barriers to each point marked on the diagram.

An example - Groups of 4 – 5 people work together and write a topic for discussion in the centre of a large piece of paper (or draw a symbol to represent it). The main issues related to the topic can then be added as the 'legs' of the spider

- People then plot the barriers to each issue along each line using a different coloured pen
- The group can then vote to decide which barrier is the most important and develop ideas for change that can be taken forward using an action planning table

Action Planning Tables

These simple tables are very good for structuring and following through ideas into action plans. The headings can be changed depending on the objectives of the exercise but it is advisable to keep them to very straightforward questions. When people are filling in these diagrams encourage them to complete each row first rather than each column; then if the group takes longer than you anticipate they have some ideas followed through

Action planning tables can be linked with other tools. For example they can follow a post-it consultation once the ideas have been ranked in order of priority.

An example of an Action Planning Table: ideas for change in the community

Idea for change	Why is this important	How could it be done?	Who would it involve?	What would be the barriers	When should this happen?
Open a drop-in centre for young people	There is nothing to do at night and we just hang about the streets	There are some shops that are empty on the High Street and it could be opened there	US Parents The council School	Money Getting everyone to agree	A.S.A.P.

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Impact-ranking

You could take ideas forward to look at which ones are easy or difficult to implement or which would have the greatest impact using an impact-ranking diagram. For example the issues that score the highest from a voting exercise can then be taken up and placed on an impact-ranking diagram.

An example: Young people's suggestions on ways to reduce crime in the area

Draw out the impact-ranking diagram and ask everyone to place the post-its into which box they feel is best.

	Easy to do	Fairly easy to do	Hard to do
High impact	Make a decent football pitch Bring back community police.	CCTV near the shops	Stop the drug problem
Medium Impact	Remove the litter bins as people set fire to them	Set up a neighbourhood watch	
Low impact			

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