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Crowd Wise

Turning differences into effective decisions

Crowd Wise is a participative method for taking shared decisions. It produces outcomes which the participants are more likely to support or be able to live with.

Crowd Wise is a tested and flexible format which can be used for a wide range of issues and decisions. It can work as a single event, or over a period of time; it can work for 15 people or 1500; it can be used to set priorities, allocate budgets or respond to a consultation.

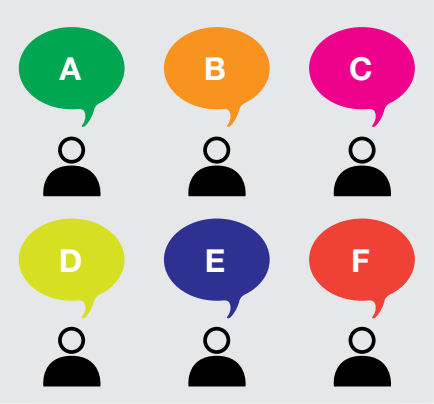
What does Crowd Wise aim to do?

- Help people find common ground
- Avoid polarisation
- Take decisions that work for everyone
- Achieve more productive outcomes

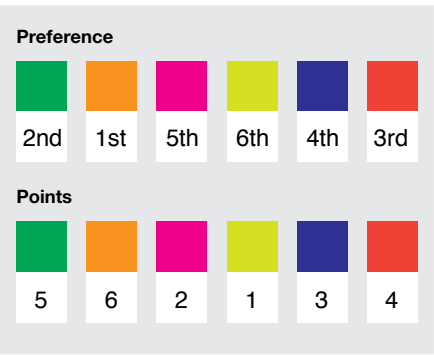
How is Crowd Wise used to make decisions?

There are several elements to making good decisions. Crowd Wise provides different ways to tackle each one.

1. A range of options is developed.



2. Consensus emerges through a combination of discussion and voting:
   - Discussion leads to options being adapted to widen their appeal, and sometimes to mergers between options.
   - Crowd Wise uses a form of voting called 'consensus voting'. All participants are invited to rank the options in order of preference. The higher the preference, the greater the number of points.



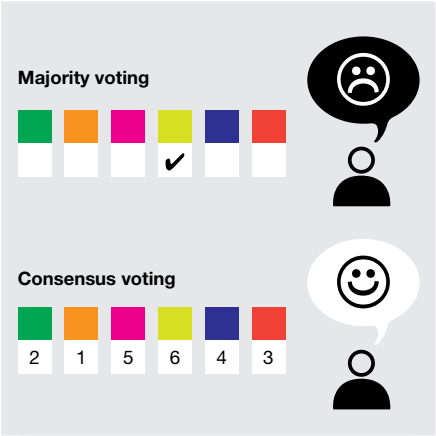
   - The votes are counted. The higher the number of points earned by the top option, the greater the degree of consensus.

Lots of people can take part, both in developing and discussing the options and in voting. Crowd Wise is relatively quick: it can sometimes be done in just two to three hours.

How Crowd Wise produces better, more acceptable decisions

1. There is a range of options. This is important because decisions are rarely a matter of black and white.

2. The options reflect the views of the participants. The options are either developed by the participants, or, if they were prepared before the discussion, they are adapted to reflect the values and interests of the participants.
3. The option that is chosen also reflects the views of the participants. This is because:
   - The voting reflects people's preferences on all the options. This contrasts with majority voting where people vote only for one option.



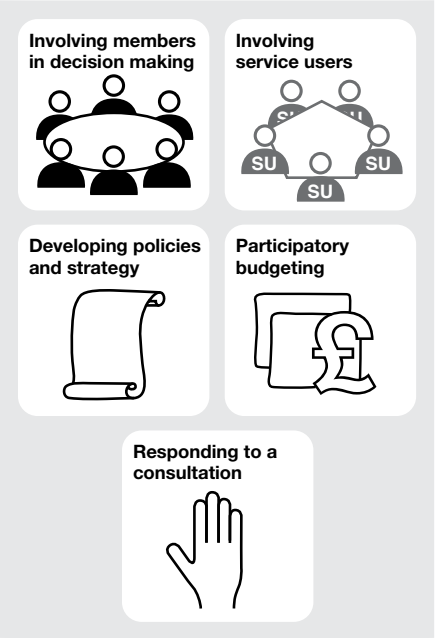
   - The chosen option is often a composite of some or all of the original options.
   - The voting shows how much consensus there is. If there is not enough, that is a sign to continue the process.
4. People find common ground with each other. This means that people are not polarised. No-one votes against any option: they vote for all the options, to different degrees. In addition, people have an incentive to engage with the other participants, to understand how they can make their preferred option more appealing to others.

"At AFC Wimbledon, the club I support, we've known for a long time that traditional decision-making meetings and structures aren't engaging our members in key strategic decisions in a way that as a mutual society they should be. I'm very excited that in Crowd Wise we may have found the solution."

Dave Boyle, Chief Executive, Supporters Direct

Q & A

What can Crowd Wise be used for?



How many people can be involved?

This autumn (2010), the biggest Crowd Wise project so far will offer all the 1500 members of AFC Wimbledon, a community-owned football club, the opportunity to contribute ideas for the options, and then discuss them, for example by filling in a blank page in the programme, or coming to a meeting before a home game. There is no limit to the number of people who can be involved in the voting. At the other end of the scale, the process has worked with as few as ten people.

How does Crowd Wise encourage a constructive discussion?

With consensus voting, each participant has an incentive to engage with the others, in the hope of persuading them to rate their preferred option, say, third instead of fifth. The process itself encourages a search for common ground.

This incentive would not exist in an either/or vote, when everyone will talk up their choice and criticise the alternative. Nor would it exist if people were not expressing their preferences on all the options.

Can the voting be done on-line?

Definitely! nef has already developed a free tool for online consensus voting.

Can you tell how much consensus there is?

Yes. The winner's score will tell you this:

- If the top scoring option is well ahead of the rest, it is likely to be very acceptable.
- If the top scoring option is some way ahead of the rest, it is likely to be acceptable for all but the most contentious issues.
- If no option has much of a lead, it is probably best to keep talking and then run another vote.

Sometimes two options are ahead of the pack. Then it is a question of whether there are compatible elements in each that can be combined to make a new option.

Could an apparent consensus give no-one what they really want?

In Crowd Wise, people have an incentive to engage constructively with the other participants. This often leads to options being amended to reflect better what people want.

In addition, this danger is more likely when people are put under pressure to give up what they want for the sake of reaching agreement. This is much less likely where people are casting their vote on a ballot paper which is only seen by the people counting the votes.

Can Crowd Wise help resolve conflict?

Yes. A forerunner of Crowd Wise was used in Belfast in 1986 to discuss the constitutional status of Northern Ireland. Over 200 people, including politicians - both unionists and Sinn Féin – chose this outcome from a list of ten options: "Northern Ireland to have devolution and power-sharing with a Belfast-Dublin-London tripartite agreement." It was a mini-Good Friday Agreement, 12 years ahead of its time!

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Case study: Developing policies and strategy

"How much power should local councils (parish and town councils) have in the 21st century?"

Two hour event at University of Gloucestershire Summer Seminar in Cheltenham in July 2009, for 50 chairs and clerks of parish and town councils.

The Process

STARTING OPTIONS

There were six pre-prepared options, written by six speakers.

VOTE AND DISCUSS

At the start, each option was introduced by a speaker and there was an initial vote. Then the speakers divided themselves between the six tables at which participants were sitting. They had ten minutes to present their option in more detail and get feedback on it. They then moved to the next table, visiting all of the tables over an hour.

REVISING THE OPTIONS

Each speaker then had the opportunity to amend and/or merge their proposal. At the end of this stage, there were three options.

VOTE AND DISCUSS

There was a second vote on the three options, with the results discussed briefly by the whole group.

How the options evolved

In the initial six options, the two extremes were:

A. Local councils should not have more power.

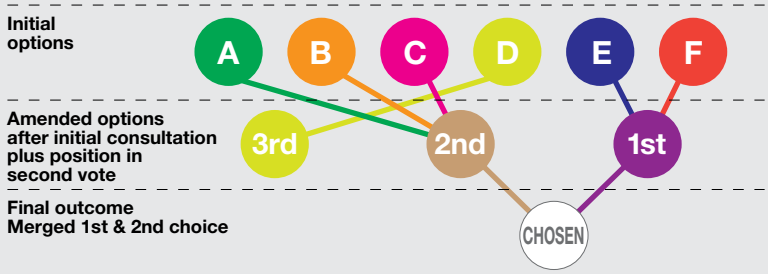
F. Local councils should have full power to deliver all services in the locality.

When the options were amended, option F was revised to add:

- Increase duties as well as powers.
- Acknowledge that this increase in power and duties brings an increased need for quality control and accountability.

At the merger stage, Option F was merged with option E. The merged option read:
Local councils should have powers and duties to deliver all appropriate services in the locality. This should be accompanied by increased: resources; quality control; and accountability.

In the second vote, the merger of E and F came first, just ahead of an option which said that local authorities should have a duty to devolve to local councils. These two merge to form the final, consensus, option:
Principal authorities and other public service providers should have a statutory duty to devolve the delivery of services to the local council. This duty should be supported by devolving financial resources, quality control, accountability and training.



By giving revising and merging ideas, the group created an option which reflected the views of a broad range of the participants.

"The room contained a great range of opinions on the future powers that local councils should have, so I was impressed at how far we moved towards consensus in just a couple of hours."

Crispin Moor, Executive Director, Commission for Rural Communities

Contacts and further information
For more on Crowd Wise, contact Perry Walker:
Perry.Walker@neweconomics.org
020 7820 6360

Case studies can be downloaded at
www.neweconomics/programmes/democracy-and-participation

For the theory of consensus voting,
contact Peter Emerson, The de Borda Institute
pemerson@deborda.org
028 9071 1795
www.deborda.org

June 2010

We acknowledge funding from the Ministry of Justice's Building Democracy Innovation Fund.

We also acknowledge the creative design ideas supplied by Rachel Anderson, Asbjørn Clemmensen and Ben Wilson, Masters students in the Department of Typography and Graphic Communication at the University of Reading.