

COMMUNITY ALPHABET

# ACTIVE LISTENING



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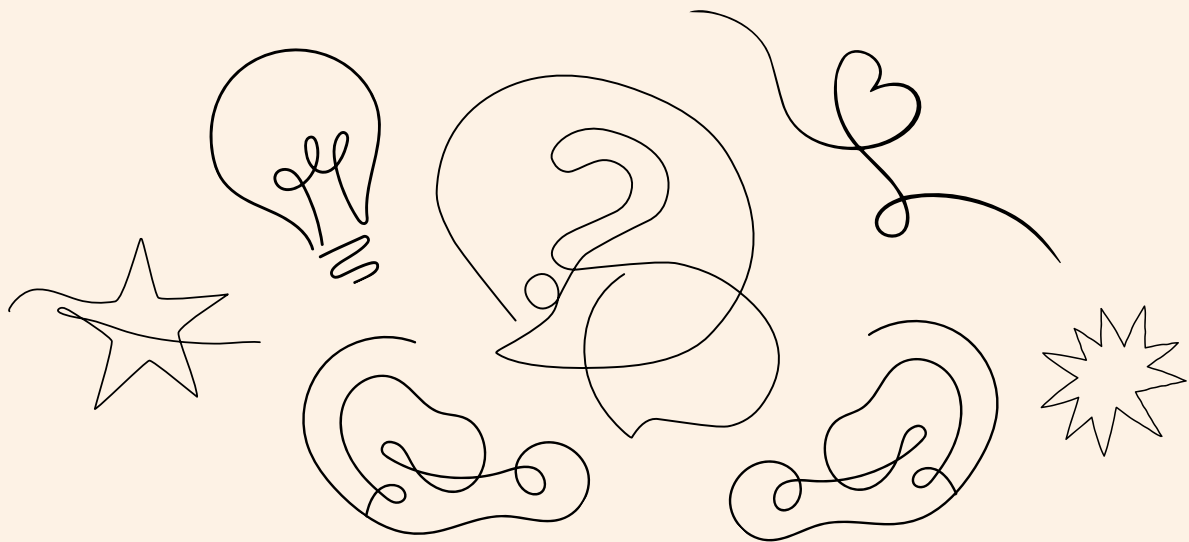
# WHAT IS ACTIVE LISTENING?

Working in communities is all about communication and dialogue. In this thematic bloc we focus on one of the **cornerstones of good communication and dialogue, active listening**. We start with a few quick definitions and ideas.

Communication is an exchange of messages. It can happen through speech, writing, signals and behaviours. When we communicate we share **thoughts and information**, as well as **feelings, values and beliefs**.

Dialogue is a form of two-way communication where we try to listen carefully and **understand the other person**. For more on dialogue, see the [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#).

Even though we do both every day, communication and dialogue are far from simple. Take a look at this brief video about [what makes communication so complex](#).<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Katherine Hampsten, "[How miscommunication happens \(and how to avoid it\)](#)." [Katherine Hampsten | Ted-Ed](#). 2016. Retrieved 26 November, 2024.

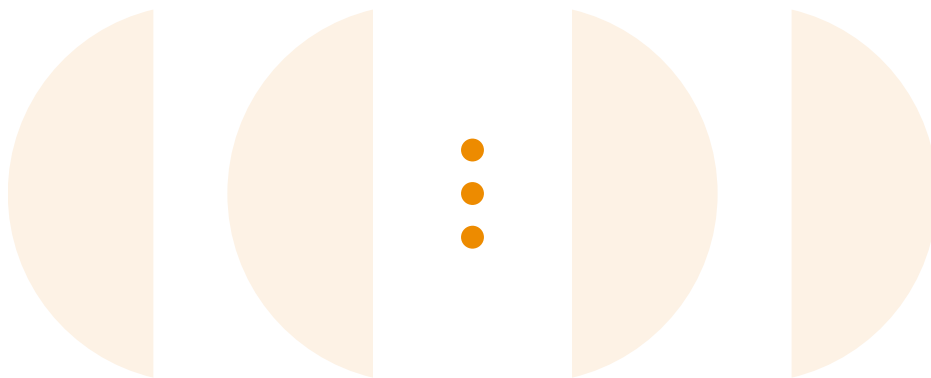
# WHAT IS ACTIVE LISTENING?

Active listening is an essential part of good communication and dialogue. *It is more than 'hearing' someone's words. It means **fully attuning to the feelings and views of the speaker**, demonstrating unbiased acceptance and validation of their experience.*<sup>2</sup>

But we often take listening for granted.

What makes active listening different from ordinary listening? Active listening is the practice of **preparing** to listen, **observing** what verbal and non-verbal messages are being sent, and then **providing appropriate feedback** to show attentiveness to the message the other person is sending. Active listening is the process of listening **to understand**.<sup>3</sup>

Listening to understand requires much more effort than just passive listening. You can read more in this article on the [differences between active and passive listening](#).<sup>4</sup>



<sup>2</sup> Richard Nelson-Jones, *Theory and Practice of Counselling and Therapy*. 6th ed. (London: Sage, 2014) as quoted in Sara Viezzer, "[Active Listening: Definition, Skills & Benefits](#)", Simply Psychology, December 20, 2023. Retrieved 30 September, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> "[Active Listening](#)", Wikipedia. Retrieved 11 September, 2024.

<sup>4</sup> "[Differences between Active Listening and Passive Listening](#)", Key Differences, 2024. Retrieved 20 November, 2024.

# WHAT IS ACTIVE LISTENING?

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Active listening is based on a **genuine curiosity** about the other person in the conversation and a desire to give other people a chance to be heard. When we actively listen, the message we send is 'I want to understand you.' Active listening helps the person who is being asked to share something **feel accepted**.

There are various strategies and techniques to become an active listener, but most of all active listening is about making a conscious effort to:

- Be **open-minded and patient** in order to hear and understand others;
- **Listen with empathy**: to try to understand the perspectives, values, feelings and experiences of others and take them into consideration;
- **Pay attention to our own communication**, both verbal and non-verbal, and the communication (verbal and non-verbal) of others.

## INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

*Think of a time when you felt really listened to. What did the other person do to make you feel they were listening, not just stating their position?*

# WHY IS ACTIVE LISTENING IMPORTANT IN THE COMMUNITY?

How often do you hear people in the community say “They don’t listen to us?”

That is how people in a community often feel when....

- the municipality or other institutions take decisions for them, or
- when individuals or organisations start community initiatives before listening carefully to residents and users.



As discussed in the [Letting community lead thematic bloc](#), community building is all about listening carefully to the things people care about and what they can bring to the community. Active listening in community-building **builds trust and relationships** and opens up opportunities for **collaboration**.

# WHY IS ACTIVE LISTENING IMPORTANT IN THE COMMUNITY?

Paying close attention to listening in community building also helps uncover the views of those who are more silent, or whose experiences and desires are often overlooked. For an introduction to working with everyone in the community see the [Identity and diversity thematic bloc](#) and [Power dynamics and bias thematic bloc](#).




Practising active listening and inclusive dialogue (covered in the separate [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#)) helps **broaden the circle** of people who are involved in community initiatives.

We all expend energy more gladly for things we care about and when we have a role in shaping the outcomes!


# WHY IS ACTIVE LISTENING IMPORTANT IN THE COMMUNITY?

*By honing the art of listening, [you] can create spaces for dialogue, understanding, and collaboration that drive positive change and foster resilient, thriving communities. In a world that is often marked by division and discord, the simple act of listening can be a **transformative force for unity, empathy, and collective action**.*<sup>5</sup>

What CA participants have to say about the importance of listening in community building:




*“The idea of listening as a broader concept – providing the space to talk, reflect, get [people’s] feedback, hear what other things they might be interested in doing – it’s collaborative rather than transactional. Even if some things aren’t relevant, we see who they are and how they think. **It’s about understanding the people we are working with.** There are no boundaries to who the stakeholders are.”*



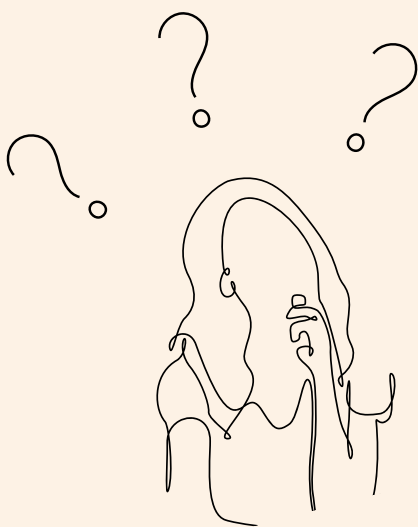
<sup>5</sup> [“The Art of Listening in Community Outreach”](#), Outreach Insights. Retrieved 28 August, 2024.

# WHY IS ACTIVE LISTENING IMPORTANT IN THE COMMUNITY?


What CA participants have to say about the importance of listening in community building:



*“The idea of my project about youth is going on with talks among locals. It is a phase that I have never allocated so much **time** and **observation** to compared to my previous projects. This slow process offers me a **different perspective** of how to implement projects when targets and budget are not the main focus. I must say that is healing me from an aggressive, pro-active attitude into more of an **inclusive and connected attitude**.”*



*“My objectives for the project and the community I am trying to build are not necessarily the objectives of the group. [That] **one of the most important things is not to assume what others want or think.**”*





# STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT ACTIVE LISTENING

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Here are some basic strategies and techniques to support active listening. But please see the [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#) to continue exploring the two-way street that is communication!

To **practise active listening** it is essential to:

- **Focus on the person speaking**, keep eye contact, and not interrupt or formulate answers for them.
- **Try to understand the emotions** behind the words and validate the other person's feelings.
- **Ask clarifying questions** to ensure you have understood the other person's message. You will find more about these in the next sections.
- **Reconfirm what you have heard** both to double-check your understanding and show that you are actively engaged in the conversation.

Watch this video for [more tips on active listening](#).<sup>6</sup>

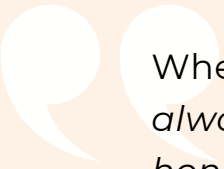
You can find more **brief videos** about active listening in the resources section at the end of this thematic bloc. And see the [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#) to learn more about how active listening supports inclusive dialogue in communities.

<sup>6</sup> ["4 Things all Great Listeners Know" | TED-Ed](#), 2022.

# STRATEGIES TO SUPPORT ACTIVE LISTENING

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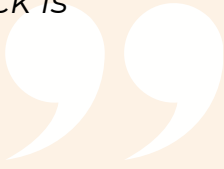
Here's what CA participants say about their listening strategies or learning:



When leading listening interviews: “Be **curious**, always **contextualise**, be prepared to explain honestly and transparently why you need that information, why you need to know the things you are asking about.”

“My approach to listening changed. Previously, I took feedback personally and got defensive or explained (why we can't do activities, e.g.). I replaced it with **curiosity, which really builds trust and opens the conversation** (now I say: 'let's start from here – what we can do?'). It's a huge game-changer. But I needed training to make this change.”

“Exploring active listening helps when you are talking to somebody or doing an interview, for example if I am not sure I understand what they mean, I had this bad habit [of trying] to get to the point and trying to force what I want to hear, but now there is more **patience** from my point of view, I ask with their own words...if I understood well what they mean, I let them talk even if they talk about something else. **I can see now that people appreciate it if you listen and if they can share their thoughts and ideas.** Giving positive feedback is also important...I think it's really important to let them be creative.”



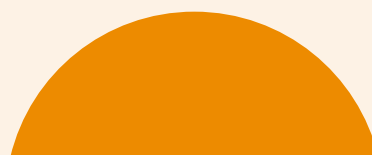
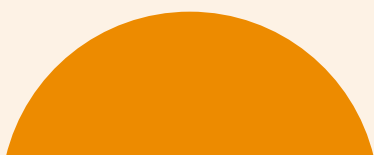
# FORMULATING QUESTIONS

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It helps to use open-ended questions when we are listening actively. Open-ended questions begin with **What, Why, How, Who or When** and are meant to be **exploratory or clarifying**. In other words, they are questions that ask for more than just a “yes” or a “no” answer - they ask the other person to tell us more. Close-ended questions do the opposite: they are meant to get a simple, straightforward answer, like “yes” or “no” or true/false.

Asking open questions is an important way of....

- Showing **respect** for the other person’s experiences
- Acknowledging people in the community, which puts some **power in their hands!**
- Improving **mutual understanding** (also see the [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#))
- **Encouraging people to take on roles**, based on their unique interests, skills, capacities and resources, that contribute to the life of the community.



# FORMULATING QUESTIONS

Here are some examples of open-ended versus close-ended questions:

Open-ended		Close-ended
<p><i>What do you like about the neighbourhood/community?</i></p> <p><i>Is something missing or problematic for you in the community? If so, what?</i></p> <p><i>How might you contribute – even in some small way - to some of these things, both the positive and the negative?</i></p>	vs.	<p><i>Do you want to solve the XXX (fill in the blank) problem in the community?</i></p>
<p><i>How would you choose to use this space? How could you imagine using this space to improve the experience that you and others have in the community?</i></p>	vs.	<p><i>Do you want to have a park here?</i></p>

Note: The framing of the close-ended questions not only emphasises the negative, they also tend to blame others for problems rather than highlighting our ongoing, shared responsibility for the quality of life in our communities.

## INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

*Do you already consciously use open-ended questions in your work? When and where? What benefits or challenges does this bring?*



# PRACTISE YOUR ACTIVE LISTENING

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Reading about active listening is one thing, but doing it takes practice!



## EXERCISE

You can find individual and group [exercises to practise active listening skills here](#).



# LISTENING TO EVERYONE IN THE COMMUNITY

Active listening should be practised in every interaction with people in the community. It is what **builds the trust** that leads to a desire to do things together in the community.

Active listening to residents and other users of a community should start with a **careful consideration of all the actors**, the obvious ones (key institutions and other powerful actors or groups) and those who may be **overlooked** because they are more silent, less powerful or marginalised. For more on how to identify them, see this [introduction to actors' mapping](#).

Other key aspects in working inclusively with communities are discussed in the [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#) and [Power dynamics and bias thematic bloc](#).



This video of a [park revitalisation project in Copenhagen](#)<sup>7</sup> shows what asking a **very diverse range of people** (direct neighbours, families with young children, older youth, gang members, the homeless and other marginalised users) looked like.

In addition to being open to listening to people in informal settings, there are ways to actively listen to people in your community in semi-structured formats.

<sup>7</sup> Kenneth Balfelt Team, with Spektrum Arkitekter ApS, [Development of Folkets Park \(English subtitles\)](#), Johan August, Nicolai Zwinge and Simone Cecilie Grytter (2017). Vimeo.

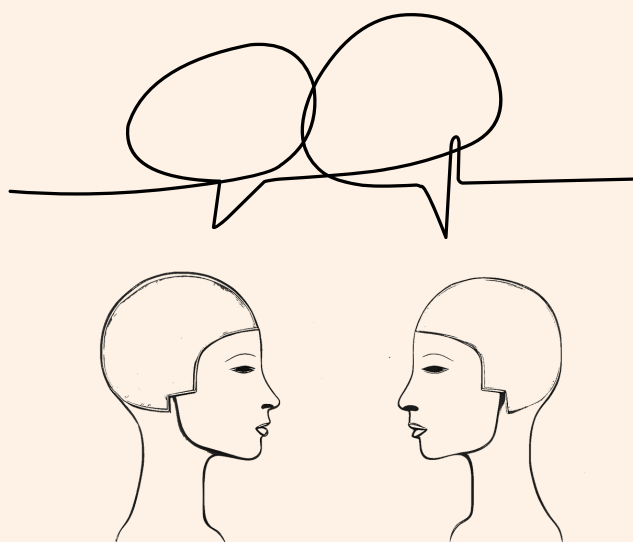
# LISTENING CONVERSATIONS

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One semi-structured way of listening to the interests and concerns of people in a community is through **listening conversations**.

Listening conversations are semi-structured, generally face-to-face interactions with people to **explore their experiences, perspectives** and the **interests and skills** that they bring to a community. See this [presentation on developing and conducting listening conversations](#) and related [homework exercise](#). For practical examples of listening conversations, see this [listening conversation process guide developed by a CA participant](#)<sup>8</sup> that includes instructions for reflection, and sample questions or this brief [community questionnaire developed by Forever Manchester](#) community foundation.<sup>9</sup>

For more details on asking questions in listening conversations, see [The Art of Powerful Questions](#) and [The Art of Hosting](#) (see the Resources section below).



<sup>8</sup> Michal Kandler, CA participant 2021-2023.

<sup>9</sup> "[For Happy Days](#)", Forever Manchester. Retrieved on 26 November, 2024.

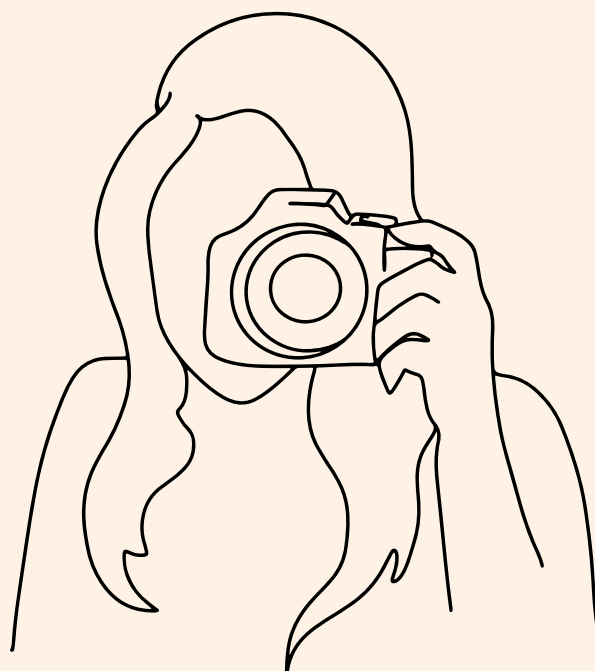
# LISTENING CONVERSATIONS

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Here are some other semi-structured listening approaches:

Here are some other semi-structured listening approaches:

**Participatory photography** (often called Photovoice™, which is a trademarked term describing the work of [Photovoice.org](https://www.photovoice.org/)), is a way to use photography to draw out people's experiences and preferences. For more on Photovoice and Photovoice.org's work, see Director [Tom Elkin's introduction to Photovoice](#).<sup>10</sup>



**Community reflection on existing data:** In these approaches, often data is gathered by a local NGO (if possible from existing, neutral data sources) on the various dimensions of community life (health, environment, education, etc.) and is shared with residents. Residents then reflect on the results, help set priorities and consider strategies for improvement in selected areas and monitor changes over time. Further information can be found here: [CA Vital Signs poster](#) and Community Foundation of Canada [Vital Signs](#)™.

You can find more information on these listening approaches in the Resources section below.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Elkins, [Photovoice presentation for Community Alphabet 2023-24](#), 9 January 2024.





# RESOURCES

For additional brief videos on listening and communication, see:

The School of Life. "[How to be a good listener](#)". 2017.

The School of Life. "[Being a good listener](#)". 2016.

The Harvard Business Review Guide. "[The Art of Active Listening](#)". 2022.

"[4 Things all Great Listeners Know](#)" | [TED-Ed](#)", 2022.

Learn Free. "[\(Mis\)communication](#)." 2018.

Cases studies with strong focus on listening:

- Preparation & initial steps in a [listening process in a small village in the Czech Republic](#)
- [Building bridges between residents in a disadvantaged neighbourhood](#) in the Czech Republic
- Kenneth Balfelt Team. Video on [community involvement in revitalization of Folkets Park in Copenhagen](#). 2017
- Kenneth Balfelt Team. "[Sowing Seeds of Love - Book of Methods](#)", 2022. (English version from page 8)
- Use of participatory photography in [The Urban Belonging Project](#) to generate insights into resident perspectives



# RESOURCES

Additional resources on listening, asking and facilitating dialogue:

[“The Art of Listening in Community Outreach”](#). Outreach Insights. Retrieved 28 August, 2024.

Vogt, Eric E., Juanita Brown and David Issacs. [“The Art of Powerful Questions: Catalyzing Insight, Innovation and Action.”](#) Whole Systems Associates, 2003, as found on [www.lindajoymitchell.org.uk](http://www.lindajoymitchell.org.uk). Retrieved 25 November, 2024.

Mitchell, Linda and Liz Martins. [“Facilitating Meaningful Conversation in the Voluntary Sector”](#). 13 July 2009. As found on [www.lindajoymitchell.org.uk](http://www.lindajoymitchell.org.uk). Retrieved 25 November, 2024.  
A collection of ideas and methodologies drawing on asset-based community development thinking and practice.

## [The Art of Hosting](#)

A global facilitation community of practice, with a number of insightful perspectives and descriptions of methods on their website focusing on personal practice, dialogue, facilitation and the co-creation of innovation to address complex challenges.

This site by Linda Joy Mitchell ([www.lindajoymitchell.org.uk](http://www.lindajoymitchell.org.uk)) is helpful for exploring [facilitation techniques with a strong listening component](#) such as World Café, Open Space, Circle, Storytelling Harvesting, Design for Wiser Action or Pro Action Café.

For more about facilitating group processes, in which active listening is always critical, see the [Facilitation thematic bloc](#). You can also find additional relevant resources in the [Inclusive dialogue thematic bloc](#).

**Return to the [Useful tools page](#).**