

An Introduction to Hosting a Long Table

A short guide to the Long Table as a way of bringing the public, practitioners and decision-makers into conversation about policy, and to four related formats you might also want to try.



What is a Long Table?

The Long Table is a format for public conversation created by the artist Lois Weaver, Professor of Contemporary Performance at Queen Mary University of London. It stages a discussion as a dinner party where conversation is the only course. People sit around a long table, follow a short etiquette, and anyone in the room can take a seat and join in ([Weaver, 2019a](#)). Weaver conceived the Long Table in 2003 as an alternative to conventional panel discussions, which divide *speakers* from *audiences*. Its aim is to let voices be heard equally and to unsettle ideas about who counts as an expert.

The format was inspired by Marleen Gorris's film *Antonia's Line*, in which a woman keeps extending her dinner table to welcome outsiders until it has to be carried outdoors. Since 2003, Long Tables have been held in over 100 locations, on topics including performance and medicine, arts and ageing, and human rights ([Weaver, 2019a](#)). Organisations such as Tate Modern and the British Council now use it as a standard discussion format. Like all of Weaver's "Public Address Systems" ([Weaver, 2019b](#)), the Long Table is open source, so anyone can use it or adapt it for their own purposes.

Why Long Tables matter in the context of creative health and health humanities policymaking

Policy conversations often follow a familiar shape, with invited speakers appearing in a panel, a chair steering the conversation, and an audience who can ask questions at the end if time allows. That format has real strengths, as explained in our resource *Top Tips for Presenting at an APPG Roundtable*, but it tends to prioritise airtime to people with professional titles. At a Long Table, everyone seated has the power to change the direction of the conversation and to make room for voices that are less easily heard ([Weaver, 2019a](#)).

Weaver's ongoing research set out to make marginalised voices more audible, to bring lived experience and professional expertise together in solving public problems, and to challenge hierarchies in institutional spaces. Her experimental events brought together policymakers, museumgoers, LGBTQ+ activists and older people ([Weaver, n.d.](#)). These aims sit closely with creative health, which values lived experience alongside clinical and academic evidence. In particular, for anyone working on health inequalities, a Long Table offers a way to hear from people who rarely sit on panels, and for commissioners, clinicians, artists and researchers to listen as equals.

A Long Table in practice: Rosetta Life

Rosetta Life is a creative health charity which turns 25 this year and works across community and NHS clinical settings with people living with the effects of brain injury ([Rosetta Life, n.d.](#); [Bond, 2026](#)). Its Stroke & Brain Odysseys programme (formerly Stroke Odysseys) runs 12-week workshops in

movement, music and song-writing, ending in a public performance co-created by participants ([Rosetta Life, n.d.](#)).

On 20th October 2026, Rosetta Life hosted a Long Table on creative health and health inequalities at South Street Arts, Reading, followed by a performance. The event formed part of the autumn tour of *Learn From Us*, a new dance theatre piece made with people living with brain injury, which invites local arts and health professionals to table discussions at each tour stop ([Bond, 2026](#); [Rosetta Life, 2026](#)). Alex Coulter, Director of the National Centre for Creative Health and chair of the Learn From Us advisory group, hosted the Long Table. She described it as ‘a dinner table conversation without the dinner’. Guests were asked not to mention their jobs or surnames, so that each contribution was heard on its own terms, and they were made familiar with the Long Table etiquette before conversation began.

“It was fascinating to be the host for a Long Table and to see how effective this is as a format for bringing people together to discuss a shared question. Almost everyone contributed to the conversation which flowed naturally and covered a lot of different ground. In a subtle way we were all part of a performance piece, which felt more creative than a panel discussion or other type of meeting.”

- Alex Coulter

How to host a Long Table

All you need is a long table, chairs, a paper tablecloth, pens for writing or drawing on it, and a copy of the etiquette, which can be downloaded free from the Split Britches website ([Weaver, 2019a](#)). In summary, the etiquette asks that:

- everyone seated at the table is treated as a guest performer in the conversation
- no one moderates, although a host may help things along
- anyone can join by taking an empty seat, ask for a seat if the table is full, and leave and return as often as they like
- anyone can write their thoughts on the tablecloth
- silence, awkwardness and laughter are all welcome
- the conversation has an end, but no conclusion.

Top tips for adapting and applying the Long Table format within policy work

1. **Set the menu** – give the table a clear question or prompt, ideally linked to a live policy agenda, so the conversation has a focus without a fixed outcome.
2. **Brief your host** – the host is not a chair. Their role is to help people find a seat, notice who has not yet spoken, and step in only when needed.
3. **Invite decision-makers to sit, not speak** – a Long Table works best when commissioners, officials and politicians take part as guests rather than keynote speakers.
4. **Level the table** – following Rosetta Life’s lead, consider asking guests to leave their job titles and surnames at the door.
5. **Plan how you will capture it** – capturing themes means that they can feed into briefings, consultation responses or evidence submissions. It is important to consider how capturing the conversation changes what people feel comfortable sharing; always tell guests how their words will be used and what level of anonymity they can expect. For some, the tablecloth becomes a good record of the conversation, that you can easily photograph. Others prefer the presence of a dedicated note-taker, to capture discussion not noted on the cloth.

6. **Think about access** – choose an accessible venue, allow for breaks, and offer multiple ways to contribute – such as writing or drawing for people who prefer not to speak aloud.
7. **Pair it with creative work** – a performance, film or exhibition before or after the table can give everyone a shared starting point, a sense of togetherness or bigger picture, and/or a space to process and decompress following the conversation.

Beyond the Long Table: four related formats

Following the wide uptake of the Long Table, Weaver developed four further formats, or ‘protocols’, as part of her research at Queen Mary University of London, supported by a Wellcome Trust *Engaging Science* Fellowship (2016–2019). Each changes the seating, the roles people play and how public the conversation is, to shape what kind of conversation is possible. All four could work in creative health and health humanities settings, but each suits a different purpose.

Porch Sitting

How it works: Porch Sitting is based on the idea that dialogue can happen side by side, rather than face to face with an expert, making space for the things we *wonder* rather than the things we *know* ([Weaver, 2019c](#)). The room is divided into a ‘Kitchen’, where people can get a drink and chat with no rules, and a ‘Porch’ of chairs, where people can sit, think, dream or join the conversation ([Weaver, 2019b](#)). People come and go as they please, as long as they respect the silence or the flow of talk. Hosts tell everyone in advance how long the sitting will last, and openers such as ‘I wonder...’, ‘I imagine...’ or ‘I feel...’ help to start things off.

Fit for creative health policy: Weaver’s research found that swapping what ‘we know’ for what ‘we wonder’ makes knowledge sharing more accessible, and that side-by-side seating leads to more reflective, less declarative talk ([Weaver, n.d.](#)). This makes Porch Sitting well suited to early-stage conversations, such as exploring what a community hopes for from a new service, or to groups who may find formal settings intimidating. It is less suited to producing specific recommendations.

Situation Room

How it works: The eldest members of the audience are invited to a table on stage to talk about shared anxieties on personal, environmental and political issues, and to edge towards solutions ([Weaver, 2019d](#)). Weaver’s research found that choosing this ‘council’ on the basis of shared experience can bring marginalised voices to the fore, that sharing anxieties in public can reduce isolation, and that applying people’s hidden hopes to social issues can spark new solutions ([Weaver, n.d.](#)).

Fit for creative health policy: This is the most solution-focused of Weaver’s formats. A council could be drawn from the people most affected by an issue, such as unpaid carers or people living with a long-term condition, with their concerns and hopes used to shape policy asks. Because people share anxieties in public, it needs careful hosting and aftercare. It also works well alongside a performance or other creative work.

Public Studio

How it works: The Public Studio was created with Emily Wiles of Wellcome Collection to push further at the boundary between expert and lay person, valuing professional knowledge while also drawing on

the expertise of lived experience. It borrows the feel of an artist's or designer's studio, where work in progress is shared and the audience is given a role in solving a problem ([Weaver, n.d.](#)).

Fit for creative health policy: Weaver found that listening changes when an audience has a say in solving a problem ([Weaver, n.d.](#)). This makes the Public Studio a strong fit for policy work, where a researcher, commissioner or practitioner could bring a draft policy brief, service model or evaluation plan for a mixed group to help shape them. It could also be an effective way for academics to present emergent findings from their research and work with audience members to consider routes to impact within communities and strategic alignment to local and national policies. Public Studio is the least documented of the formats, so hosts may need to adapt it.

Care Café

How it works: The Care Café borrows the look of café culture, with small tables and shared food and drink, but has no set agenda or topic. Hosts provide one simple, repetitive task of care – such as folding laundry or stamping envelopes, which keeps conversation gentle and flowing – and a way for people to share resources – such as sticky notes or a noticeboard ([Weaver, 2019e](#); [Weaver and Maxwell, 2018](#)).

Fit for creative health policy: Because it has no agenda, the Care Café is not designed to produce policy recommendations. It is better suited to building trust and community before more formal engagement, to peer support for creative health practitioners, or to gathering people after difficult news such as funding cuts. Weaver found that the café setting and hands-on tasks help strangers to talk and reduce self-consciousness ([Weaver, n.d.](#)).

References

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