

Association of Scottish Community Councils



# Setting Priorities

Decision Making Tool Kit

## Introduction

When faced with a challenge it is not uncommon to find the group either overwhelmed by where to begin or with a vision so large that it encompasses activities well beyond their scope. Sometimes groups have a combination of the two: a huge dream but feeling powerless to realize it. Setting priorities can help. It is an important step to better understand the issues of an area and to identify what goals are achievable. The process opens dialog, builds consensus, and teaches people how to work together.

## Definition

Determining what matters most to individuals, a community, or a resource.



## Essentials

To set priorities is to give an item within a category, group, or list a certain rank. Ranking can be by importance, by time, or by some other defined system of order or values. A vote or multiple-choice opinion survey, a discussion, or a lone individual can determine the ranking.

When undertaking a resource-related project, it is helpful to set priorities for issues to address and for goals to accomplish. For issues, the highest priority often goes to what activity has the greatest impact on the resource or what will garner the most public



attention and support for action. Issues such as dams and clear cutting forestlands have immediate visible impacts and can help generate support and motivate action for additional work. Sometimes ranking an issue higher is as much for perception and political reasons as it is because of its importance. Larger issues, such as non-point sources of pollution and recreation, may be ranked lower simply because of complexity. Even though they may have a more pervasive impact over time, solving the problems requires a greater commitment of resources and time.

Goals are often prioritized based on the availability of human, environmental, or financial resources needed to achieve them or external threats or pressures such as pending legislation or an upcoming planning meeting. Like issues,

timing is also a consideration. Some goals will need to be worked on over a period of time while others can be achieved relatively quickly.

## How to Use It

### 1. Get a list

Based upon prior group discussions, there should be a list of issues, goals, tasks, or some other items. The list should be refined to the point where similar information and ideas are grouped under one theme and everyone present is in agreement with the wording of statements and expression of ideas. All of this preparatory work should be posted on walls so that participants can see it especially if time has elapsed between meetings or workshops.



### 2. Rank the items

If the group is less than 10 people, and the list is manageable, have each person write down on his or her own piece of paper how they would rank the items. Then randomly select one item and have each person take a turn sharing his or her recommendation for its ranking and why. A facilitator or recorder captures comments on a flipchart. When everyone has spoken, review the list and see if there is agreement about the ranking. If there are some whose ranks are completely opposite that of the majority, check back with those individuals to further discuss the ranking or to make sure they agree with the group's decision.

For larger groups, give all of the participants an equal number of coloured dot-

stickers. Ask everyone to come forward and place their dots on the top three or five items, depending upon the size of the list, as they see it. When done, count the dot-votes and see if there is a natural consensus. Discuss the top items, then rate the remaining items by counting their dot-votes and discuss rates for any items without dots.

Another alternative is to use dot-votes in multiple steps. Participants vote their way through the entire list using different colours of dots: first step is to vote for top three using another a colour (blue); second step is to vote for top one within those three using a second colour (green); third step is to vote for top one outside of that first group of three using a third colour (yellow); and so on.

If the group is especially large and so is the number of items, divide into subgroups each assigned to a category. Subgroups discuss and decide upon ranks within that category. Everyone reconvenes and reports their recommendations. The end result is a number one priority in each of the different categories. Or, have the whole group select an overall priority across the categories.

## **When to Use**

You want the group to focus.

You desire to form consensus among a number of people about what problems or challenges are facing a community and its resources or about what they want to do.

You plan on building a strong public involvement campaign. Identifying and prioritizing issues launches setting and prioritizing goals and that leads into creating doable action agendas.

## **Not Recommended If...**

You need action. There's a clear, single threat that needs to be fought against, not multiple ideas.

You have not developed consensus about what the issues or goals are within a community or concerning a resource.

## **Timing**

Priorities can be set and reset anytime according to needs, resources, and opportunities

