West Berkshire Council

Consultation Toolkit

How to Run a Focus Group

Focus groups are a valuable part of the toolkit available to local authorities in carrying out public consultation. Facilitating discussion in a purposeful and open way, making sure everyone has the opportunity to take part, coping with disruptive participants and making sure the discussion remains relevant are all key aspects of convening focus groups. The development of these skills is essential for maximising the potential of focus groups and running them

The aim of this guide is to provide you with the necessary information and resources to successfully carry out focus groups.

This guide is part of a wider toolkit which looks at managing and undertaking consultation in West Berkshire Council (WBC). It provides practical guidance on how to develop, conduct and commission consultation and assess the quality of any output that you produce. **You can find the Toolkit in full on the Consultation area of the intranet.**

What is a Focus Group?

Focus groups are where 8-10 people selected according to specific criteria - e.g. age, gender, service-user - interviewed together on a particular subject. They usually last for 1½ to 2 hours.

When Should You Use a Focus Group?

Be aware of the distinction between focus groups and individual interviews. They collect different data, in a different way. One-on-one interviews focus on individuals. Focus groups on the other hand, centre on groups and are more interactive and discursive. They are useful if we are interested in finding out what groups of people think, how consensus is formed and how people interact with one another - rather than a detailed understanding of individuals' rationale.

For this reason, one of the more well-known uses of focus groups is for finding out people's attitudes. Explaining and accounting for their own attitudes or views is sometimes easier for people when they hear other people's opinions. As a result they are also useful to see how people's views or attitudes change as a result of a discussion, or when we are interested in more creative thinking - for example, in developing or testing solutions or strategies.

But, the public nature of focus groups, makes them unsuitable for discussing personal or sensitive topics or issues. These are better left to individual interviews where confidentiality can be assured.

Your consultation should be designed to meet the specific needs of the question or issue you are looking at. The table below summarises the key issues when considering these two approaches.

	Individual, In-Depth Interviews	Focus Groups
What Kind of Data?	• In-depth personal accounts • In a personal context • Exploring issues in depth and detail	• Shaped by group interaction • Explore how people discuss issues • For creative thinking and solutions • Investigate differences within or between groups
What Kind of Topics?	• Understanding complex processes and issues (e.g. motivations, decisions) • Exploring sensitive subjects.	• Abstract / conceptual subjects • Exploring social norms
What Kind of People?	• Who are less likely to travel • Who are dispersed • Who are diverse • Issues of power / status • Who may have communication difficulties	• Who are more likely to travel • Who live close together • Who have some shared background / interest to the topic • Who are unlikely to be inhibited by a group setting.

Points to Consider in Developing Focus Groups.

Expertise

Get advice from someone who has carried out focus groups in WBC. Have a look on the consultation calender on the intranet to see who has held some focus groups in the past.

Topic Guide

A topic guide should always be prepared before conducting focus groups. This is an ordered list of topics / questions to be covered. They are used to ensure that subject areas are covered systematically and with some uniformity.

Strike a balance in drafting topic guides. On the one hand, they should be flexible enough to prompt and allow freer discussion, but on the other they should not be a rigid list of questions to be read out in succession.

Location

Consider whether the venue you intend to hold it in is appropriate - will people feel comfortable, not over- or under-whelmed. Ideally you should hold the focus group in the participants locality or community, in a building they are familiar with, one that is welcoming and not intimidating. 'Free' local authority venues may be cost effective, but may not be the best option for your respondents.

Tape Recording

Focus groups should always be tape-recorded and transcribed. Note-taking is a poor means of recording the discussion, not least because: information will always be missed or misinterpreted; it distracts the moderator; and it gives unintended cues for participants to slow down - or not to continue if something is not being taken down.

People rarely refuse to be taped so long as it is explained why the discussion is being recorded and the confidentiality of the tapes and transcripts is assured. Indeed, anonymity should always be assured from the outset. Naturally, if people feel something could be attributable to them, this could change what they say, or they could refuse to take part.

Group Composition

On an issue that concerns the community as a whole, steps will need to be taken to ensure that all sections of the community are represented. This might be best done through the use of several focus groups, structured in terms of age, gender, social class, working status, ethnicity or geographical location as appropriate.

A key factor in designing a focus group study is to balance depth and coverage. The more tightly defined the group is, the greater the depth of understanding that could be gained through the discussion. Therefore, group composition will be influenced by the purpose of the study, finances available and the timeframe within which results are required.

If you use mixed groups, think about their appropriateness - e.g. are there likely to be any gender, ethnicity and religious issues? Is the facilitator suitable and sufficiently independent from the group so that their presence does not influence peoples' responses and the direction of the discussion? Make sure that composition of the groups encourages rather than hinders the exchange of ideas.

Recruitment

You are not trying to be 'representative' when recruiting people to take part. However - this may seem like an obvious point - but make sure that the people you talk to reflect all the issues and characteristics relevant to your consultation. This could be simply by people's role - such as bus driver, school child - or by less obvious criteria such as people's experiences, behaviours.

People can be drawn from existing sources - i.e. administrative data, mailing or membership lists, published data or surveys etc. However, if these are not available you may need to actively find and recruit people to take part.

You can make direct contact with people. However, you might have difficulty either identifying who you need to speak to, actually making contact with them, or you think you may not get much response. Therefore use someone with 'inside knowledge' - i.e. a 'gatekeeper' - to approach and recruit people on your behalf.

Remember that although people agree to take part, this does not guarantee that they will come. If some people turn up, the session will probably have to be run regardless. Therefore, confirm people's invite / attendance in writing and send a reminder with background information prior to the meeting. Include notes on what to expect, detail facilities, car parking and building access.

If it is thought that recruitment might be a problem, it is not uncommon to offer incentive payments. These can range from a small tokenistic £5 gift voucher to a more substantial cash amount £20-30.

Cost

The main cost if you are contracting out this work is that of the facilitator.

Another key cost is for transcription. Transcribing the discussions will allow you to double-check aspects of the discussion and make sure that you have not misinterpreted any parts of it. If you are undertaking a number of focus groups this will also allow you to better analyse and compare emerging points and issues. You could do this yourself (recommended if you are also do the analysis) or employ a transcriber to do this for you.

You should at least cover participants' travel costs to and from venue, where you are setting up the focus group - as well as any incentive payments.

Other costs include hire of a suitable venue, refreshments such as tea coffee, biscuits and if appropriate a buffet.

Analysing the Data

Focus groups collect vast amounts of text. Therefore, although the process of determining what people have said is easy to understand, breaking this down to make sure you have captured a full and balanced picture of the views expressed is a time-consuming and complex process.

Unfortunately, there are no real shortcuts, although it is important to recognise that this stage is **AS** important as doing the consultation itself. Inadequate analysis will leave you, on the one hand, with selective extracts merely supporting one particular viewpoint, or on the other, a simple catalogue of random, unfocussed quotations.

Analysing qualitative data can be broken down into three stages:

1. Familiarisation. Read the transcripts of the interviews and familiarise yourself with the data. Literally 'label' the data so that it can be easily identified and categorised as common themes emerge. Depending on your consultation, it could relate to age, gender, postcode or for example, whether a view was prompted or based on actual experience.

2. Organisation. Structure the data by collating all the data under the different labels. Start building up an outline of the issues and begin compiling them under common themes.

3. Interpretation. Issues and themes can then start to be developed and tested. This stage - and your ability to develop explanations - lies at the heart of analysis. Most data is very rich in the levels of explanation it can offer and you need to think about drawing out and explaining why patterns, linkages or apparent contradictions are found in the data.

This can be a long and intricate process. There is however software available to help you label and code data. This is collectively termed CAQ-DAS. Speak to Jason Teal (Consultation Officer) on x2102 if you want more information on this.

Whether undertaking the analysis yourself, or someone else is doing the analysis for you, there are a number of key principles to think about:

- Make sure that you have allowed **sufficient time to analyse** your results. It will always take longer than you think and it is usually the part that is cut short because of delays earlier on. Rushed analysis will only give you poor quality findings.

- It is important that **key messages** from your exercise are clearly identified and reported. You should also identify areas where views diverge and opinions are divided. See the Toolkit on the intranet for some hints on identifying key messages from your data.
- Analyse responses with an **open mind** - otherwise the exercise will be seen to validate a previously held view and it will be difficult to defend should the decision it supports be subject to legal challenge.
- **Provide Balanced Views**. On a controversial issue views may be strongly polarised. This may happen, for example, if a facility is deemed to be a 'good thing' by the population as a whole but no-one wants it in their own back yard.
- When reporting, make sure that **confidentiality assurances** have been kept and you have complied with the Data Protection requirements.
- **Provide clear feedback**. Consultees who do not feel that their point of view has been fairly represented may have recourse to the Council's representations procedure. Balanced feedback can assist individuals who do not like the decision that has been reached to feel that the process has given them a fair hearing.

Throughout the course of qualitative analysis, you should be asking and re-asking yourself the following questions:

- What patterns and common themes emerge in responses dealing with specific items? How do these patterns (or lack) help to answer your key questions, aims and objectives?
- Are there any deviations from these patterns? If yes, are there any factors that might explain these atypical responses?
- What interesting stories emerge from the responses? How can these stories help to illuminate your broader question(s)?
- Do any of these patterns or findings suggest that additional data may need to be collected? Do any of the study questions need to be revised?
- Do the patterns that emerge corroborate the findings of the work? If not, what might explain these discrepancies?

Reporting Findings

Overall, when reporting or presenting your results think about the diversity and range of views that were expressed. Highlight patterns and themes in the discussion. Don't get bogged down in numbers or prevalence! Don't just list quotes, use what people said to illustrate and amplify the discussion.

The key is to portray the subtleties and detail of the data whilst maintaining the balance and link between description and interpretation. Elaborate accounts, insufficient description of linkages, too little selectivity of the issues being conveyed and over-reliance on describing rather than interpreting data, are all common issues in reporting interview data.

Good reporting should provide a clear account of how the analysis was undertaken. It should be clear what is 'reported' data and what is being inferred. Quotations can only partially explain the concept being described and so should be used to illustrate points being made rather than to make the point itself.

It should be apparent how conclusions have been arrived at - what evidence backs up different findings, why some explanations have been given more weight than others and how / why explanations differ by people's characteristics and circumstances.

Things to avoid in Reporting Qualitative Data

- Don't quantify - that's not the point of focus groups
- Don't overuse certain transcriptions / respondents
- Don't duplicate quotes
- Don't misapply quotes

- Make sure quotes are in context and easy to understand
- Don't 'sanitise' quotes - tell it how it is!!
- Don't overdo quotations - use them to illustrate, rather than tell the story.
- Be careful not to compromise confidentiality.

Key Tips for Running Effective Focus Groups

If you decide to undertake focus groups, it is advisable to use a trained, independent moderator to facilitate the group. Effective moderation is the key to a successful focus group. It is important to ensure that the discussion does not diverge too much from the topic guide which lists the main areas of interest to be covered. It is the moderators' job to move the discussion along without imposing their own views and they must also ensure that particular participants do not dominate the discussion or 'shout down' others.

For some people attending a focus group can be very intimidating and nerve-wrecking, it is important to make people feel at ease. It is polite for the moderator to introduce themselves and ask participants to say their name, where they are from and what they do, this helps settles the group.

If you do elect to run a focus group yourself, some general tips are listed below:

- Welcome people as they arrive. Help fill the time before you start, mingle with participants, collect details and hand out incentives.

- Deal confidently and effectively with practical matters such as refreshments, incentives, tape recording and seating.

- Before you begin introduce yourself and the purpose of the group. for an ice breaker ask people to introduce themselves. Name labels are also useful. Set the ground rules and manage housekeeping. Eye contact is very important, look up at respondents rather than down at the guide and make sure the discussion runs at an appropriate pace so that you cover everything you need to.

- As a moderator you cannot take accurate notes of the discussion, you will always miss information or possibly interpret it differently. You should record the discussion (seek permission to do this first). The transcription will also allow you to accurately analyse the discussion at a later date.

- It might be appropriate to provide paper, pens and flip charts to help promote discussion.

- Start with easy questions as a warm up and leave sensitive more complex questions to the end after group dynamics and rapport has been established within the group. As moderator you should not give your opinion or say where you stand.

- Ask questions that are simple, single, open-ended and non-directive or leading. Give people time to answer, do not rush to fill the silence or finish people's sentences. Make sure you probe fully, don't assume you know the context / motivation for why someone has said something. Do not allow side discussions to take place, invite contributions and avoid getting locked in with one person. It is essential that you try and get everyone to take part, neutralise the 'discussion hog' or disruptive participant. Ask them to leave if necessary.

- Concentrate and listen carefully, do not let your attention wander.

- Pay attention to non-verbal signals.

- Always end on a positive/constructive note, invite questions and re-affirm uses of findings and confidentiality.

- Remember you are in control: if you are tentative the group will feel uncomfortable.

Further Information

We hope you found this booklet helpful. If you would like further information see the Consultation Toolkit on the intranet which will give a more detailed discussion and provide you with further advice, resources and pointers.

If you would like any further help and advice with your consultation please call Jason Teal (Consultation Officer) on x2102.