

Written with assistance from:

1. Durham University Library

2. Citizen's Advice:

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/Global/CitizensAdvice/Equalities/How%20to%20run%20focus%20groups%20guide.pdf>

3. Reading University:

<https://sites.reading.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/42/2021/01/Focus-Groups-Guide-Final.pdf>

ALN Guidelines – Focus Groups

What is a focus group and when should you use one?

A focus group is a way of gathering research with a small group (on average 4-8 people) and a moderator(s) who guides the discussions. Focus groups aim to:

- obtain a deeper understanding of an issue;
- explore perspectives on a problem;
- generate ideas;
- identify potential problems with a new service/programme;
- brainstorm potential solutions within a group setting.

A focus group will tend to concentrate on a defined topic/issue, with the moderator using questions to encourage discussion between participants, the interaction between participants then guiding the discussion. Focus groups can be good for discovering ideas not previously considered as well as for gathering a rich diversity of data from participants. To this end, it is important to have a diverse range of participants who can offer a range of life experiences and opinions. It is important to note that the focus group should encourage interaction between participants, not between the moderator(s) and participants.

Focus groups are not recommended if you are seeking to access personal stories/narratives, where one-to-one interviews would be preferable. If you require data that can be generalised to a wider group, a survey could work better.

Running a focus group (before, during and after)

Before

This section outlines some of the key considerations for each stage of the process.

Think about what you want to get from the focus group:

- consider the topic you want to explore
- think about how the group will add to what you already know
- what else you might need to know

It can be useful to create a guide to help you explore your topic without leading the discussion. The guide can include some open-ended questions and prompts which might be helpful when guiding the participants' discussion. It could be helpful to allow your participants to begin with wider experiences and gradually move to more specific questions. However, you may find participants will raise issues without you needing to prompt them.

It is considered good practice to run more than one focus group to enable you to gather a diversity of views.

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You should think about how you will identify and recruit participants and how that could influence the diversity of views and contributions. The types of participants in each group could influence the contributions made, so the make-up of the group is important.

If you are planning to use data in a future publication or presentation, you should consider preparing a consent form, which all participants should be asked to sign when the focus group is set up.

During

Wherever possible, you should record the discussion at a focus group (the participants need to be aware of it prior to signing up to the group and have given either written or verbal consent), as well as have an identified note taker. This can be a co-convenor who will also contribute to the discussion and ask questions you might not pick up on.

Set some ground rules from the start which state that:

- it is a safe space in which all views should be respected;
- there are no right or wrong answers;
- everything said will be kept confidential and anything that is recorded will be anonymised so individuals can't be identified;
- everyone should respect other opinions even where they differ from their own

Establish an atmosphere that helps everyone to feel comfortable and secure. Doing introductions first can help to make participants relax. To further help with this, refer to them by name.

Before the topic discussion begins, check that there is a shared understanding of the key terms/concepts to be discussed, for example, by asking "When I say x, what does that mean to you?".

During the discussions, the moderator should be checking for a balance of contributions from all participants. One or two people shouldn't be able to dominate the discussion; equally quieter members need to be brought into the discussion, without explicitly targeting any of them by name. Generally, participants should be doing at least 80% of the talking during the discussion.

It is helpful to have some practical tasks for participants to do that gets them to move about the room (noting things on different flipcharts for example).

At the end of the discussion on each question/topic, it can be helpful to summarise the shared views to check your understanding of what participants have said. At the end of the meeting, give a quick verbal summary of all questions/topics and run through all the action points agreed.

After

Afterwards It is good practice to transcribe the interviews so that you ensure you pay close attention to everything that participants said, rather than just the things you were expecting to hear. If transcribing your data, you should anonymise as you go to ensure participants cannot be identified.

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It can be helpful to send out a summary to participants so they can check their views have been captured correctly (though this may slow down your ability to begin to review the findings – setting a deadline for responses could be useful).

To analyse your data, a good starting point is to read the transcripts and begin with a summary describing the key issues discussed and identifying the themes that arise. Consider how the data adds to other feedback/data you already have. You should be reflexive and aware of how your own opinions may have influenced your interpretation of participants' comments and be as objective as you can. If possible, follow-up and report on action points so people can see their views have made a difference. Any reports and outcomes from the focus groups should be shared as appropriate with the Steering Group lead for Groups who will communicate the findings with the rest of the Steering Group and the Board.