



## Focus Groups

### **What are ... Focus Groups**

A Focus group is a meeting to which a small group of invited participants (typically 8-12 people) attend. The meeting is based around a particular issue / topic with the intention of undertaking an in-depth discussion to gather views and ideas that can lead to change.

The group is usually led by one or two facilitators who begin the discussion and make sure it stays on course and doesn't deviate away from the topic. They are also on hand to mediate when discussions get heated. There will also be an observer/note taker to ensure comments are recorded.

A focus group may meet only once or a number of times but they will only meet to discuss the one issue / topic.

Groups may be built around a group of service users, a group united by an interest in a topic or a citizen's panel.

### **Why use this technique?**

They are good for getting common sense opinions on complex issues and can provide insight into the contextual issues surrounding service provision and "dip-stick" tests for policies or ideas.

They allow for the exploration of people's views, motives, desires, aspirations, ambitions, values and behaviours. They are useful for acquiring large quantities of open-ended information. Often used to clarify and identify issues prior to implementation. They can help to increase understanding of people's motives and behaviour.

## **When should you use it?**

This technique should be used when:

- Looking for qualitative feedback on proposals (e.g. service change)
- Generating new ideas
- Identifying issues for larger consultation practices
- Tracking perceptions of issues
- Seeking to understand behaviour and motivation (e.g. user satisfaction)
- When confidence constrains people participating in a one-to-one interview

## **What type of information does it produce?**

Qualitative. Even one focus group skilfully facilitated will generate a large volume of qualitative data.

## **What are the advantages?**

- It can be helpful in obtaining wide-ranging views
- It enables people to express their views
- It can generate detailed information
- It is useful for exploring complex or sensitive and difficult issues
- Participants have the opportunity to fully interact
- You can set the framework and parameters of the discussion and intervene to keep it on course
- You can control the flow of the discussion but should not pre-judge the outcome
- A facilitator can respond to negative non-verbal signals
- It can include people traditionally excluded or uncomfortable in more formal surroundings
- It is quicker than interviewing 12 people
- They are relatively easy to organise
- It can be used to consult different sections of the community and useful for consulting specific target groups of people
- Interpreters, sign language interpreters etc can be used
- A range of issues can be listed using different groups
- It is a dynamic and creative method of consultation

## **What are the disadvantages?**

- Small numbers mean you cannot extrapolate results to the whole population
- It is not statistically reliable
- It may not be representative of wider population
- Meetings can be dominated by a few people with strong views
- It is time consuming
- It requires trained facilitators and observers
- People might not attend even if they have said they will
- You may have to hire equipment and venue and pay incentives
- You need time and quiet, private location
- Recruitment may be time-consuming
- Views may be unrealistic
- Individuals views may be masked to gain consensus
- Results cannot be representative, unless a large number of groups are organised
- Results cannot easily be quantified

## **What are the costs?**

- It often requires trained facilitators and observers who may have to be commissioned.
- You may need to hire a venue
- You may have to pay incentives for people to attend (perhaps to cover travel costs and provide refreshments)

## **What are the practicalities?**

- You need to clearly identify your target population
- Ensure staff have appropriate skills – provide training where needed.
- You may need a comfortable, quiet venue
- You will need to discuss confidentiality with the group
- You may require a follow-up meeting to see if views have changed
- Ensure venues are accessible in terms of physical access and location
- Make sure clear, easy to understand information is available before the event and on the day
- You must be clear about the purpose of the exercise and know who should make up the target group
- Think about how easily traditionally-excluded get involved? Are any special arrangements required?



## **Types of Focus Group**

**Mini Groups** - can be for five people discussing sensitive topics

**Normal Groups** - 7-9 respondents lead by a professional moderator

**Extended Groups** - 12-15 people in a question and answer mode

## **Focus Group Process**

- Recruitment which involves finding group members qualified to attend
- Planning of the discussion including topics, venue, timing etc
- Moderation which involves leading and reporting on the proceedings

