



FOCUS GROUP RESEARCH TRAINING

How to run a focus group, collate feedback, and manage
tricky situations!

Norfolk Community
Foundation

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Introduction

Running a focus group allows you to gather qualitative data and feedback from a small group of people on a particular topic or product. This can help you gain insight into the behaviour, preferences, and opinions of particular groups of people, which can be used to make informed decisions and improvements. Results can inform what work is done with the benefit of community participation, and can even help provide evidence to funders and supporters.

Running your focus group

No matter how many focus groups you run, the process is the same each time.

Finding your focus group

- Groups of 5-8 participants are ideal, but groups should **not** exceed 10
- They may be people you already work with, they may not
- You can select groups however you see fit.
 - You can choose people who are friends or who are not, people who are of similar ages, or not etc. The important thing is that you note these details in the feedback at the end.
- Make sure they can all participate at the proposed time!

The Roles

Moderator

- Responsible for running the focus group
- Create a relaxed, supportive and non-judgemental atmosphere
- Remind participants that there are no right or wrong answers
- Ensure **all** participants can express their viewpoints freely
- Keep the conversation on topic and moving
- Keep an eye on the time
- Makes basic notes on the group dynamic during the session
- Reports back at the end of the session
- (Fulfils Observer duties if there is no Observer)

Observer

- Makes detailed notes on the group dynamic during the session
- Assists the Moderator in setting up the session
- Takes care of paperwork during the session
- Responsible for the recording equipment
- Reports back at the end of the session

Coordinator

- Collects all feedback from groups
- Compiles feedback into report for sign off
- Publishes report

Preparation

- Try to hold the focus group in a room away from other activities and in a quiet space. Smaller rooms work better.
- The Moderator and Observer set up the room, check that the recording equipment works, the questions/material are ready, and consent forms, incentives and any other paperwork are in place.
- The room should be set up in a way where everyone can see everyone (e.g. in a circle or around a large table) and feel included.

Arrival

- The Moderator greets participants as they arrive.
- The Observer offers and makes them refreshments, sorts out consent forms, and hands out and signs for incentives.
- The Observer should take charge of the recording equipment, be prepared to take notes and should be unobtrusive but seated in a position where they can see and hear all the participants.

Introduction

- The Moderator begins, sitting at the front of the group.

Suggested order of introductory remarks:

- Welcome everyone and say how grateful we are that they have taken time out of their day to come.
- Introduce yourself and explain your connection to the project.
- Introduce the Observer and outline their role.
- Explain that you will be recording the session and that this is so detailed notes can be made afterwards.
- Make it very clear that they will be anonymous and that no one will be identified in any report.
- Ask each person to say their first name and a sentence or two about themselves.
- If you or people within the group are not familiar with all group members, ask them to write their names on badges/labels so you/they can remember who they are.
- Tell them that they are here to give you their views on what it is like to be a woman in Norfolk.
- Explain that you want their opinions - not what they think you want to hear. Say that we want them to respond as individuals and to say what **they personally think or feel**, not what they think others would think or feel.
- If you are holding multiple focus groups, explain that there are other groups and that whilst all their individual contributions are valued, the final report will be a summary of all the groups' views.
- Explain how the session will be run – e.g. we will go through some questions/prompts which are designed to get people thinking, but are by no means the only things people can talk about; indeed, we want to know if they think something has been missed out.
- Ask if there are any questions relating to the process.

OBSERVER TO TURN ON RECORDING EQUIPMENT!!

The Session

Question/Prompt 1

What do you like most about living in your local area?

Key Outcomes:

- To warm up participants
- To set the tone for the session - warm, open, chatty and friendly.

Ideas for further questions if the conversation isn't flowing:

- What things are there to do in your area?
- What nice spaces are there?
- What good community things happen nearby?
- What's the best way to get around in your area?
- What do you enjoy doing at home?
- What do you enjoy doing outside of your home?
- Where do you feel most safe in your area?
- Who do you like to spend time with in your area?
- Etc.

Notes:

(Responses/info to have to hand in case anyone asks)

Question/Prompt 2

[Your question]

Key Outcomes:

- ???

Ideas for further questions if the conversation isn't flowing:

- ???

Notes:

(Responses/info to have to hand in case anyone asks)

and so on.

- We will provide you with a list of questions for inspiration, but feel free to add your own. You will probably want to spend about 10-15 min per question so you'll only need 3-5 questions for the whole session.
- Let them know when you get to the last question/prompt.

To Close

- Ask if there is anything anybody would like to go back to or anything else anybody would like to talk about.
- Observer to turn off recording equipment once everybody has finished.
- Tell them what happens next:
 - E.g. We will be show you a copy of what we produce and will have the opportunity to remove or change anything you have said.
- Tell them how the results will be drawn together and what will happen to them.
- Thank them for agreeing to take part.

Writing up your report

The Moderator and Observer will need to take note of the following during focus group sessions:

- Eye contact
- Body Language
- What isn't said (it's often as important as what is said)
- Voice tone
- Confusion
- Language adopted e.g. is the group using impersonal or personal language, are there lots of 'oughts'?
- Dominance in a group
- Silences
- Indifference
- Interest (personal)

Writing up - roles

Moderator

- Write down 1st impressions as soon as possible (work with the format provided).
- Listen to and make notes of recordings.
- Mull over.
- Write down 2nd impressions.
- Revisit recordings and notes.
- Write down initial conclusions.
- Attend debrief meeting with observer.
 - Share conclusions.
- Revise conclusions as needed and forward to coordinator.

Observer

- Write down 1st impressions as soon as possible using format provided.
- Look at notes made during session.
- Write down 2nd impressions.
- Write down initial conclusions.
- Attend debrief meeting with moderator.
 - Share conclusions.
- Revise conclusions as needed.

Coordinator

- Consider all the findings
- Draw findings of the other reports together and circulate/present the first draft to moderators, observers and members of the project team as appropriate.
- Revise final report in light of comments on draft.
- Present final report.

Writing up – Format

We have created a template feedback form – link at the end of this document. If you do not wish to use the form, please use the below as prompts for writing your feedback:

Within the context of the objectives report overall impressions of the group including the following:

- Composition of the group? Include age, gender identity, whether in a couple/close friends, and any other information/observations e.g, whether they knew each other, whether they are new to county/area, background and level of education.
- Were any people dominant in the group? How did this impact on what the group discussed and how they discussed it?
- Was there anything which particularly excited or enthused them?
- Was there anything that confused them?
- Was there anything they definitely didn't want or like?
- Was there anything important they thought was missing?

Each Question/Prompt

- The group's overall reaction?
- The key points raised?
- How the discussion developed, and what else was brought up.
- Whether the group was enthusiastic or hostile about something and why, and how they expressed this.
- How they wished to see/experience the themes and how they expressed this.

General Observations

Focus group research rarely gives you exact answers. It provides guidance as to the way to go forward. You may find that some of the findings are not clear or are contradictory. It is the nature of focus group research to raise issues you have not thought of. You may have to think about changing your ideas completely.

Producing the final report

Once all focus groups have been conducted and written up, the Coordinator can then begin to consolidate the final report. This should seek to introduce the audience to your group, what it does and why the group decided to run the focus groups. Discussion should then move on to what was said in the groups, conclusions drawn, and recommendations made.

Tips on working with groups

The ideal group is relaxed and supportive of each other and the moderator, open to new ideas from others in the group, engaged, task-oriented, humorous and happy.

Unfortunately, not all groups are like this. Some are hostile, defensive, irritable, dominated by one person or group reactionary, or unwilling to engage or listen to each other.

Strategies to deal with some of the problems which arise when working with groups:

1. Dependence - people only speaking if the moderator asks questions or prompts responses.
 - Draw the group's attention to this
 - Explain that the group should feel free to discuss topics openly between themselves; the moderator is there to listen and move things on from stage to stage.
 - It's much better if a dialogue is established between group participants.
2. Hostility – usually directed to the moderator, generally by one or two individuals e.g. "You don't really care what people think, you're going to do this anyway."
 - The Moderator should avoid engaging in direct arguments with individuals but instead discuss with the whole group. E.g. "Well as it happens I am interested in all your needs, what do the rest of you think of this?" OR "There seems to be a lot of aggression in the atmosphere, can the group comment on this?"
3. Flight - the reluctance of the group to tackle the real topic, e.g. easily diverted by personal anecdotes
 - Acknowledge this, e.g. "We seem to be wandering off the point a lot. What does the group think about this?"
4. Splintering - when the group does not work as a group and small splinter groups/cliques develop.
 - Be open about it. E.g. "Some of you seem to show a keen interest in x... What do the rest of you think?"
5. Domination by one person
 - As above, acknowledge this openly and encourage others to participate.

No group is perfect, and all groups will probably display one or more of the above characteristics, so relax; let the group take you where it will. You'll learn things whatever happens!

Other challenging situations

- Challenging viewpoints
 - Some topics illicit answers that are uncomfortable to listen to for one reason or another. It is important to let people have their say and have their opinions heard. If, however, this crosses a line where it is disrupting the conversation, it is upsetting other group members or it is highly offensive/illegal, move the conversation on. The above tips give useful guidance on how to do this.
- Someone discloses something unexpected
 - Focus groups can get people thinking about topics in new ways and this leads people to say things that perhaps they otherwise wouldn't. Sometimes someone will say/disclose something that will require action to be taken (i.e. implement your safeguarding policy, pause the session for a break, etc.)

Closing remarks

To make the best use of research findings you have to:

- Carry out such work at a point in your development when the results can be acted upon. It is a pointless exercise to carry out focus group research on a project when the design brief has been drawn up, key decisions have been made or the work has already started.
- Give yourselves enough time to consider findings. If the findings are not clear you may have to spend further time exploring issues the groups have already covered or raised.
- Think strategically. Focus group work is a useful tool. If it is carried out in a professional manner it becomes a good way to convince funding bodies, partners, and stakeholders that this is public support for what you want to do.
- Welcome criticism by focus groups. If you find out that they don't appreciate what you want to do and want you to change some elements, just remember you have taken the initiative by asking them their opinion in the first place. Use the findings to move on.
- You have to win over your institutions and convince your governing body, staff and funders of the value of the work if you are going to move on with the ideas generated with the focus groups. Try to involve staff at every stage. If you have trustees, local council members who sit on committees who vote on budgets, senior managers who set action plans and so on, involve these people in the focus group work at an appropriate time. You need them to take ownership of the findings and support your work.

Resources

You can find resources mentioned in this

Questions?

You can contact us at:

01603 623 958

shinebrighter@norfolkfoundation.com