

How to... Write effective survey questions

1. Why use this method?

The benefits of using surveys are:

- Reaching a large group of people in a short space of time.
- Being quick for participants to complete.
- Often easier to analyse than other forms of engagement.
- Provide a baseline that you can compare to at a later date (if you repeat the same survey, in future).

Whilst this guide focusses on the questions you will be asking, it's also important to think about who you will be sending the survey to, how you will be sharing the survey and how you plan to analyse the findings.

But there are some limitations:

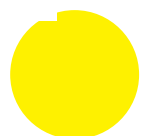
- Short, focused surveys work best
- Not all communities/people can or will engage with a survey
- Not as useful for in-depth, deliberative feedback.
- Be aware of biases in terms of who chooses to respond. Carefully consider, through reviewing your demographic data, who has responded and how representative your sample might be.
- Strong analytical skills are needed to interpret the data generated. For example, a common mistake when analysing survey findings can be drawing wider conclusions from a small sample size. If only a small number of people have responded, how confident can you be that feedback is representative? Similarly, if a large number of responses indicate a positive experience, this doesn't mean negative experiences can be dismissed. Understanding and exploring differing views is important as it can help highlight hidden health inequalities.

If your survey becomes too long, you want to explore things in more depth or find the communities you are trying to reach can't or don't want to engage with surveys, **using a mix of engagement methods** will help you get the information you need.

2. Purpose of your survey

Before drafting your questions, you need to consider the purpose of your survey:

- What are you trying to find out? Ask focused and specific questions with answers that will be helpful to you.



- If participants cannot influence a certain topic or if the answers to these questions will be “nice to know” but are not materially helpful, avoid asking them as these can create unrealistic expectations and damage important relationships with our communities.
- If your main goal is to understand participants’ opinions, behaviours, or motivations you will want to ask more open-ended questions that explore the *why* and *how*. These are called **qualitative questions** and require the participant to explain their own thoughts in their own words. You will need to review these responses and look for themes and trends. If you are finding you include too many qualitative questions, you may want to consider using other engagement methods that allow you to explore topics in more depth.
- If your main goal is to help prioritise things or decide whether certain ideas are worth being developed or are likely to be supported by the community, you will want to ask closed questions that clarify *what*, *how much*, and *how many*. These are called **quantitative questions** and require the participant to choose from a set of answers that you have provided for them. This will give you more numerical data that may be easier to analyse.
- You should have a clear idea of how you will analyse and how you plan to use the information gathered from each question.

3. How to structure your survey

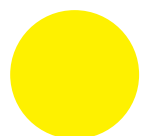
- Include a short, plain English, introduction that explains;
 - what the survey is about,
 - how long it will take to complete,
 - any other information respondents need to know to give an informed response (for example further information/ documents they might need to read first)
 - the closing date.
- Surveys should be short and to the point. Longer surveys tend not to be completed unless there is a strong incentive to do so. Aim for it to take **no more than 10 minutes** to complete.
- Primarily use quantitative questions. Qualitative questions should be kept to a minimum as they take much longer for participants to complete and take longer to analyse.
- Use a mix of **types of questions** to keep your participants engaged.
- Consider if you need to have different sections to your survey, for instance, if some parts are not relevant to everyone. If your survey is online you can set the survey up so that it “skips” certain questions to send participants to a future point

in the survey, based on how they answer. For example, if you ask a question about experience of a certain service and your participant indicates that they have not used that service, you may not want to ask them further questions about that service.

- Think about the flow of your questions and what order you put them in. You might want to start by understanding the person's familiarity with the topic of the survey first – e.g., frequency of contact with a particular service – before you ask about their experience or view of it.
- Include demographic questions at the end of the survey that tell you about who is completing the survey. You should explain why you are asking for this information and how it will be helpful to your work. We have a duty to consider equality and how we can end health inequalities, so information about protected characteristics – such as race, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and age – is usually included to identify where this is a potential factor in respondents' experiences. It may also be important to understand other information such as whether they have recently used the services they are being asked about, if they are a carer etc.
- Make sure to finish the survey by;
 - thanking people for participating,
 - explaining how they can get more involved in the project (if there are further opportunities to do this) and
 - giving participants the choice to sign up to receive feedback on the survey/project and be involved in further developments. This will help support you in future phases of engagement and to continue the conversation.

4. Writing good questions

- Aim for **all participants** to have the **same understanding** of what the question is asking, with **little or no room for interpretation**.
- **Check** questions are easy to understand by testing them before sending the survey out more widely. You can do this by working with a service user reading group or supporting organisation.
- **Make sure people's responses are not influenced by how you asked the question.** Keep your survey questions neutral by avoiding:
 - Leading questions – i.e. prompting someone towards a specific answer or making something sound negative/positive to encourage a specific response. For example: *90% of people find the ICS website engaging. How do you feel about this?*



- Assuming experience or knowledge - for example: *which of our ICS website features did you find most useful?*
- Coercive questions - forcing participants towards a specific answer. For example: *you liked the ICS website, didn't you?*
- **Check you are only asking one question at a time:** For example, questions like: *On the ICS website, what do you think about having more colours, photos and diagrams?* This is actually three different questions. If you ask the question as it is, it may be hard to understand the participants' responses. Instead, have three separate questions i.e. *On the ICS website, what do you think about*":
 - *Having more colour(s)?*
 - *Having more photos?*
 - *Having have more diagrams?*
- **Be specific:** For instance, if you are asking about frequency, say 'daily' or 'more than once a week', rather than 'regularly'.
- For quantitative questions, **make sure you always include a 'prefer not to answer'** or 'other, please specify' option in case they don't feel there is an answer that covers how they feel.
- If you are using a **scale (such as strongly disagree, disagree, etc.) try to have an even number of answer choices** – participants are drawn to a middle option.
- **Limit the number of options** to choose from in a list.

5. How to make your survey accessible

It is important to keep your audience in mind when creating your questions. If your survey is easy to understand, accessible and quick to complete, this will help you reach as diverse a range of people as possible, meaning your findings are more representative.

To make your survey as accessible as possible, consider:

- **The language you use** – do you need to have your survey translated into other languages or, if [working with people with a learning disability](#), easy read versions so that information can be more easily understood? **Writing in plain English and removing jargon and acronyms is always essential.**
- **The format of your survey** - how will those who may have physical disabilities such as sensory loss complete your survey if it is online or in hard copy format? Seeking advice from specialist organisations can help you consider the best ways to make your survey accessible (such as braille, audio versions or larger print). Could you offer participants the option to complete the survey as a 1:1 interview?

- **Privacy and confidentiality** – are the topics you want feedback on sensitive or likely to be triggering? Might people be worried about providing feedback about services that have helped them? Or, that it might impact their care? [Read the tops tips for working with people who have experienced trauma](#). Allowing people to respond anonymously, including trigger warnings, signposting to support organisations and being clear about where the findings will be shared and how feedback will be used can help support participants to decide whether or not to feedback.
- **Testing and co-developing your survey questions** by working with those you are hoping to reach. This will help you to understand whether your questions will be interpreted as you intended and give you a chance to make changes before the survey goes live.

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