

## How to... Run a focus group

### 1. Why use this method?

The **benefits** of running focus groups include:

- Enabling a deep source of insight into people's experiences, attitudes and beliefs. There is the ability to clarify and confirm what is being said in a way that is more difficult with other engagement methods, such as surveys.
- Free flowing conversations, allowing for deeper learning about complex issues.
- High levels of participant interaction due to the small size of the group.
- Being able to recruit the participants you most need to hear from. For example, those most impacted by your project and people affected by health inequalities. Small group sessions can work better for people that find other engagement activities inaccessible, or are not comfortable talking in large groups.
- Reaching people who are not willing or able to give written answers.

But, there are some **considerations**:

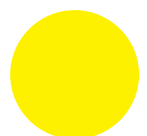
- A facilitator is needed to support each conversation.
- A content specialist should attend to provide key information and be on hand to answer questions.
- How you will support people to feel safe to share personal stories that might be uncomfortable -read more about this in section two on setting ground rules.
- Sessions can be dominated by one or two strong opinions and some participants may stay silent and not feel able to share diverging views.
- Focus groups can produce a lot of information that needs to be reviewed and analysed, which can become resource intensive.

### 2. Planning your focus group

Focus groups bring together people for a guided discussion on a specific topic. Usually, a focus group lasts anywhere from 60-90 minutes.

#### A. Identifying roles and responsibilities

When undertaking a focus group you will need to identify people to undertake these roles:



- **Point of contact** – communicating with participants before, during and after the conversations have happened to make sure questions are answered and the conversations are organised and set-up smoothly.
- **Facilitator** – responsible for facilitating the conversation and asking the key questions, ensuring everyone has the opportunity to give their views.
- **Note taker/ recorder** – responsible for accurately capturing feedback during the conversation and for finalising information after the session. Recording devices and transcription software may be used with the participants permission.
- **Reviewer** – responsible for reviewing the outputs of all conversations and analysing the key themes and trends to be presented in a feedback report.

Depending on how many conversations you plan to have, these roles might be performed by one or many people.

## B. Creating a conversation guide

A [conversation guide](#), prepared in advance, provides the facilitator with a script for how the conversation will flow (less common with unstructured conversations). It sets out the key topics to discuss and some prompts to help keep the conversation flowing. [Read the how to guide on developing effective questions to support you.](#)

The facilitator uses this guide flexibly; encouraging participants to elaborate on their answers, following the direction of the conversation and changing the questions accordingly. It is important to consider the time available and the number of questions you will be asking.

To make participants feel more comfortable and prepared, consider whether you want to share the questions you will be asking with them in advance.

## C. Setting

It is important to decide where you will hold your focus group. Work collaboratively with the people you will be speaking to, to decide what is best. If you have any limitations on where you can conduct these conversations, make it clear from the start so people can choose whether they want to participate, or not.

Focus groups can be conducted face-to-face or online (via video conference). If meeting face to face, focus groups should take place in an appropriate and neutral space to make sure conversations can't be overheard, to protect privacy.

Things to bear in mind:

- Face-to-face focus groups can generate anxiety in meeting new people and sharing their experiences in an unfamiliar setting or participants may be affected by the interviewer - feeling pressured to respond in a manner they perceive will

please you. Some people/groups may prefer working face to face so they can see you and understand your body language.

- Video / online focus groups can sometimes feel awkward or stilted, which could affect how your participants respond. However, they may be more comfortable joining a session with people they don't know from their own home.
- Not being face to face with participants could lead to more honest answers – particularly if the topic is sensitive/ traumatic. However, there could be environmental conditions or distractions on the participants side that could affect their responses.

#### **D. Recruiting and preparing participants**

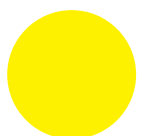
Having undertaken [your stakeholder mapping](#), you'll have identified those you want to have conversations with.

To recruit participants, you will need to consider how you will advertise this opportunity. It should be clear:

- What the purpose of the focus group is,
- When and where they might take place (or if there is flexibility in this),
- How much time the conversation will take,
- What topics participants might be asked about,
- If they need to fit any criteria to participate (i.e. having accessed certain services recently),
- How you will recognise their contribution (i.e. will they be paid for their time/ reimburse in other ways) and,
- How their participation will influence the project.

Once participants express an interest, find out from them what adjustments they might need for you to have the best conversation with them. This might include things like:

- Taking regular breaks if topics are emotive or traumatic,
- Being able to skip questions and stopping the interview at any time,
- Enabling a support worker or advocate to attend the session with your participant,
- Arranging a translator,
- Supplying information about how to use any online video platforms/ technology they may need to engage with,



- Paying attention to the environment in which you are having your conversation – some spaces might be intimidating or unfamiliar and therefore unsettling for some participants,
- Being able to signpost to support services if they feel upset by what the conversation might bring up for them and,
- Checking if they would like to see the write up of their session and make any corrections/ alterations.

Prepare participants for the conversation:

- Confirming (in writing and/or over the phone) when, where and how the conversation will take place.
- Explaining how the feedback will be collected and used
- Explaining you will invite them to complete demographic monitoring forms and consent forms as part of the process. Be sure to explain why these are important.
- Explaining and agreeing who will be “in the room” when the conversation happens.
- Encourage them to ask questions about the process.

### E. Getting consent

It's important to anonymise feedback received so that individual participants cannot be identified. It is essential to get your participants permission with a [photography consent form](#) if you want to:

- Take photographs/ videos of them,
- Make an audio recording of the conversation,
- Use their feedback to create a case study/ persona,
- Quote them directly and,
- Use any content on social media or in press releases, webpages, blogs, or in internal or external reports etc.

If you are working with children and young people under 18 you will need parental consent to work with them to begin with.

## 3. Undertaking your focus group

### Before the focus group:

- Remind your team of the purpose of the conversation/ reshare the conversation guide.

- Check the venue before booking the room (if meeting in person) so that you can find out and give participants information about travel to the venue and any accessibility information to support them to get into the venue (i.e. wheelchair access and disabled parking).
- Establish clear roles for anyone who will join (for example notetakers, observers etc.).
- Set up the room/ do a tech check: confirm that screen sharing, recording, etc. works.
- Double-check any links, files, etc. that participants will need have been shared.
- If working face-to-face, make sure you have hard copies of your conversation guide and consent forms/ demographic monitoring forms as well as any forms of reimbursement you may be using.

#### During the focus group:

- Ensure you capture important information about who has attended through sign-in sheets, demographic monitoring forms etc.
- Remember your conversation guide is just that. Having some flexibility will make your participant feel more comfortable with giving open and honest answers.

#### After the focus group:

- Review how the conversation went and consider if the guide needs to be updated.
- Begin reviewing and analysing the feedback received, ready to support your decision making.
- If you promised the participant any follow-up communications, identify who will send them and when.

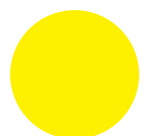
### F. Considering group dynamics

When running focus groups, it's important to consider group dynamics. Things that can help include:

#### 1. Spelling out your role

##### It's the facilitator's role to:

- Set the tone,
- Keep focussed on the topic,
- Keep to time,
- Keep up interest and momentum,
- Ensure everyone has a say,



- Strike a balance between prompting for further learning (ensuring the desired outcomes for the session are met) and respecting people's desire to disclose information about their experiences,
- Set the ground rules and ensure everyone agrees, understands and adheres to them.
- Manage the dynamics to ensure that everyone has an opportunity to speak and
- Remain impartial.

The facilitator's role is to be supportive; enabling and encouraging people to share their story, and to help discover information pertinent to the project.

## 2. Agreeing clear and simple 'ground rules' or expectations

These will need to vary from group to group, but might include:

- Creating a safe space by agreeing to keep information shared in the session confidential, avoiding confrontation about personal experiences and views and allowing people to take regular breaks if topics feel heavy. Think about support that can be offered inside and outside of the session if the topic is sensitive.
  - **Outside of the session** - you may need to offer signposting to one on one therapeutic support.
  - **Inside of the session** - have ways for people to discreetly indicate they are uncomfortable, e.g. by telling them how to send a private message in the chat. Offer separate one to ones if people prefer to talk outside a group setting.
- Having only one person speaking at a time.
- Respecting and not judging different views, experiences and ideas.
- Agree how participants will take part. For example, in online sessions, encouraging the use of the "raise hand" and chat functions. Or face to face, discussing how they should indicate they would like to speak.
- Using creative tools to support participation for those with different communication needs. [Please see our top tips for engaging with people with a learning disability.](#)

## 3. Common problems

Any group discussion can fall into the following traps:

- Someone's monopolising the discussion space.
- Nobody's saying anything.
- The group has gone off topic.

You can avoid these traps by anticipating these scenarios and practising your skills.

Developing your own stock of useful phrases and gestures can also help you facilitate your group. These really should be personal to you, but a few suggestions are offered below.

### To get the ball rolling / get people speaking:

- **Introductions** can help relax people but keep them brief – this will help you know how people wish to be addressed (best not to assume first name familiarity and check people's preferred pronouns).
- **A simple 'warm-up' question** that is open (not requiring a 'yes/no' response), general (offering likelihood of everyone being able to contribute something from their own perspective) and concrete e.g. "How long ago did you or someone you support/ care for access this service?".
- **Open and expectant facial expression.** This may seem obvious but look as if you're interested in what people will have to say.

### To keep people on topic

- **Listen actively** – ask yourself:
  - Is this point relevant?
  - Do I want to learn more about this by asking some follow up questions?
- Offer a **summary** of points made so far.
- Have an **'other issues' board** or post-it notes set to record matters that are not of direct relevance but that nevertheless should not be lost.

### To bring new people into the conversation

- **Look around** the group, when there is a pause in the conversation, indicating you are interested in what others think of what has been said.
- **Notice** who is nodding, shaking their head or in other, non-verbal ways indicating they either agree or disagree with what is being said.
- **Encourage all participants to share their experiences.** Ask 'how do others see this?' as a conversation starter.

### To stop someone speaking

- **Address the issue head on**, but politely, by saying 'I'm sorry I'm going to have to stop you there, as I need to give others a chance to contribute on this point, too'.
- Only **interrupt someone or be firm** if the comments/ behaviour are **offensive or inappropriate** e.g. racist or sexist comments, shouting and becoming aggressive.

### To encourage someone to keep talking

Be aware of participants' communication needs. If someone has speech difficulties, neurological difficulties, or is conversing in a language that isn't their first, they may need time to articulate what they want to say. Be patient and give them space and avoid trying to complete sentences unless they have indicated that type of support is helpful.

- **Keep up eye contact.**
- Maintain an **open and interested posture** (e.g. not crossed arms).
- **Single nod of head** (not double, which may indicate you are agreeing with the speaker – a facilitator should maintain a neutral position).
- **Minimal verbal signs:** 'mm'; 'yes'; 'I see'; 'go on'; 'really?' and so on.

### To draw discussion to a close

- **Summarise points** or range of opinions on issues discussed.
- Explain **what will happen** with what they've said, **where** they can get feedback and **how** they can be informed of developments.
- **Thank people** for taking part.
- Ask if there are any **questions**.

