Planning a Focus Group

This document outlines some of the key things to consider when you are planning a focus group. It covers what a focus group is and when it is most appropriate to use one. It also covers key practical considerations, such as identifying a research question and being realistic about the time available. It will introduce practical ways of ensuring the ethical safety of participants and raise common scenarios and how to deal with these. Being mindful of the areas covered in this document will help to ensure that focus groups runs smoothly and ultimately leads to better understanding of an area of interest.

What are focus groups?
Focus groups are a useful tool for collecting information about opinions and beliefs, encouraging discussion about a particular subject and providing opportunities for the facilitator and participants to learn more about a topic. The method relies on group interaction whereby people are encouraged to talk to one another, ask questions and comment on each other's point of view.

Focus groups are particularly effective for exploring people’s attitudes and needs. Focus groups can be used as the main research method or in conjunction with surveys. Surveys can create quantitative information and indicate how many people hold a certain opinion, but focus groups can further this information by exploring exactly how those opinions are constructed.

As a research tool focus groups offer the advantage of yielding rich data in participant's own words and developing deeper insights. People can build on each other’s responses and come up with ideas they might not have thought of in a one-to-one interview. Focus groups can encourage participation from people reluctant to be interviewed on their own or who feel they have nothing to say.

A skilled and experienced facilitator is needed to make sure discussions are not dominated by one or two participants as this can skew the session. A further limitation of focus groups is that the responses of participants are not independent. Previous research has shown how interacting in a group influences what each individual will contribute to the group. Logistical factors may also impact on the effectiveness of a focus group, for example it may not be practical for some participants to travel to a focus group or it may be difficult to gather enough of the appropriate people for a group.
There are several main considerations when undertaking a focus group.

**Timeline**
- 6-8 weeks before the start of the group write the objectives of the focus group drawing from the research question, identify the participants and gather the contact information of the participants. Be sure participants fit the criteria established for inclusion in the focus group, influenced by the research question.
- 4-5 weeks before the start of the group select a facilitator, develop the questions, create a script / topic guide and choose a location.
- 3-4 weeks before the start of the group send out invitations and follow up with phone calls one week later.
- 2 days before the start of the group gather materials and phone participants to remind them the focus group is coming up.

**Size**
- Focus groups should have six to twelve participants, as less than six may not generate enough discussion and more than twelve may make it difficult to follow the discussion.
- More participants should be invited than is needed to allow for no-shows.

**Location**
- Arrange participants around a table where everyone can see each other.
- Make sure the location is easily accessible (access for people with disabilities, safety, transportation, parking, etc).
- Location should be quiet and comfortable for participants.

**Facilitator**
- The facilitator should be able to deal tactfully with outspoken group members, keep the discussion on track and make sure every participant is heard.
- The facilitator should be knowledgeable about the topic and have undertaken a literature review so the focus group findings will add to the existing body of work.

**Script / Topic Guide**
- A script helps to increase the reliability of the focus group and ensure the facilitator stays on track and on time. It is usually developed in three steps:
  i. The facilitator welcomes the group, introduces the purpose of the focus group and makes introductions.
  ii. The facilitator asks the prepared questions.
  iii. The facilitator wraps up the focus group by thanking the participants, giving them an opportunity for further input, explaining
how the information will be used and when the overall process will be completed.

Questions
- As a focus group will last for one to two hours there is only time for four to seven questions.
- There are usually two types of questions; warm up questions and the more detailed topic questions. Warm up questions get people thinking and talking about the main subject and continue to build the rapport established in the introduction. Examples include How long have you been volunteering? or What is volunteering like for you? The more detailed questions are specific to the research question.
- Questions should be open-ended rather than closed and move from the general to the specific. Open-ended questions ask the participant to think and reflect, they reveal thoughts and opinions. Usually they begin with what, why, how, describe. Closed questions are usually answered with either a single word or phrase.

Ethics
- Prior to the focus group the participants are sent a consent form along with a confirmation of attendance slip and an information sheet. The consent form covers issues such as:
  Confidentiality: participants share important and often sensitive information, therefore only the researchers should have access to participant responses.
  Data protection: participants must be assured that no information will be publicly reported that would identify them as a participant in the research.
  Right to withdraw: the researcher should ensure that participants understand the nature and purpose of the research and that they may withdraw from participation at any time.
  Consent: people must agree to participate in the research of their own free will, usually by written consent however verbal consent that is recorded may be used instead.
- Participants should be asked in advance for their permission to tape record the session, usually stated in the consent form and information sheet.
- Participants should be informed what will happen to the information and how they can find out about the findings.
- It is normal practice to send participants a summary of the findings.
Conducting the focus group

- Have all materials ready including paper and pencils, focus group script, list of participants, name tags, refreshments, a clock, a digital voice recorder and spare batteries to tape the session.
- The facilitator should explain that the aim of the focus group is to encourage participants to talk to each other rather than address themselves to the facilitator.
- The facilitator should take the opportunity to ask questions that arise from the discussion, probing deeper into a topic. Probes and clarifying questions can help to clarify what a participant has said and can get more detailed information, e.g. *Could you explain what you mean by……or Can you tell me something else about……*
- Leading questions should be avoided, e.g. *Don’t you think that…..* This can influence the participant to answer what they think the facilitator expects to hear rather than how they feel.

After the focus group

- Summarise each focus group session and transcribe notes or recordings as soon as possible after the sessions.
- Analyse the summaries of the sessions using content analysis:
  - i. Read through the transcripts of the sessions to get a general idea of the content, noting down the key themes that emerge (e.g. Each question could start as a theme);
  - ii. Read the transcripts again and use four different highlighter pens or coloured pencils to categorise the statements that fit under the four theme headings;
  - iii. A further theme may emerge that does not fit under the main categories you started with;
  - iv. Re-reading may also reveal that a heading is too broad and could be broken down into three further themes;
  - v. Make notes under the seven headings, writing summaries for each theme including examples and quotations from the transcripts.
- Write the report containing the background and purpose of the focus group, details of the sessions, results and conclusions.

Common scenarios

- The facilitator should invite each participant to speak in turn if one person dominates the session.
- Use differences of opinion as a topic for discussion.
- Direct questions to quieter participants by using eye contact. Their right to be quiet must be respected but they can be given a chance to share their ideas one-to-one during a break.
Guiding principles for the group

At the beginning of the session it can be useful to inform the participants about ways to make the session run effectively and respectfully of all people. For example:

- Only one person talks at a time.
- There are no right or wrong answers, just ideas, experiences and opinions that are all valuable.
- It is important to hear all sides of an issue, both the positive and the negative.
- Confidentiality is assured, what is shared in the room stays in the room.

These guidelines can be presented to the group and displayed on a flip chart page. It is also helpful to invite participants to contribute to the list and these can be added to the flip chart page.

Additional Resources

There are additional template documents attached which you may find useful when preparing a focus group.

- Confirmation of Attendance Slip
- Template Consent Form
- Template Information Sheet / Covering Letter

If you require any further support in relation to planning for or carrying out a focus group contact the Volunteer Now Policy and Information Team: policy@volunteernow.co.uk

Reasonable precautions have been taken to ensure information in this publication is accurate. However it is not intended to be legally comprehensive; it is designed to provide guidance in good faith without accepting liability. If relevant, we therefore recommend you take appropriate professional advice before taking any action on the matters covered herein. Charity (Inland Revenue) No. XT22896. Company Limited by Guarantee No. NI602399. Registered in Northern Ireland.

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