

How to run a focus group

Focus groups are a great method to engage with your target audience to capture rich, in-depth insight. The thought of organising and facilitating a focus group might seem overwhelming, so we have produced this guide to help you understand the processes and steps you need to take in order to run a good focus group and get the insight you need.

To run a focus group, there are four phases that you need to complete. These are;

- 1 Create a discussion guide
- 2 Recruit participants for your focus group
- 3 Facilitate your focus group
- 4 Analyse your data



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Create a discussion guide that works

In order to run an effective focus group, you need to design a discussion guide that will enable you to explore and probe responses from your target audience - you need to do this first before anything else. Discussion guides are typically split up into several sections that cover different areas around the topic you are researching and the hypothesis you are testing. Here are some exercises to help you build the skeleton of your discussion guide:

- Who am I conducting research with? Are they children? Are they vulnerable people?
- What do I want to find out from the research? How can I compartmentalise this question? What areas/topics are linked that I would like to probe further?
- What activities should I use to capture insight?
- What tasks do I want to include as part of the focus group?

To create your discussion guide, there are two methods that you can use. Neither method is superior to the other, but they enable you to access different thought patterns in designing your guide.



1 Start off by listing the different categories you would like to explore. From those categories, expand by writing on post-it notes all the questions that you can think of that would enable you to capture insight.



2 On as many post-it notes, write down different areas/questions you want to gain from the research. Once you've done this, collate the different post-it notes and group them by similarity. This will build together the different sections that you will cover in the discussion guide.



Our top tip!

When thinking about research techniques to use in the focus groups, different audiences will need to be approached differently. For example, children will need more visual prompts and alternative techniques such as role playing, art and more engaging tasks to keep them engaged with the focus group.

We recommend that a discussion guide lasts between 60 – 120 minutes in length. Focus groups longer than 90 minutes would benefit from a break.



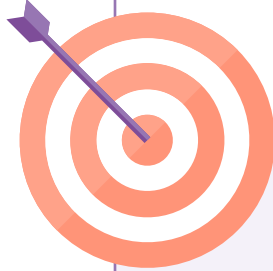
Recruiting the right people

Now that your discussion guide is complete and finalised, it's time to start recruiting!

Recruiting is the most difficult part of research. To ensure that you get the correct insight from the research, you need to make sure that the right people attend the focus group. To do this, you need to:

- **Identify who the best people are to communicate;**
- **Select a venue that is easily accessible – take into consideration transport connections and available parking;**
- **Pick a good time – make sure that the focus group is available at a realistic time for your target audience;**
- **Provide information about the focus group into a flyer or advert. This has to be short, sweet and snappy. There's not much room to go into detail about the focus group – this is something you can provide later on. If you are providing incentives, put this on the flyer/advert (and state what it is).**

From experience, conducting research with different target audiences will involve using different methods. Below are some examples of the routes we've used to recruit different groups:



Target audience	Method of recruitment
Children and young people	Schools and youth centres
Patients	Patient and Liaison Service, advertise in GP surgeries, hospitals and pharmacies.
Smokers	Local stop smoking service, pharmacies offering smoking cessation support, local health and wellbeing centres.

The process for participants to express interest is important as this could put some potential participants off from signing up to attend. The process must be easy and clear on how to sign up.

Again, the process will depend on the target audience you will be conducting research with to make sure that you engage with audiences based on preferred channels. For example, creating an event page with an online registration process would work well with young people, whereas older people might prefer to call or sign up on a physical sheet of paper that would be left at places of interest (such as community centres).

Don't forget, you are also able to use recruitment agencies to recruit participants for your focus groups.

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Facilitating your focus group

Facilitation of focus groups is key to the outcome of the research, as the insight is only as good as its facilitator. The key with focus groups is to wait and listen. A discussion guide is there as a guide – you don't need to follow the structure religiously as the facilitation of discussions should be flexible. Use the responses in the focus group to help guide conversations.

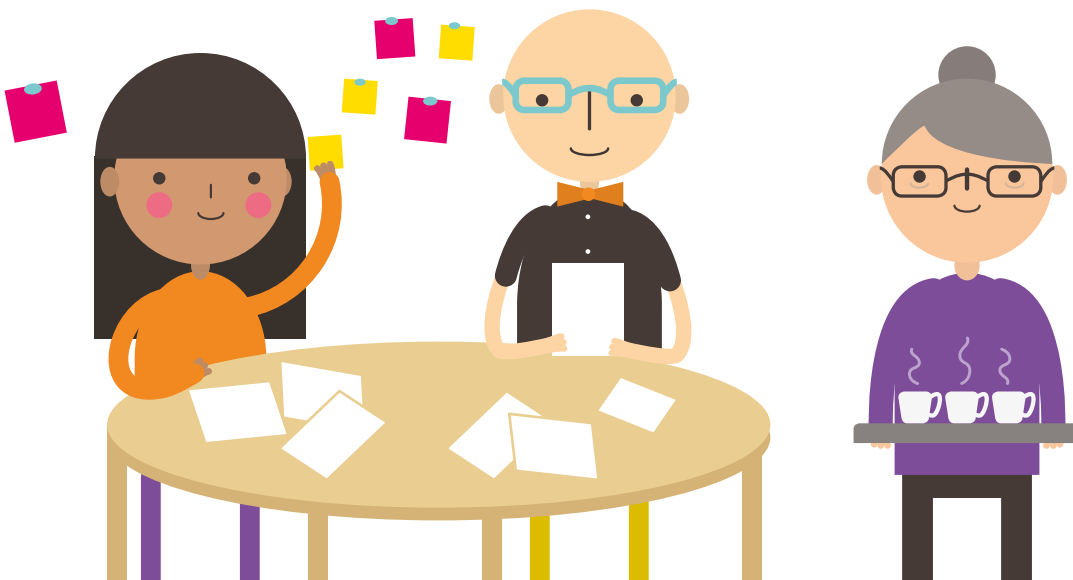
Ahead of starting the facilitation, you will need to go over some ground rules to make sure that the session is not disrupted. Here are some areas to cover during this part:

- **Introduce yourself, what you will be covering in the focus group and what you aim to achieve from the research as well as its output (i.e. how the research will be used).**
- **Make participants aware of their consent to take part and that they are welcome to leave the focus group if they are not feeling comfortable or have to leave early.**

- Ask that participants remain respectful to the facilitator (yourself) and other participants.
- Notify participants that the session will be recorded to help you transcribe the discussion later on. Ask for consent to record and if everybody is happy with this, you can press record and begin facilitation.
- Ask that participants don't talk over each other as this will make it difficult to listen back to and transcribe.

Here are some considerations you need to think about to make sure that you facilitate discussions well.

- Have the room set up in a way that would allow participants to engage with yourself and others. Use a circular seating arrangement so that participants are able to have eye contact with others;
- Make sure that you engage with participants through different tasks and activities that will aid discussion. Ask people to write out their responses, draw something or move around the room as part of the focus group – this will help participants to become more engaged in discussions;
- There will be over-contributors and under-contributors – this is bound to happen, but it's all about how you manage participants that would fall under these categories. For those that under-contribute, use subtle gestures and eye contact while asking for their views or responses as part of the discussion. For over-contributors, acknowledge that they have provided input by thanking them. Following this, invite others to share their views and opinions.
- If you feel that discussions are going around in circles. Use your guide to bring the discussion back on topic – it's natural for participants to start discussing other topics.
- Time keeping is important, so be conscious of how long it is taking to cover areas in your discussion guide so that the session doesn't over run.
- Once the focus groups are complete, thank participants for attending and provide them with incentives (if this will be provided to them).



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Transcription and analysis

This final process will be time intensive. You will have to listen over the recordings and transcribe what has been said in the session while typing conversations and this takes time.

Once you have transcribed the recordings, you will need to analyse the transcript. There are different methods of conducting the analysis. The most common is to undertake a thematic analysis.



What is thematic analysis?

Thematic analysis is the process whereby you review qualitative data (transcripts) and identifying the different emerging themes alongside the data. Through this process, you will see emerging trends and reoccurring themes.

These themes will often cross over with each other, and in some cases cluster to form broader themes. During this process, the research becomes more of an art and less scientific as the analysis is dependent on how researchers interpret the themes.

Key insights will stem from the emerging themes that you produce through the analysis. However, key insights utilise the gaps, barriers and motivators from within emerging themes.

When reporting on these key insights, it's important to provide supportive quotes that put key insights into context. This will help to paint a picture of how your audience behave and what their views are.

If you'd like support with conducting focus groups on challenging topics and hard to reach audiences, why not contact our research team?

Send an email to hello@social-change.co.uk to see how we can help!

