Focus groups

What is a focus group

A focus group is a group of people who have been brought together to discuss a specific topic in-depth. They are extremely useful for evaluating services or for testing new ideas. Basically focus groups are interviews, but of 6-12 people at the same time. Focus groups have had a “bad press” in the past because often they have been conducted in a manipulative way and responses have been misinterpreted in order to fit in with the perceived outcomes desired by those conducting the focus groups.

Why use a focus group

Focus groups are a very useful tool for collecting relevant and informative data. They allow you to investigate complex behaviour such as what different groups think about a subject and why they hold such views and can also help to identify changes in behaviour. Focus groups are particularly useful in investigating the use, effectiveness and usefulness of a service as they allow you to gather detailed information and probe people’s views. They also enable the user to inform decision making and resource allocation.

However, Focus groups can be difficult to control and manage as some participants may have their own agenda. It can also be difficult to get people to take part as some people may find the focus group situation intimidating or off-putting. It is important to remember that focus groups are not suitable for every occasion and will only be useful where the topic being discussed is of sufficient substance to merit vigorous debate. In order to protect the validity of your findings you must also avoid joining in any debate that ensues but merely record the participants’ views. This can be more difficult than it sounds, especially if they are saying something that you believe is not true! However, unless you do this you leave yourself open to the accusation that you have manipulated your results. You must not try to “engineer” the responses you want to hear and allow participants to respond openly and freely.

Here are some guidelines, which you should follow when conducting a focus group.

Preparing for a focus group

- Identify and define the issue for discussion – try to start with broad themes that can then be refined. Write down the key areas that you want to explore. If these areas are not brought out naturally by the group it is permissible to prompt them, though you must not lead them to any conclusions.

- Aim to develop no more than 5 or 6 questions. These should be open in nature not closed, to avoid provoking a set response. Closed
questions are of limited use as they often produce a yes or no reply which does not lead to any further debate. Develop your questions along the themes you have identified.

- Choose the participants to be as representative as possible. Do NOT select people who you think will give you the answers you want to hear. They should be as random as possible, given the topic you are discussing. You should choose between 6 and 12 people. This gives you enough people so that individuals do not feel signalled out and not too many that they do not get an adequate opportunity to record their views. Allow yourself enough time to recruit your members as it can be more difficult than you think! Offer an incentive where possible e.g. a book token, additional print quota etc.

- Do prepare some icebreakers to get people talking. For example at a focus group for international students get the students to say a little about their country and background to help people to relax.

- Always follow up your initial contact with a formal invitation and contact them a few days before the focus group meets to remind them.

Planning the session

- Allow 1 to 1.5 hours for the session and if possible try and conduct them over lunch as this is often a convenient time. Try and provide refreshments as this acts as an ice-breaker and allows people to chat. Lunch is a better incentive when recruiting participants than tea, coffee and biscuits.

- Hold sessions in as good accommodation as possible. Make sure everyone can see one another and provide name tags for everyone. Sit people round a round table if possible.

- Try and keep the discussions flowing when the focus groups begin. Make sure everyone gets a chance to contribute. Keep everyone focussed – do NOT let people go off on a tangent that is not relevant. Try NOT to allow any one person to dominate the discussion – especially YOU. Always start your next question with a different person than previously and alternate which way you go round the table. Try and get a conclusion to the debate and if necessary summarise what has been said.

- Have a clear agenda in mind which should include the following:
  - welcome
  - introductions
  - agenda
  - aim of the focus group meeting
  - ground rules
  - questions and answers
• Choose **6 – 10 people** to participate in the focus group excluding the organisers. Try to choose people who you think will participate but also try and get as wide a cross section of participants as possible (easier said than done) Always offer an **incentive** e.g. book token, print quota etc.

• Record the session both electronically as well as taking notes. It is very difficult to transcribe the sessions if you do not use both methods as it can very difficult to recall exactly what took place.

• Transcribe the sessions as soon as possible so that your finds are as accurate as possible.

• Provide a list of the questions to all members of the group, including helpers at the session.

• Carefully **plan the questions**. Always start with a question that should elicit a positive answer e.g. What do you like about LSS’s facilities?

• If one person seems to be dominating the discussions then call on others for their opinions. Give each person a set time to answer e.g a minute each.