democratise

Focus Group Protocol Guide

A GUIDE TO ORGANISING EFFECTIVE FOCUS GROUPS AND GETTING THE MOST FROM THE DATA YOU COLLECT

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Future Digital/Democratise delivers unparalleled, uncompromising and practical support to strengthen and transform our social, civic and democratic futures

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Contents

Introduction

This guide is designed to help you to organise, run and analyse the findings from focus groups. The guide assumes little prior knowledge of research methods and provides information on participant recruitment, focus group structuring and management of the focus group process, as well as a brief discussion and suggestions for making sense of the resulting qualitative data.

Focus groups are a facilitated discussion and work well when the topic can be well scoped. They differ from one-on-one and group interviews in that they capitalise on communication between participants to generate understandings (but not necessarily consensus) about the research topic being discussed. Focus groups have proven particularly effective for research that seeks to explore ideas, concepts and where there is a desire to create shared meanings about issues through discussing them with others.

The group dynamic is an important part of the process in focus groups; participants are encouraged to talk to each other about the (open-ended or semi-structured) issues raised in the group. They are able to explore their own concerns, using the language and syntax with which they are most familiar and comfortable; the everyday terms which people use to talk about the issues raised are important, highlighting understandings that are not always apparent in more formal responses to research questions.

The focus group format is sensitive to cultural variables, making it appropriate for this research which explores the approaches to new technologies across parliaments internationally. When focus groups work well, they can produce new understandings; however, there is obviously a risk that the group dynamics will intimidate some participants, which is why the role of facilitation is extremely important.

We produce here a brief description of the important aspects of focus group facilitation which will help to ensure that the discussions are productive and beneficial to all participants. This guide will help you to consider the following points when you are organising the focus groups:

- Who will participate
- What you intend to cover
- The level of formality (informal, semi-formal, formal)
- The duration
- The location

Participation

This section is very important for all focus group coordinators. In it we describe the different stakeholder groups that we want to include in the research and define the criteria by which participants in each focus group can be selected. This section also provides some useful tips on recruitment.

Focus groups do not need to be statistically representative but they should be selected using a considered sampling approach, in this instance we are using a 'purposive sampling' technique, whereby the participants will be selected based on prior knowledge of them, proximity and availability (accepting that only a small sample of the group will be involved in the focus group).

There is sometimes a risk that the sample can be self-selecting in terms of those with an interest in the subject are more likely to take part. Whilst there is little that can be done about this other than to acknowledge it, it is important to try and avoid narrowing the recruitment only to those who appear supportive or favourable.

Consider the use of alternative methods to a traditional focus group – such as experiential techniques and group work. The UK focus group with young people used a concept known as Lego Serious Play[1], where small groups were asked to build models, first for their thoughts on what was important for parliament and, second, what a parliament of the future would look like. It was through the ensuing discussion that we drew out themes that informed the research.

Consider remuneration or reward for the public focus group, for example book tokens, as this motivates participation as well as acknowledging the time taken to participate.

Composition and Focus

It is useful for focus groups to be fairly homogenous when the aim is to draw out shared experiences; some diversity is useful if the aim is to generate discussion from a range of perspectives, although be careful to keep an eye on group dynamics in mixed groups.

The ideal group size is about ten people but there is no hard and fast rule; focus groups can work well with more or with slightly fewer. There is no optimal duration. A traditional focus group will probably require about one hour for this topic and we would suggest that anything more than two hours is excessive. If you are considering alternative structures for focus groups, particularly where the participants might not be well versed in the subject of Parliamentary process, we suggest investigating options such as creative play and including a more detailed briefing session ahead of the focus group starting (being careful not to prejudice the groups thinking on the subject). Such groups would be expected to last two to three hours.

1 www.seriousplay.com

It is best to hold focus groups in a comfortable and neutral space, and to provide refreshments (this is a comfort consideration but also can be an inducement to attend). Consider too that your participants will be more motivated to attend if the focus group is held in a convenient location at a reasonable time. For parliamentary focus groups, hold the meeting in parliament!

> For elected representatives, consider the optimum time to get this busy group together – for example, in the UK, organising the focus group directly after Prime Minister's Questions makes good sense – as does providing lunch.

Recruitment

There are a number of methods that can be used for participant recruitment, some will be more appropriate than others for different groups. For the purposes of this research, two of the groups are internal to Parliament and therefore self-defining, for the general public segment of the research it is first necessary to identify your target group or groups.

We suggest that, for practical reasons, it is sensible to try and work with a group or organisation that you already have contact with.

> For our Parliament 2020 UK public focus group, we chose first year students from a local university. The choice was made for three reasons;
>
> - We had an existing contact in the Media Department at the University and, when approached, he was willing to co-facilitate a group;
> - The group was all first time voters (all were over 18 but none had been of voting age at the last general election); and
> - The group was representative of the wider public and were not embedded in political culture.

To recruit the parliamentary officials, we suggest that it can be successful to approach some people directly and, in other areas, to ask for nominations from senior managers.

> We co-ordinated with a senior official at the UK Parliament who was able to ask for volunteers or delegates from other areas. Once we had received the initial list, we were then able to contact participants directly to ensure that they understood what was being asked of them and to confirm that they were happy to attend.

Elected representatives can be identified based on the desirable demographics, although our own experience is that, given their schedule, you might need to invite a significant number even to meet the basic numbers for the focus group (obviously, this will differ between parliaments).

We invited 500 members of the House of Lords and the same number of MPs. From this we received approximately 50 acceptances (5%). This achieved a turn-out at the focus group of 20 (2%) – our expectation had been 10.

Interview Guide

You will need to develop an interview guide, which is simply a set of semi-structured questions that you will use to steer the focus group. To do this it is important that you have a clearly defined research question and sufficient evidence-based data (either from other research or literature) to be able to identify the key themes for discussion.

Although focus groups can be highly structured, we recommend a semi- semi-structured approach, so a list of pro-forma questions will guide rather than rigidly structure the focus group. The best method for asking questions is to make sure they are as open as possible and questions might not be asked directly (or at all) or in the order written (as this can affect the nature and quality of the conversation).

Four principles that should frame the development of questions are:

- Questions should be simple, clear and easy to understand.
- They should start with the most general questions and end with the most specific ones.
- The more general questions should focus on the most important topics; the later (specific) questions can focus on issues that are less important to the research – they are illustrative.
- Engage the group by starting with a warm-up round, this might be ‘suggest something that you consider to be important’. This approach helps engage the group and gives the facilitators some ideas on the direction the discussion could take.

The final guide should be limited to a maximum of ten to twelve questions; any more and there is a risk that the focus group will over-run, leading to a reduction in the quality of the data obtained.

Questions should be pre-tested with people who weren’t involved in the writing of them to ensure that they are not too loaded or leading and that they can assist with answering the research question(s) – even better if you can trial the base questions in at least one live focus group then reflect back on the experience and refine accordingly.

Some sample proposed base questions for a focus groups are shown in Appendix A. Once you’ve created these base questions, they can be used ‘as is’ or adapted to suit local conditions or the needs of a specific focus group. There’s no need to be overly rigid!

Running a Focus Group

What do I need to take with me?

- Digital recorders (at least two), with new batteries and a spare set!
- Copes of information sheets and consent forms.
- Any other background information that might be needed or handouts.
- Signs, name badges as required.
- Writing materials, flip-charts, white-board pens and any other resources that might be needed.

What should the room look like?

Rooms need to have good lighting, ventilation and not be too noisy or the environment too distracting, you should confirm all of this at the planning stage. The layout and furniture can affect the mood and manner of the group and make sure you minimise any external distractions (visual and auditory!)

On the day plan to arrive at the venue early to give yourself time to set up the room, if needed, and to prepare. You need to be relaxed and calm and there to welcome participants.

There are no hard and fast rules about room layouts, round tables or open-seating can all work but do ensure that people are comfortable and that there is enough space that people do not feel 'hemmed in' or stressed. Make sure everyone has equal access to the facilitator. Ensure that there is water available for participants, if you are providing catering (even if it's just tea/coffee and biscuits), make sure this is in place before you begin so it does not disrupt the proceedings.

> The shape, layout of the room and seating room can affect the dynamic of the discussion. Consider what is an appropriate environment and level of formality that would work best for the research you are conducting.

When people arrive

Welcome participants as they arrive, direct them to any food or drink that is available and encourage a timely start. A focus group discussion will always start with an introduction from the facilitator about its purpose and process.

- Welcome all the participants and introduce yourself and any other team members in the room, explaining their roles.
- Explain the general purpose of the discussion and why the participants were chosen.
- Explain the presence and purpose of any audio or video recording equipment.
- Explain the structure of the focus group, the duration and outline any ground rules and discussion guidelines. These might include the importance of hearing everyone, speaking one at a time and that the moderator might interrupt to assure that all the topics can be fairly covered.

- Review any housekeeping information.
- Ensure that the group understands what will happen to the information – that it will be analysed and written up in a report. Make it clear that no individual will be identified in any output from the research and that whilst what is said might be quoted it will be done in a way to ensure that it is anonymous.

You can adapt the following as an introduction to the focus group to define the scope of the research:

> This research is being undertaken by the [x] on behalf of [y].
>
> Our aim today is to find out what you think [what we are here to do, and set any boundaries or exclusions here].
>
> This is one of [x] focus groups, the others are [list the other groups]. When we have finished the research, we will produce a report that describes what we have found in terms of the main themes that you and the other focus groups tell us about.
>
> We are recording this focus group and we will use this recording for our analysis. When we write about our findings we might use direct quotes from this focus group but we will not identify you individually and any quotes that we do use are will be attributable to an individual or to a role.
>
> You should all have an information sheet that describes the research, if after today you have any questions about what we are doing, this information sheet contains our contact details and we welcome you to get in touch.

We usually recommend a semi-structured format for focus groups. This approach means that we provide the facilitator(s) with a set of pro-forma questions and set the scene during the focus group but we are not being prescriptive about the structure or direction of the conversation (so long as it remains within the scope of the project). Experience tell us that it's best to take an organic approach, encouraging conversation amongst participants and guiding them by using the provided questions (or variations on them as appropriate) or reflections as a prompt, rather than sticking to a rigid process.

Ice-breakers can be useful at the start as they allow people to get a feel for the group before the discussion starts and can include a short introduction round to ensure participants are familiar with who else is in their group. You can also use simple group exercises to 'state change' if people are potentially distracted by issues outside the group or the group is flagging or drifting.

A good approach is for the facilitator to use a strategy of 'structured eavesdropping'; the more participant-led the discussion, the better. Although it is likely that the facilitator will need to seed the conversation at the beginning and will also need to ensure that the (loose) structure of the focus group is followed and all questions covered in a reasonable time frame.

When people come together in a group settings they will adopt a variety of different roles (often simultaneously and changing as the group changes). This interaction between the different participants and the roles that they adopt is vital to the group process so it is useful to be aware of some of these roles:

- Assistant moderators
- Complicators
- Devils advocates
- Distractors
- Dominators
- Early adopters
- Emotionalists
- Explicators
- Innovators
- Investigators
- Laggards
- Late adopters
- Leaders
- Questioners
- Simplifiers
- Submissives
- Supporters

In these different roles, participants interact through a wide range of actions, some are submissive to other members, others supportive, conciliatory or modifying and yet others can be confrontational or attempts to assert power. You'll experience people doing a range of the following:

- Ask each other questions
- Build on each others' ideas
- Change their opinions
- Draw each other out
- Fill in incompletions and gaps in knowledge
- Jog each others' memories
- Modify each others' comments
- Nudge each other out of ruts and habitual thinking
- Persuade each other
- React to each others' comments
- Spark new ideas
- Take opposing positions
- You didn't think to ask[2]

There are times when the facilitator might need to take a more interventionist approach (if the discussion gets heated or dries up, for example). The facilitator can try to get the group to discuss inconsistencies between participants and within their own thinking. Disagreements can lead to clarifications and new understandings if handled properly; often misunderstandings can be resolved by the participants themselves. Reflection and seeking clarification are useful too as they can encourage deeper thinking on key issues. Just be sure not to lead the group thinking or suggest answers.

Different techniques can be used. Participants can be asked to say how much they agree or disagree with a statement relating to a research question (e.g., 'New technologies have no part

[2] From: mnav.com/cligd.htm.

to play in Parliament'). Such 'closed' questions can get them to talk to each other rather than to the facilitator and can be used to re-direct, open up or re-start the conversation. It also goes without saying the reality of groups is certain people will often dominate, as the facilitator it's part of your role to draw out the more reticent participants and manage any attempts to dominate the conversation.

Once the facilitator feels that sufficient questions have been covered (or the allotted time is running out), there can be a cooling-off period, during which participants should be encouraged to think about what has been said and reflect on the experience or to add any other comments that not been heard earlier. Opportunities can be provided for them to fill in a questionnaire, email thoughts or speak to the facilitator individually (following a period of reflection) to ensure that they have said everything that was on their mind (even if they did not say it during the group discussion).

Basic demographic profiles are valuable data and you should always attempt to collect these for all participants, including wherever possible an email address so that they can be sent a copy of the research findings (should they wish to receive them). Only ask for data that is relevant and useful to the study.

> Appendix D provides a check-list of things to do when organising your focus group.

Analysing the Data

> Consider who is going to analyse the data, will it be the focus group facilitators or other members of the project team? This section provides information on how the data from the focus group needs to be managed and supplied to the project team and an overview of the recommended methodological approach you can use to analyse the data.

Each focus group discussion should be recorded and a non-participant observer should take notes during each session of the key themes as they emerge, remaining reflexive to the nuances and relative significance of these themes. Written transcripts are not needed if the focus group is in English and the audio quality is sufficient but they can still be valuable if time and budget allow.

> We recommend that you use two digital recorders so that there is some redundancy.

The emerging themes should provide the framework for the analysis, which should also consider the impact of group dynamics (e.g., 'deferring to others' or 'joking') and cultural contexts (e.g., 'controversies regarding use of IT' or 'distrust of politicians') on the nature of the discussion. It is generally considered good practice for transcripts and the analysis to be sent to participants for comments.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis is a technique whereby qualitative data is analysed to identify themes and patterns that emerge from the data (in this case, what was said in a focus group) and to describe what relationships, if any, exist between them. Themes emerge as words, sentences and concepts are identified and 'marked-up'. Whilst individual items can appear random and fragmented, as more data is considered a depth and richness emerges that illuminates themes. Once a focus group has been analysed, the themes can then be separated from the original context and reviewed in light of both the research questions and other data that exists, from here they can be merged to develop over-arching key-thematic lines of enquiry to inform future data collection and, eventually, to identify the key themes to emerge from the research itself.

You might want to consider refining the pro-forma questions based on the emerging themes as the research progresses but be aware that this risk skewing the research, so take care doing this. We recommend making only minimal changes and then only to attempt to 'drill down' into emerging themes. You are not trying to prove a hypothesis, you are looking for emergence!

Ethics

Whilst non-academic research is not governed by a particular human research ethics committee, the research should abide by good practice guidelines as prescribed by an appropriate professional organisation.

> You must ensure that you adhere to any local regulations or human research ethical guidelines that are in place at the research location.

For us basic good practice means that you must ensure focus group participants are always provided with:

- An information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, describing the process of the focus group and what will be done with the data. This will also confirm their right to withdraw from the research at any time and not to answer questions should they wish.
- A consent form to confirm their agreement to take part in the research (email confirmation can be used for some groups).
- A basic demographic survey (including contact details), unless this has been collected separately.

These will be developed by the project team but may require customisation and variation for different focus group settings and countries. Ensure that any requirements that we have under the privacy and data protection legislation is addressed in full (in the UK, ensure compliance with the Data Protection Act 1998). If the research involves minors (under 18 unless otherwise specified), any additional safeguards and caregiver consents have been put in place.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Research participants will never normally be identified by name and all efforts should be made to avoid identifying individuals wherever possible. A caveat is that sometimes it can be difficult to maintain anonymity for a public figure or for someone in a very specific role that is clearly identifiable to those who work in close proximity to them. Whilst all attempts should be made to protect the identity of participants there may be occasions where it is impossible to do so completely or where to do so invalidates what they are saying (for example if they are speaking 'ex-officio').

For the final report or any other publications (such as blogs), the location of the participants and the nature of the focus group can be used to identify a participant where it is appropriate (eg Australian MP) but this needs to be done in such a way that it doesn't identify individuals, either through what they say or how they are described. If you do wish to identify people directly then you must ensure that you have their permission in writing on the consent form.

Appendices

Appendix A – Sample Pro-forma Questions

The following questions are indicative of what can be asked in the focus group, they are intended to provide some prompts but should not be considered linear or prescriptive; it is better to allow the group to explore issues itself rather then simply going through the list so it is best used to guide the facilitator who would not expect to use all the question nor to strongly adhere to the order or format shown.

Communication

1. Can you think of some ways in which Parliament communicates well with the public and some ways in which it communicates poorly?
2. How do Parliamentary process and procedures impact on your ability to communicate with the public (support or impede)?
3. What do you think could be done to improve the way that Parliament communicates with the public?

Engagement

4. What do you think could be done to encourage greater public understanding of how Parliament works?
5. What impact do you think digital technologies (such as the internet and mobile phones) have on representative democracy and do you think there are ways in which their use could lead to increased participation by the public (or do you think that the affect will be neutral or negative)?

Information

6. How are the information needs of members changing and how are they likely to change in the future?
7. How are the information needs of Parliamentary staff changing and how are they likely to change in the future?
8. What can parliament do to better support these changing needs?

Resources and Culture

9. Email and newer social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, have created expectations amongst some members of the public about the level of intimacy and speed of response from their elected representatives and the Parliamentary authorities. Do you think that Parliament can change its processes and procedures to reflect this or is this expectation unrealistic on the part of the public?
10. How receptive is parliament to change and the take-up of new technologies – do you feel that it embraces them openly, carefully considers and then adopts them or has a tendency to block and avoid them?
11. What do you think the staff and resource implications of increasing the use of digital technologies would be for Parliament?

Appendix B – Sample Consent Form

Your consent in writing is needed to confirm your involvement in this research. Signing this form means that you have agreed to be a part of the research but does not stop you from changing your mind at a later time. You can withdraw from the research at any time and doing so will not affect your public or community standing. To withdraw from the research please contact the Principal Researcher at the address shown on the Information Sheet.

	Please tick box
I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.	☐
I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.	☐
I agree to take part in the above study.	☐
I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded	☐
I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded	☐
I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications	☐

Name ____________________ Signature ____________________ Date ____________________

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Appendix C – Sample Participant Information Sheet

This research aims to find out what different groups of people think a Parliament of the future might look like and how new digital media might affect and influence the way that citizens engage and communicate with parliament and MPs. This research is being conducted by the [[organisation] on behalf of the [client organisation]].

Before agreeing to take part in this research it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please read the following information carefully.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time and can refrain from answering any question.

The information provided by you remains anonymous. This means that you will not be identified in the results.

All information you provide will be treated as confidential. This means that it will not be passed on to anyone else in any way that could identify you.

The information you provide will be analysed by us and what you say might be presented as a direct quotation in a report or academic paper but not in a way that could identify you.

The data collected for this project will be stored by us on a computer network accessible only with the use of a password or in a locked and secure cabinet. Any personal or demographic inform

Data Protection Act 1998

Some personal data might be required in order to satisfy the research requirements (for example, we might need to contact you for further information and update to our project). Where personal information is collected it will be treated in strict confidence and your personal information will not used in the results. Only aggregate analysis will be used for publication.

If you would like more information about the project you can write, telephone or email the principal researcher:

[Name & Contact details]

Appendix D – Focus Group Checklist

Two weeks to one month before

- Agree date and time
- Book the venue
- Selected participants
- Send out invitations

One week before

- Order catering (if appropriate)
- Organised remuneration (if appropriate)
- Prepare information sheets and consent forms ready
- Prepare and test focus group question pro-forma
- Send a reminder to the participants

One day before

- Facilitation team briefed
- Confirmed food and venue
- If anything has changed, let participants know
- Print information sheets and consent forms
- Print list of participants
- Print list of questions
- Check recording equipment and replace batteries

On the day

- Arrive early
- Check the venue and arrange the room

After the focus group

- Transfer digital recordings, video and photographs to computer/network
- Write-up hand-written notes
- Debrief with the facilitation team (and document anything that emerges)
- Return all data and notes to project management for analysis (note that digital audio/video files will need to be uploaded or not sent by email due to their size)