



Guidance for Conducting Focus Groups

A focus group is a planned discussion within which a number of participants (a participant can be a patient, service user, carer or family member) are asked by a moderator to discuss key issues about their experiences of care from a service.

Focus Groups

The aim in focus groups is to select participants who you believe have a specific experience of your service, or who have a common characteristic and can provide meaningful insights into how to improve your service.

Suggested Steps

1. Identify who your participants will be. They may be chosen on the basis that they share a common geographic location; or are a group of people who receive a service, or who have a certain topic in common or share some common experience e.g. people who have the same medical concerns.
2. Discuss the process of reimbursement of out of pocket expenses. Please follow the link below to access the policy for the reimbursement of service user expenses. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/about/who/qid/person-family-engagement/resourcesqid/policy-for-the-reimbursement-of-service-user-expenses-2017.pdf>
3. Write to participants in this group, with an introduction letter, consent form and reply slip.
4. Organise the venue; consider accessibility and safety, especially if you are interviewing participants with a particular condition that you might need to take into account.
5. Participants respond and agree/do not agree to participate.
6. Contact participants to agree time and date.
7. Be clear about the number of meetings that will be taking place and the duration and location of these meetings.
8. Try to use round tables or situate chairs around a table to promote conversations.
9. Develop simple, easy to understand questions for the focus group.
10. Ensure the questions are conversational, clear, short and open ended.
11. Avoid closed or leading questions.
12. Circulate the questions together with any background information or other reading materials that may be relevant to the topic of the focus group.
13. Establish some ground rules for the focus group to take place, e.g. listening respectfully to all participants and not interrupting.
14. The topic will be introduced to the participants before the questions will be asked, to establish the context of the next few questions.
15. Context cues may be required, possibly before every question, to facilitate participants.

16. Conduct focus group and tape or transcribe focus group session.
17. Ideally, it is useful to have full transcripts available to analyse the group discussion, so wherever possible use tape recorders. In some situations though, this may not be possible and in these cases there should be a dedicated – note taker. At key points through the discussion, the note taker should summarise for the group what issues have come up, and check that they have interpreted them correctly.
18. Multidisciplinary team discusses full transcript and decides actions to be taken forward.
19. Provide feedback to participants on what actions will be taken and the timeframe involved.

Format

Group session

Size

8-12 per session

Length

1.5 to 2 hours

Number of sessions

Varies – should be more than one participant:

- ⇒ Selected – by invitation only
- ⇒ Similar characteristics

Forms of feedback

1. Conversation, including tone of voice
2. Silences (words and issues)
3. Body language

Feedback collection

1. Audiotape
2. Note taking/transcribing

Formats for reporting

1. Selected quotations
2. Analysis, including identification of common themes and specific issues raised by participants.

Sampling

The aim of selecting participants to be involved in your focus groups is not always to collect a representative sample of people who reflect the views of all the participants who use your service. You may select participants who you believe are representative of your wider participants group, but you might also specifically seek participants who are not usual and who have a specific experience of your service and who could provide meaningful insights into how to improve the service. For

example, you might seek to include participants who have experienced how you coordinate care after they have been discharged from hospital or those who have a chronic disease and who frequently use your service. The types of participants you seek to include will be dependent on your particular topic and are those who you believe are most likely to provide the most meaningful information about receiving healthcare from your service. Information provided to participants should contain details as to who is collecting the feedback, the list of purposes for which it will be used and details of any potential disclosures.

Moderator's role

All focus groups are conducted by experienced moderators. The moderator's main role is to develop a non-judgemental environment where participants feel comfortable and confident to openly and honestly discuss their experiences of your service. The moderator's role is to pose questions, encourage discussion among participants, keep the group on track to discuss the key issues, ensure everyone has an opportunity to participate and most importantly, to blend into the background and allow participants to honestly and openly discuss their experiences of the service.

Benefits of focus group discussions

- You require an in-depth understanding of how participants experience a particular aspect of care
- You want participants to interact in a small group
- You want to understand how particular types of participants experience care from your service and these participants are unlikely to be sampled using a questionnaire method (e.g. participants with a specific illness)
- You want to get feedback from participants who are unlikely to respond to a written questionnaire (e.g. those with low literacy, those living with a disability or participants from a non-English speaking background).
- When it is more culturally appropriate to get feedback through face-to-face communication (e.g. Travelling community)

Challenges

- Getting people to agree to and then attend focus groups can be time-consuming and difficult
- Developing appropriate questions, setting up and running focus groups can be time-consuming in comparison to the questionnaire method
- Analysing qualitative information from the focus groups can be challenging • You will need to consider how to use the findings of the focus groups as the findings will not be 'generalisable' to all your participants' experiences.
- The success of the focus group depends on the communication skills of the moderator in directing and guiding the conversation as the group may be dominated by one or two strong opinions or some participants may feel inhibited to speak.