



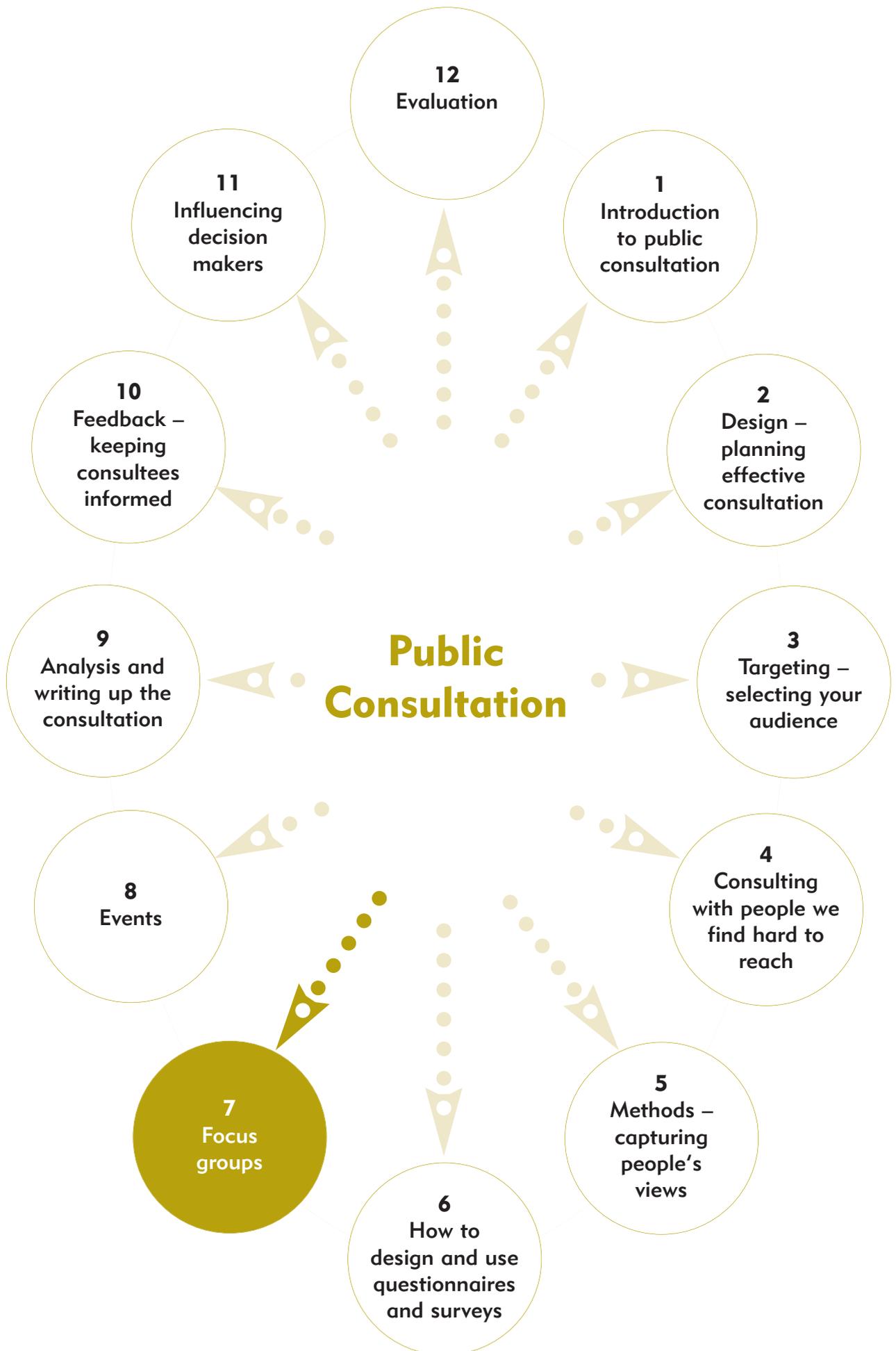
Nottinghamshire  
County Council

# Consultation in Nottinghamshire

## Focus groups



guide 7





## Contents

1. Introduction	4
2. Participants	4
3. Coverage	4
4. Level of structure	4
5. Duration	4
6. Location	4
7. Data collection method	5
8. Observation	5
9. Preparation	5
10. Recruitment of participants	6
11. Confidentiality	6
12. Typical format for the day	6
13. The role of the facilitator/moderator	7
14. Working with sub-groups	7
15. How to guide a discussion	7
1 . Projective techniques	8
1 . Drawing a focus group to its conclusion	9
1 . Writing up focus group notes	9
1 . Feedback	10



## Introduction

Focus groups are invaluable for taking an in-depth look at what people think and why they think it on predetermined topics. Properly organised and facilitated, they enable you to understand what is important to people, their motivations and how they feel about Council services. But they are not as easy to arrange or conduct as they appear. An experienced facilitator or moderator is to be recommended.

Focus groups have been used extensively in market research and by local authorities wishing to understand their customers. However, when using a focus group as a consultation method there are additional requirements that need to be taken into account: participants need to be informed of the name of the client/organisation and the precise nature of the research; they should be informed of eventual outcomes and the reasons for the decision. Where practical participants should be involved in developing the focus group report as an aid to ensuring its accuracy.

These additional requirements derive from the need for openness, integrity and accountability that accompany any consultation exercise. Market research is essentially a private activity - consultation is not. Where focus groups are used as market research tools it is perfectly acceptable to present their findings as part of a general consultation report. But unless the additional requirements have been observed it would not be appropriate to describe them as consultative.

## What a focus group involves

### Participants

Focus groups usually involve seven or eight participants but can involve up to 12. They can be homogenous such as all young people, all service users, or mixed. Each has advantages and disadvantages depending on the purpose of the research. In every case the selection criteria need to be sorted out in advance and checked to make sure that they are appropriate for the purposes of the consultation.

When an expert audience is invited to participate in a focus group, the role of the facilitator is sometimes taken by the consultor and the discussion conducted through a series of questions and answers.

### Coverage

Researchers recommend no more than three topics (with perhaps additional sub-issues under each) for discussion. There is a trade-off between numbers of issues and the quality of the feedback.

### Level of structure

This can vary from very structured to loosely structured, but focus groups by their very nature are flexible, fluid research tools which involve the participant fully rather than just getting them to passively answer questions.

### Duration

Focus groups should usually last no more than one to two hours – this helps to prevent boredom and participants giving answers that might end the discussion rather than their personal thoughts and impressions. Breaks should be used to freshen up and relax participants as necessary.

### Location

Focus groups should be held in comfortable locations offering a suitable environment for an informal, private, discussion with refreshment facilities available.



### Data collection methods

The focus group discussion is normally captured through notes or on video or audiotape (in which case a verbatim transcript is sometimes prepared so that the facilitator can prepare a report).



### Observation

Sometimes third parties may wish to observe proceedings. This can normally be accommodated but there are some consequences to take into account:

1. Participants must be informed in advance and asked for their consent.
2. Observers must not participate in the discussion.
3. Any notes taken by the observer must conform to the rules agreed with the group and should not later be used to contradict the official focus group report.

Having observers (regardless of whether they are 'hidden') will influence how participants act and can inhibit their discussion. Notes taken by an observer may be at variance with the formal note of the group – individual perceptions of an event can be very different.

## Getting started

### Preparation

Stage	Action
1	The purpose of the consultation is defined and the target audience identified. The terms of reference for the focus group and its participants need to be agreed.
2	Think carefully about the venue, timing, seating arrangements (everyone needs to see each other), special requirements, for example, sign language, interpretation.
3	Selection and recruitment of participants.
4	Prepare any written material – topic and discussion guides, terms of reference, prioritising exercise.
5	Despatch written materials and brief facilitator.



### Recruitment of participants

Focus group participants should have specific common interests in the topics being discussed, but should also be sufficiently diverse to stimulate discussion. Participants can be found through newspaper or poster advertisements, through cold calling members of the target group drawn from other sources (such as service user records) or by intercepts – meeting people at the point of service delivery or in shopping areas and stations. Sometimes word of mouth or social networks are a useful way of recruiting participants. This practice is commonly referred to as ‘snowball sampling’.

To enable everyone to participate in a focus group paying travel and/or childcare expenses is often necessary. In some circumstances you may want to look at providing voucher incentives (£20-£30 is considered appropriate).

Depending on the nature of the consultation it may be necessary to recruit and conduct focus groups in different parts of the county, as most people are unwilling to travel long distances.

### Confidentiality

Participants should be reassured (both at the time of invitation and in the introduction) that their comments will be recorded, but will not be attributed to them as individuals. The facilitator should assign random letters or numbers to participants for recording/note taking purposes.

Focus groups involving experts, stakeholders or representatives of organisations are usually different and views may be attributed to the people concerned. Either way, the terms of any attribution need to be agreed with participants in advance.

### Typical format for the day

Stage	Description
1	It can be useful to plan the event so that there is an initial opportunity for the participants to chat informally, over refreshments for instance. This helps to break the ice and immediately creates a more comfortable environment. It also picks up late arrivals. An icebreaker may help to do this quickly particularly with certain types of participants for example young people.
2	Facilitator convenes the meeting with a preamble about what the meeting is for and how views will be used. It is an opportunity to explain that an open debate is to be encouraged and request that all views are treated respectfully. The facilitator should also provide any information that participants might need to get involved in the discussion. Get each participant to introduce themselves and ideally work on first name terms (although this may be inappropriate in some cultures).
3	Begin the discussion with a simple and focused topic that has clear boundaries and people will find easy to talk about. Encourage discussion amongst the group members and use projective techniques as appropriate. (See page 8)
4	Move into the key discussion topics. Spend time exploring each issue in some detail.
5	Start to bring proceedings to a close by summarising the key points. Other useful ways of closing are to attempt exercises that encourage the group to either prioritise issues or reach consensus on issues (for example asking participants to rank in order of preference a number of options or statements). Such exercises are also good for bringing structure to what might otherwise be very diverse comments. Lastly, thank people for their contributions and explain the feedback process.



## The role of the facilitator/moderator

The main purpose of the moderator is to facilitate the group discussion including:

1. Getting the discussion started.
2. Managing expectations of the participants.
3. Keeping people on the subject.
4. Keeping the discussion moving.
5. Bringing out the people who are not participating.
6. Inhibiting people who are dominating the discussion.
7. Moving people on to the next topic.

The other important role, and arguably their real skill, is to use the group dynamics and interaction, and what people say on the day, to probe views effectively and in more depth. Essential skills include:

1. The use of direct, straightforward language that is appropriate for the specific group of participants.
2. An ability to remain neutral - avoid expressing opinions, influencing the discussion or favouring/being dismissive of certain views.
3. Good listening skills with an ability to pick up on salient points and use them in the discussion.
4. The ability to make links between what people say using summarising or paraphrasing.
5. The confidence to subtly challenge and probe views.
6. Promoting debate, possibly by bringing your own experiences/knowledge to bear.
7. Supporting group members to generate ideas or solutions and not just raise problems.

## Working with sub-groups

A focus group of seven or eight is relatively straightforward to facilitate. But it may be helpful to break the group into sub-groups to encourage participation and ensure that all views are captured if the group is:

- comprised of people from very different backgrounds
- discussing particularly sensitive subjects or subjects where peer pressure may be particularly strong.

The views of the sub-groups can be fed back into a whole-group discussion to give all participants an appreciation of differing points of view, to pose a challenge for the group to address collectively or to provoke more in-depth discussion.

## How to guide a discussion

It can sometimes be difficult to keep a discussion going on a particular topic without influencing it and pushing it toward an alternate solution.

Nevertheless by using tentative, questioning, but challenging language a good focus group facilitator can do precisely that.





The following words and phrases are typical of a focus group facilitator's approach:

No.	Typical phrase
<b>Introduction</b>	
1	Our goal for the meeting today is to...
2	I'd like you all to discuss / decide...
3	Tell me what you think about X...
4	Just say anything that comes to mind when you think of...
5	I'm wondering what you would do if...
6	I'd like to hear about how you are dealing with...
<b>Summarising</b>	
7	If I've understood right, you mean...
8	So it sounds like you are saying...
9	So it's fair to say / conclude that...
10	So the message you want me to get from that example / story is...
<b>Encouraging</b>	
11	Tell me more about...
12	Keep talking/Say more
13	Can you give us an example...
14	Can you explain to us...
15	How can we solve the problem?
<b>Involving others</b>	
16	That's helpful. Let's hear some other views...
17	Let's hear a different perspective on that...
18	Who can add to that?
19	Does everyone accept that...

## Projective techniques<sup>1</sup>

Depending on the type of issue being covered, projective techniques may be useful to reveal the views of participants. Projective techniques use vague, ambiguous, unstructured objects or situations to stimulate someone's feelings and motivations. The theory behind projective questioning is that it is often difficult to obtain accurate information about what a person thinks and feels by asking them directly to explain their feelings but information can be obtained by allowing a respondent to project these on to some other person or object.

There are four main projective procedures: association, completion, construction and expression.

### Association

1. Word association – What's the first thing that comes into your head? Respondents are then asked for the rationale behind their choice.
2. Personification - Turn the service/product into a person and describe that person's physical description and lifestyle: Imagine \_\_\_ sprouted arms and legs, what sort of a person would it be?
3. Turn the service/product into another object, such as an animal, a car, or a supermarket etc. Respondents are then asked for the rationale behind their choice and what it means to them.

### Completion

1. Mapping – Ask respondents to physically arrange a selection of pictures, objects or symbols. Discuss reason for layout.
2. Kelly's triads - Select three things and ask respondents to comment on what two have in common, what separates them from the third. Rotate the groupings.
3. Bubble drawings – Give respondents pictures of scenarios depicting people with empty thought or speech balloons. Ask them to fill them in. You may also wish to include some prompted speech captions.

<sup>1</sup> We are indebted to Mark Wright (Nottinghamshire County Council library service) for his advice on this section.



4. Sentence completion – Ask respondents to complete statements like boys who read books are... ?

#### *Construction*

Respondents are invited to either construct their own visual expression of a service/product, or are shown ready prepared boards and asked to select which images they would most associate with the service. Participants can then be asked for the reasoning behind their design or choice.

#### *Expression*

1. Psycho drawings - Participants are invited to express their feelings with drawings or symbols. This offers an alternative to verbal expression.
2. Role-play - The group are asked to act out a scenario (This requires sensitive handling because many people are wary of 'embarrassing themselves' by such free expression).
3. Fantasy - Participants are asked to imagine that they are another person, object, facility or service and asked to describe their feelings and visions connected with that.



## Drawing a focus group to its conclusion

Focus group discussions can be wide ranging and the advantage of a prioritisation or consensus exercise is that it allows the whole group's view on a key issue to be recorded. Common exercises include budgeting, prioritising or drafting a summary statement.

#### *Budgeting*

This method usually involves the allocation of a fixed sum to the various available options: for example, 'If you had £10,000 to allocate towards improving school attendance how would you spend it?'

#### *Prioritising*

This method usually involves a forced choice between options: for example, 'If you could only do one of these things which would it be?' 'If you had to drop one of these options which would it be?'

#### *Summary statement*

This method involves drafting a statement that has to be agreed by all members of the group: for example, 'If you were asked as a group to write three sentences about what you think the Council should do, what would you write?'

## Writing up focus group notes

Notes should be written up as soon as practical after the event while it is still fresh in the mind. Participants should be labelled (for example, Participant A, Participant B) and the same label used throughout so that accuracy can be checked. Once drafted the notes can be sent to individual participants to allow them to check that their views have been accurately recorded. Once checked, the names of participants and the label assigned to them can be destroyed to protect their anonymity.

Expert focus groups and those involving major stakeholders may be better presented with the views of individuals attributed. This would however need to be agreed with participants in advance.



## Feedback

In a market research exercise the involvement of participants ends at the close of the focus group. In a consultation, participants may be involved in the development of the report and would normally receive a copy of the notes from the discussion. Where this is the case, these should be issued as soon as possible after the focus group in a draft form to allow for correction/comment. Participants should also receive the usual consultation feedback on outputs and outcome.

Focus groups are generally operated upon market research lines and it is not common to involve participants in the development of focus group reports. This is hardly surprising given how difficult it is to summarise the views of a focus group but the involvement of participants after the discussion has been identified as an example of best practice. The advantage of doing so is the added feeling of involvement and ownership it gives to participants, the added sense that the Council is interested in their views and the reassurance it gives to others that any report on the group accurately reflects what they thought.



**Copyright:**

All County Council copyrights are reserved. The supply of Council information does not grant the applicant the right to re-use the information in any way that would infringe the copyright on that information.

For any wider use, the County Council may choose to allow the re-use under licence. This enables the County Council to ensure it is not used in a manner which is inconsistent with the County Council's copyright.

## Nottinghamshire County Council's consultation standards

1. A consultation mandate should be completed and approved by your departmental co-ordinator/ champion before the start of any consultation. *(Guides 2 and 11)*
2. The consultation should be logged on the County Council's consultation database. *(Guides 2, 10 and 11)*
3. For key decisions a public engagement plan should be published with the forward plan. *(Guides 2 and 11)*
4. In planning a consultation, the specific communication needs of groups and individuals who are often otherwise excluded should be considered. *(Guides 3 and 4)*
5. A minimum of 12 weeks should be allowed for consultation on major decisions. *(Guide 2)*
6. The name, address and contact number of the person responsible for the consultation should be published on all consultation materials. *(Guides 2 and 10)*
7. The consultation material should make clear by what date responses are required, in what format and to whom they should be sent. *(Guides 2 and 6)*
8. The consultation should include a face-to-face element where consultees are able to meet, question and put their views to the decision-maker(s). *(Guides 4, 5, 7 and 8)*
9. Any venue selected for a consultation event should meet the Council's accessibility code. *(Guides 4 and 8)*
10. Any complaints about the consultation, questions asked, materials or time allowed should be noted in the consultation report. *(Guides 9, 10 and 11)*
11. A notice of decision should be published for each consultation. *(Guides 10 and 11)*
12. Feedback regarding the responses, the Council's decision and how the consultation influenced it should be given to consultees. *(Guides 4, 7, 9, 10, 11 and 12)*



### Contacting us

email **[consultation@nottscc.gov.uk](mailto:consultation@nottscc.gov.uk)**  
phone **0115 977 2937**  
fax **0115 977 3886**  
post **Chief Executive's Department, County Hall,  
West Bridgford, Nottingham NG2 7QP**  
internet **[www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk](http://www.nottinghamshire.gov.uk)**  
published **May 2007**

This publication can be made available in alternative formats and languages upon request.