Conducting focus groups

This briefing will cover the things you need to think about when planning to hold a focus group.

What is a focus group?

In focus groups a small number of participants meet with a facilitator for a short session which takes an hour to two hours to complete. The group should have a theme such as “the difference advice made to me” and you may start with some pre-determined questions. However, the discussion will be determined to some extent by what the respondents say so you should be prepared to be flexible about what you cover.

Focus groups are interactive and discursive and provide a useful forum to understand peoples’ experiences, feelings, thoughts and attitudes and how those have changed as a result of receiving advice.
What to cover

As with surveys there are a number of ways you can identify what you want to cover:

- You can consult staff to find out what they think that their advice achieves for clients
- You can review case records to identify consistent issues
- You can consult a small group of clients to identify what issues they think should be explored further

It is best not to introduce too many topics as this may mean there is not enough time for all the participants to say what they want to say.

The participants

Who to invite

This will depend on the issues you want to cover. So if, for example, you simply want to know what difference your advice agency makes to all your clients you could take a sample from everyone you see. However, the more you limit the group of clients that you select from, the greater depth you can go to in relation to specific issues. For example, if you want to find out more about the effects of advice on clients with children with special needs (as did one of the agencies we worked with), the pool of people you can draw on is going to be much smaller but the quality of information and level of detail you collect on that topic will be high.
Getting people to come

The agencies we worked with all spent considerable time identifying focus group participants. There are a few things you can do to boost attendance:

• Asking clients if they were willing to attend a focus group when they are in the advice agency rather than calling them produced good results.

• Invite more people that you want for the focus group as there will be some no shows on the day.

• Once a client has accepted the invitation, it is a good idea to contact them the day before to confirm that they know where to go and the time it starts. It acts as a reminder and reduces the number of no-shows on the day.

How many?

The pilot agencies found that focus groups worked well with between 4 and 8 participants. More than that would have made it difficult to ensure that each had enough time to say what they wanted to say. The agencies with clients with mental health problems kept the number of focus group participants to 4. This is because each client needed quite a lot of individual attention to coax out their stories and also to make sure the experience wasn’t upsetting them.
How to measure client outcomes

Resources

As well as the time needed to identify participants, carrying out a one-off focus group requires the following resources:

**A facilitator** – ideally you will need to identify someone who has relevant facilitation skills. This may be an external consultant or a member of staff who has attended training or been introduced to the focus group process. If you use an external facilitator this could cost £2-300 for the day.

**A venue** - Identify a venue which is accessible and comfortable for the participants. The venue should be somewhere that people won’t feel overwhelmed and preferably one they are familiar with such as a local community centre. Several of the agencies we worked with used confidential rooms at their own premises as it was felt clients would happier coming to a venue they knew.

**Refreshments** – you should provide tea, coffee and biscuits for your participants.

**Expenses** – you should also meet the travel expenses and child care costs for focus group participants.

**Vouchers** – you should consider whether you want to offer an incentive to focus group participants. Most of the pilot agencies gave supermarket gift tokens to the value of £10 to each focus group participant. This needs costing into your budget for the focus group.

**Recording and transcribing** - focus groups should be recorded. Recording is better than note-taking because note-taking can slow down or inhibit the discussion and it may mean that some comments are taken down incorrectly or missed altogether.

If you don’t have a recorder you can use a mobile phone. Some of the agencies we worked with did this, however, recorders are better as mobile phones tend to only record for short periods.

People rarely refuse to be recorded provided they are confident that they will not be identified in any way in subsequent transcripts or reports.

www.asauk.org.uk/adviceoutcomes
Conducting the focus group

The start

Whether the focus group is facilitated by an external consultant or a staff member:

• It’s a good idea to have a staff member that the clients know in the room as participants arrive and before the discussion starts. This will help them to relax.

• Ensure people know that they can leave the focus group if they want to and that they do not have to answer any of the questions or join in the conversation if they don’t want to. In some focus group sessions it might be a good idea to have a worker available to talk to during and after the workshop if you think the clients might need it.

• Start the session with introductions and housekeeping and let participants know when it will finish.

• Explain that you will be recording the session and ask whether anyone objects. Ask people to respect each others’ confidentiality and not to disclose the names of anyone attending. Explain that participants will not be identifiable in any resulting reports and that no comment will be attributed to any individual.

• Explain why you are holding the focus group, what issues the group is going to cover, why you want to collect the information and what you are going to do with it. Tell participants how the report will be used and check with participants if they want a copy.

• Ask the group to say whatever they want in the discussion and explain how important their input is.

• Encourage questions. If anyone is uncertain about the process, encourage them to ask.
Managing the discussion

Before you start you should consider the best way to get the information you want and prepare a list of questions. Bear in mind, that depending on the clients present, you may have to abandon your prepared questions and simply follow where the clients lead.

We found that some clients are happy to answer direct questions about themselves and their problems such as “can you tell me about the problem you had when you came to the agency”. Others are less comfortable, so you should think about starting with more indirect questions such as “can you tell me how you found out about the advice centre” or “can you tell me about the first time you came here”. This leads them more gradually into talking about why they sought advice.

The points below may also help ensure your focus group is successful:

• Use wide open questions to encourage the discussion e.g. ‘What would it be like dealing with this problem without support?’

• Ensure everyone has a chance to contribute and try to avoid allowing one person to dominate the conversation. Invite quieter participants to contribute by name if you think they want to.

• Periodically summarise what has been said so that the discussion can move forward.

• Let people speak and don’t add your own opinions.

• Take a refreshment break if people look tired.

• Check at various stages whether participants have anything to add.

• At the end ask whether there is anything else people feel is important they would like to add.
• Before the close ask participants what is the most interesting or important thing they have heard during the discussion.

• Thank people for attending and repeat what the information is going to be used for. Distribute vouchers and travel expenses.

Writing up the focus group

Transcribing a focus group is many hours’ work and it is probably better to pay a professional than to do it yourself. A couple of hours of tape will probably cost about £300. In the transcript, remember not to use clients’ names. Ask the transcriber to refer to them as client 1, client 2 etc.

It is a good idea to circulate the whole transcript to staff so they can see exactly what clients said. The clients in our focus groups were all very positive about their advice workers and reading what they said was very gratifying for staff.

As well as the transcript, it is a good idea to produce a summary report. The best way to do this is to read through the report, making a note of themes in the margin as you go. It is likely that you will find that most comments can be grouped into 4 or 5 main themes such as health, confidence, family or work. When you write your summary report you can organise the content under the different themes you have identified, summarise what people said and pick out two or three quotes to illustrate the points made.

When quoting, be accurate about what people said. It is tempting to improve the English (people rarely talk in fluent, grammatically correct sentences). However, when quoting you should use the clients’ own words, otherwise you may misrepresent them.

You should also include any conflicting or negative comments. Clients have given up their time to participate in the group, therefore it is important to take account of all their opinions, not just the ones that are positive.