



DATA DECISION-MAKING DEMOCRACY DESIGN DISPLAYS EVENTS FORUMS FORMAL INTERACTIVE INTERNET INTERVIEWS LEAFLETS MEDIA MEETINGS NEWSLETTERS PAPER PERIPHERAL PARTICIPATION OPEN PARTICIPATORY PARTNERSHIPS PARTICIPATIONS PUBLIC QUESTIONNAIRES RESPONSE SHARED SITE STAFF SURGERY SURVEY FORCE TELEPHONE SURVEYS TELEVISION AND RADIO VISITS WEBSITES WORKING GROUPS

Focus groups

A Focus group is a small group technique in which participants discuss specific issues and topics in depth with the help of a trained facilitator. The technique can be used to achieve input on planning decisions but can also be used as a message-testing forum where key messages are tested prior to proceeding with planning or taking action. Focus groups often range from 5 to 15 people specifically composed to represent a range of perspectives from within the subject population. Participants represent a particular group of society with shared social, cultural, age or gender nominators so that their positions and views become clear during the process. Homogeneous groups of participants are an advantage as this helps discussions to go smoothly.



A disabled access group will have specific ideas and inputs.

Resources and requirements

Skills

- A skilled facilitator is required, ideally an independent and neutral one.

Equipment

- A good meeting facility is important and potentially some incentive for participants, such as refreshments.
- Session audio-recording equipment is necessary.

Time

- Focus groups are relatively short-term, one-time events that last between one and two hours.

Level of engagement

INFORMING:

CONSULTING: ★★

INVOLVING: ★

PARTNERSHIP:

Strengths

- A Focus group allows participants to consider issues in detail by listening and responding to others within a controlled context.
- Group sponsors are provided with flexible opportunities to follow up on questions and sometimes find out the reasoning behind responses.
- It is relatively inexpensive to run.

Weaknesses

- Focus groups are not statistically valid because they include only a small number of participants.
- Sometimes it is difficult to recruit people to take part.
- A facilitator is required; the end result can be a mixture of conflicting conclusions from different groups.
- The short time span does not allow very detailed exploration of participants' views or the development of shared opinions.

- Several weeks may be required to set up a session, and a day or two to develop documentation of the outcome.
- Preparation includes development of issues into question form which can be discussed productively. Often the session ends with an exit questionnaire which must be collated, analysed and reviewed.

Costs

- Consultant costs may be up to £250 per day, but an inclusive fee for a project or a particular service can normally be negotiated which reduces costs.
- Recruitment by research professionals usually costs around £200 per group.
- Attendance payments; this is usually a flat fee of £15–25 per person, per session, depending on the evaluation of degree of incentive required.
- Transcription costs – currently £50 per C90 tape (source of all costs: Toogood, M., 2000).

Useful sources of information

Books

- Focus Groups Sage. D. L. Morgan (1988). Publications, London.
- Reference manual for public involvement. J. Barker et al. (1999). 2nd edn. Southwark and Lewisham Health Authority, Lambeth.
- Techniques for talking: participatory techniques for land use planning – a review. M. Toogood (2000). Report Commissioned by RSPB.

Web

- The International Association for Public Participation: www.iap2.org
- PPPM 613 Planning Analysis by R. G. Parker: darkwing.uoregon.edu/~rgp/PPPM613/class10summary.htm

Training

- Facilitation courses by The Environment Council: tel. 020 7632 0103 or www.the-environment-council.org.uk

This toolbox is designed to assist Forestry Commission staff when they are considering which tools they could use to involve the public in the forest and woodland planning process. For more information please visit the website at: www.forestry.gov.uk/toolbox