South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS Partnership

Path to Excellence Consultation

Running a Focus Group
Moderator's Guidance

Contents

1 INTRODUCTION

This short guide is intended to provide support to third sector partners and interested groups in South Tyneside and Sunderland to deliver Focus Groups locally as part of the South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS partnership 'Path to Excellence' consultation into services in the areas of stroke, obstetrics and gynaecology and paediatric services.

It provides a summary of the key elements and areas to be aware of, offering tips and hints for Focus Group moderators to assist them through the process.

It should be read alongside the formal consultation documentation, found at: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/information/.

This consultation documentation and impact assessments are important pre-reading for any moderator and the team at NECS are available to respond to any queries about the content the consultation beforehand.

The guide will look at:

- Why focus groups are used and the difference between qualitative and quantitative opinion;
- The steps to be taken to prepare for the group;
- Tips on moderating the group; and
- Guidance on reporting the group.

This guide has been developed by bringing the learning from consultations elsewhere, including previous NHS consultations in the North East. Presented, as an appendix to this guide, is a PowerPoint slide deck for further support.

2 WHY A FOCUS GROUP? THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN 'QUANT' AND 'QUAL'

When consulting with the public the terms 'qual' and 'quant' are often used, these are shorthand terms for:

- Quantitative consultation or research; and
- Qualitative consultation or research.

2.1 Quantitative Research

The simplest definition of **Quantitative research** (also known as 'quant') is the use of numbers, such as survey responses, to predict how a population (chosen for specific or representative characteristics) would answer the same question or set of questions. Typically, quantitative research is characterised by closed questions from which a statistically reliable set of results can be calculated.

This approach is very useful for looking at the responses of a large sample and tends to look at a set pattern of enquiry, leaving little room for the expression of emotion. This aspect of opinion collection is covered in the Path to Excellence consultation by the online survey which can be accessed at https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/take-part-survey/ A paper version has also been produced.

2.2 Qualitative research

Qualitative research (also known as ‘qual’) uses unstructured information and seeks to explore emotional responses and to understand what people feel and do. Focus group discussions are one example of a qualitative approach to sampling opinion, and this has been chosen as one of the mechanisms for the Path to Excellence consultation.

The defining characteristics of a focus group is that they:

- Use open questions to prompt discussion;
- Are moderated impartially and objectively;
- Follow a discussion guide that allows exploration of themes as they occur; and
- Allow for exploration of emotional response – getting ‘beneath the skin’ of issues, in this case to provide complementary understanding to the findings of the quantitative survey.

The focus groups convened and moderated by the VCS in South Tyneside and Sunderland are designed to explore the emotional responses of a mixed cohort including members of the public, service providers, staff, volunteers, service users and carers to provide a ‘voice of the sector’ input to the consultation.

The reason for explaining the difference between ‘qual’ and ‘quant’ is to clarify the purpose and mode of delivery of a Focus Group and the importance of using a Discussion Guide. For example, it would be inappropriate for moderators to use the survey questionnaire and ask for a “show of hands” basis to develop a response.

Another very important reason for using a focus group approach is that allows for a standardised approach that can be tailored to local circumstances allowing for ready comparison and reporting. South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS partnership is under a duty to consult on these changes and these groups will add an effective voice for the sector while providing parity of opinion with others consulted in the process.

3 PREPARING FOR THE GROUP

Before the focus group can run there are a number of steps that are needed. Experienced moderators will be familiar with many of them, but it is important to remind ourselves of some of the key steps.

3.1 Recruiting the group

The VCS have been asked to convene groups to listen to the opinion of members of the public, service providers, staff, volunteers, service users and carers on the basis that they are best place to gain representative opinion. Put simply you are already working very actively in the sector and have a reach into a network of contacts that makes bringing together a group of people relatively easy, this may be around events you already have planned.

The ideal focus group size is between eight and ten people, any larger than this and it becomes a workshop, which requires a different set of skills and produces a different type of outcome, equally of value to the consultation process but outside the scope of this guidance.

It is good practice to issue an invitation in advance that provides at the minimum a broad outline of the topic under discussion as well as:

- The time, date and venue the group will be held;
- An indication of the duration of the group to allow people the chance to plan their time around this, and to ensure they are able to contribute fully;
- An indication of the number of other people likely to be present; and
- An indication of the reason they have been invited (i.e. for a particular knowledge or skill or their perspective in a particular role);
- Any pre-reading you advise they do before the session.

When recruiting, you need to use your knowledge of the ‘pool’ you are inviting, if you are confident that all will turn up, you need only invite the number of people you require (i.e. 8-to-10), however, if you are uncertain that everyone will turn up, perhaps based on previous experience it is sensible to ‘over recruit’ – allowing for drop out – so if you want a minimum of eight to turn you should invite twelve people to account for the likely dropout rate. The precise number you over recruit by is best judged against your previous experience of events like this with the group you are inviting.

3.2 Scope of discussion

To aid moderators in understanding what should be discussed in the groups:

- It is important to note that this focus group will concentrate on discussion related to the proposals for change related to the services in the areas of stroke, obstetrics and gynaecology and paediatric services.
- This means that the group will almost exclusively discuss the options in the consultation documents.
- However, the views and opinions of participants on other issues related to the Path to Excellence consultation are important and while the time available in the group prevents this discussion it is important that participants do not feel their opinion is

being 'managed out' of the consultation process. To do this participants should be directed to the other means of response listed in the consultation document. They should also be reassured that if they wish to raise this issue with any other bodies or individuals participation in this group does not prevent them from doing so if they feel they have issues unanswered or expressed at the end of the discussions.

3.3 Homework in advance?

One of the issues sometimes raised is the amount and 'density' of the consultation materials.

The issues discussed in the consultation are both complex and contentious. To give the participants the opportunity to familiarise themselves with the issues, good practice suggests that the consultation documents should be sent out in advance. It is impossible to make people read the documentation in advance and you may expect participants to turn up early and quietly read the information, which is a step closer to the ideal than 'tabling' it on the day.

Note: The standard Discussion Guide for the Focus Groups is supported by the Consultation Documents/links provided. Ideally these should be sent or highlighted to participants in advance.

Hard copies of the documents can be requested from:

Post: Alex Rodger
The Path to Excellence
Freepost RTUS–LYHZ–BRLE
North of England Commissioning Support
Riverside House
Goldcrest Way
Newcastle upon Tyne NE15 8NY
Tel: 0191 217 2670
Email: Alexandra.Rodger@nhs.net

A summary of the relevant documents can be found at: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/ with links to the individual online versions provided below:

- The full consultation document: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/NHS-Path-to-Excellence-public-consultation-document.pdf
- The summary consultation document: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/NHS-Path-to-Execellence-public-consultation-document-summary.pdf
- The pre-consultation Business Case: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/P2E-PCBC-v2.4-FINAL-1.pdf
- The online consultation survey can be found at:
  - https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/information/
- The Travel and Transport Impact Assessment: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/NHS_Travel-and-Transport-Impact-Baseline-Report-Full-report.pdf

- The Travel and Transport Impact Assessment Public Summary: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/NHS-Path-to-Excellence-travel-and-transport-impact-public-summary.pdf
- Travel and Transport Impact Assessment service review: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Travel-and-Transport-Impact-Assessment-of-service-review-options-1.pdf
- Health Inequalities Impact Assessment – Stroke: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FINAL-Stroke-IIA-080617.pdf
- Health Inequalities Impact Assessment – Obstetrics and Gynaecology: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/08/FINAL-OG-IIA-250617.pdf
- Health Inequalities Impact Assessment – Paediatrics Service Proposals: https://pathtoexcellence.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/FINAL-IIA-Paeds-110617.pdf

3.4 Preparing the room

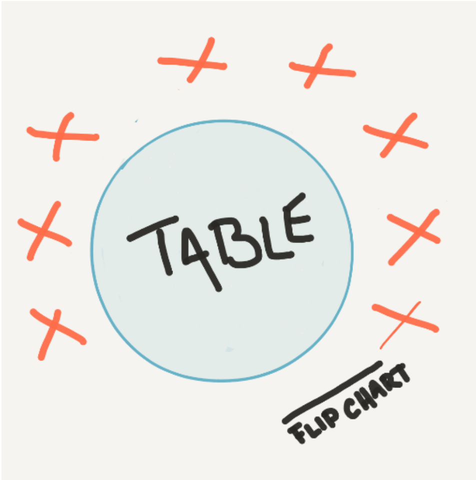
In most cases the room available to you to run the groups will be limited by the available resources.

Ideally the room should:
- Be well lit and ventilated;
- Be fully accessible;
- Conveniently located for toilets and other facilities.

It is important to familiarise yourself with the layout of the room, any fire exits and to be aware of any fire alarm tests and the evacuation procedures in the event of a fire or other emergency. It is good practice to get the participants to sign into the group, to both provide a record of who attended and to allow you to check all are safe in the event of any emergency.

Before you begin the group it is important to share the details of facilities and emergency procedures, irrespective of the perceived familiarity of these of those attending.
The room layout is important – if you are using a flipchart or whiteboard to record comments ensure they are positioned so that everyone can see them. It is also advisable to check all pens in advance to ensure they are working and in the case of whiteboards that they are not permanent markers (do not use these as they will damage the whiteboard).

The ideal layout for a focus group is around a table in ‘cabaret style’ allowing the participants (remember the ideal group size is eight to ten) to sit across from each other and to have somewhere they can make notes, as in the following illustration.



The shape of the table is not important, however, it is not ideal if it is so large that the group feel they have to shout across it to be heard.

As a moderator it is a matter of personal choice whether you stand or sit, it is also dependent on the audience's needs.

You can also run the group in a horseshoe seating arrangement, which is more open and provides the participants with less defensive barriers, but this is often impractical, particularly where you are providing refreshments.

3.5 Preparing yourself

One of the most important steps, often overlooked, is preparing yourself. Take time to read the discussion guide, familiarise yourself with the content, in particular the scenarios.

You do not need to be an expert in the subject matter, you do need to understand:

- The differences between the options for each service area;
- The order in which the various options are presented; and
- The expected outcomes from each discussion.

3.6 Preparing for making a record of the group discussions

The hardest part of a moderator's job is that of moderating the group, keep the conversation going and on track. This is important to the smooth and effective running of the group, however, the aim is to understand people's opinion to do this a record of the event is required. To avoid the need for distracting note taking the simplest method is to make an audio recording that can be listened back to later, this can be made using a digital/tape recorder or many smartphones now have excellent voice memo facilities. In some cases video recordings are also made, which has the added benefit of capturing body language and group non-verbal responses.

You **MUST** get prior permission from the group to record and inform them of the use the recording will be put to - in this case this is as a record to aid later reporting and that it will not be shared with any third party.

NB: Remember, reporting back should not be verbatim from the recording, simply used as an aid to you when you report back.

The ideal situation – often prevented by limited resources – is to have two non-participants in the room, one to act as moderator and one to act as scribe/reporter. The role of the second person includes observing non-verbal responses in the group and taking notes of this.

3.7 Considerations before starting the group: a few common pitfalls and some tips to avoid them

There are a few common challenges faced by moderators that can mean the difference between a good group discussion and one that isn't, these are:

- **Panic**
  It is a natural human reaction to feel anxious before any public performance, and the role of moderator is as much a performance as a skill. Some simple ways to overcome anxiety are to:
    - Acknowledge that this is a stressful situation and the sensations you feel are a normal part of your body's response;
    - Acknowledge that you are putting too much pressure on yourself to 'get it right' instead frame it as a learning experience were mistakes are allowed; and
    - Recognise that your do not need to be the expert imparting knowledge, the group are experts by experience and your role is to listen to them. They know more about their own lives than you do, surrender some of the responsibility for the group outcomes to them.

- **Too long an introduction**
  Taking too long with the initial introductory preamble and warm up, leaving the important opinion sharing sessions short on time and the participants feeling they are being rushed rather than fully developing their opinion. Stick to the allocated time schedule from the beginning, this involves being disciplined with your introduction – the discussion guide for this Focus Group will ensure you and the group do not run out of things to discuss in the allotted time.

- **Failing to prepare**
  Many moderators struggle to keep the group running smoothly because they are not prepared, seem uncertain and constantly and visibly have to refer to their notes. Spending an hour or so familiarising yourself with the materials and room layout will prevent you from facing this challenge.

- **Monopolising the group**
  Taking too long to phrase the questions and adding in 'supporting' information when asking the groups opinion, can lead to the participants forgetting what the question was in the first place and more importantly lead to the loss of concentration and focus. Keep your questions short and to the point, the process of probing for more detail is more important than providing too much information. Remember the group is designed to allow participants to share their opinion, not to listen to you.

- **Tolerating ‘off-piste’ contributions**
  The Path to Excellence consultation deals with emotive - and to some - contentious issues, there will be people who have a specific agenda or viewpoint that is not compatible with the objectives of the group. If you allow them to talk too long the important views related to this specific element of the consultation will not be heard. Point out that there are other routes to bring this opinion into the consultation.

  Likewise, a member of the group may introduce irrelevant facts or discussions that while important to them add little to the specific objectives of the group. It is important that these issues are not ignored, but are effectively parked. One mechanism to cope is the ‘issues sheet’ where such topics are noted with a commitment to review them outside the group, however, if you use this mechanism it must be followed up.

By the time the groups have been completed there is every likelihood that we can add to this list.

The important thing to remember is the group want to share their opinions, you are never in danger of losing them and if you need to, call a ten minute comfort break to regroup your thoughts.

4 RUNNING THE GROUP

Having prepared for the group, there are a few simple suggestions to help you actively moderate the group.

4.1 The role of the moderator

The role of the moderator is to act as a neutral third party who facilitates the discussion, the objectivity of this role is important to the outcomes. The more involved you become the more leading the questions and the group is in danger of reporting your opinions rather than those of ‘experts by experience’ you have brought together.

Positive moderator behaviour:
- ✓ Managing the group discussion, ensuring all have the opportunity to contribute;
- ✓ Giving participants the relevant structures and tools;
- ✓ Helping participants articulate their opinions.

What a moderator does not do:
- ✗ Take part in the discussions;
- ✗ Try to influence the outcome of the discussions;
- ✗ Offer their own view.

Typically moderator questions and responses are ‘Why?’ and ‘How?’ ***not*** ‘In my opinion!’

If in your role as moderator you find yourself offering your opinion on a subject, you are no longer being objective and have become a participant, it is easier to avoid giving your opinion for the duration of the group than to bias the process. If you feel really strongly about offering your opinion, wait until the formal session is concluded and then discuss it, you cannot lead the process when it is finished. Equally, remember that you are not prevented from sharing these opinions in the consultation just because you moderate this group.

An important element of the moderation is personalising the interaction with the group. If you have not met the participants before make a rough map of the group and write the names of the participants in the position they are sitting as a handy reference. Another technique adopted by some moderators is to write the names of the group in a list and use a code to remind them of who they are. For instance put G next to a person wearing glasses and B next to a person with a beard, developing your own memorable codes is often part of the fun in the process.

When you act as a moderator, you need to remain neutral. Some techniques that can help you focus on keeping the group running smoothly and not influencing the outcomes are:

- Paraphrasing;
- Feeling identification; and
- Insight clarification.

It is important to keep in mind that while using these techniques that sounding judgemental or critical will be counterproductive.

Paraphrasing
Involves describing, in your own words, what another person's remarks convey:
"Do I understand you correctly that…"
"Are you saying…?"
"What I'm hearing you say is…"

You need to be paraphrasing continuously throughout. It is a very useful way of dealing with potential conflicts and clarifying peoples' opinions. You will put participants at ease by paraphrasing, simply because it shows their opinions are being heard and acknowledged.

Identifying feelings
This generally consists of specifying and identifying a feeling either by naming, using a metaphor or using a figure of speech.
"I feel we've run out of energy" (Naming)
"I feel as if we're facing a brick wall" (Metaphor)
"I feel like a fly on the wall" (Figure of speech)

As a moderator, you need to be in tune with how you're feeling as the group progresses and be more than willing to share those feelings in a positive way with the group. Relying on your own emotional intelligence - and by expressing them honestly - revealing your feelings encourages others to share their own.

4.2 Warm up

The process of getting participants to introduce themselves is also an opportunity to 'warm up' the group getting the participants talking and helping them to feel comfortable with each other. In a Focus Group this needs to be a short sharp exercise, which the participants can answer concisely, typically there is no more than a five minute time allowance for group introductions and warm up. The two most common techniques are to ask either projective or specific questions, each have their benefits, summarised below, in summary, projective involves discussing unrelated topics that allow dissociation from the discussion subject whereas specific dives right in.

General (projective) an example of which could be:

What did you have for breakfast?

- 👍 The advantage of this is that it is very general and non-specific, introducing a bit of fun to the proceeding.
- 👎 The disadvantage is that it is not linked to the subject and does not start the conversation directly.

Specific an example of which could be:

What's your definition of maternity services?

- 👍 The advantage of this approach is that it immediate introduces the subject and sparks general discussion
- 👎 The disadvantage is that it could introduce negative opinion from the outset of discussions, setting the tone for the remainder of the group.

4.3 Working with a discussion guide

The moderator is supported in the group by a discussion guide that provides a standard framework. This assists in both:

- Keeping the group flowing by providing prompts for discussion and areas in which to probe for further detail; and
- Providing a standard structure for consultation feedback that will stand up to external quality assurance and other scrutiny of the process

The discussion guide is perhaps more accurately identified as a semi-directive script. The main purpose is to act as an aide memoire of the topic areas that must be discussed. It is not a questionnaire and it does not need to the rigidly followed to the exclusion of an interesting and relevant line of discussion. If you were running more than one of these groups there is a likelihood that the discussion guide would evolve and adapt based on the outcomes of the first and subsequent groups.

4.4 Difficult or reluctant participants

You are likely to meet a number of different characters when moderating your group dominant or reluctant participants both have the impact of reducing the breadth of discussion and opinion.

Reluctant or shy participants need to be encouraged to participate, this should not involve observations like *"…you're a bit quiet over there…"* instead using techniques where you ask people to respond in turn allows the space to respond. This is non-threatening and often once the individual is allowed to find their voice and place in the group they make strong contributions. They have not given up their time to observe, they are more than likely motivated by a passion or opinion that is looking for a way out.

A constrained 'idea storm' is a good example of this type of approach, where you ask each participant to give a short sharp response to a set topic, this allows space to respond and limits the more dominant participants.

When dealing with difficult, aggressive, dominant participants the first thing to do is to welcome their opinion. More often than not their ‘difficult’ presentation is underpinned by other issues and anxieties, not least of which is not being listened to. The simplest way to deal with is to allow them to briefly vent, do not allow this to go on too long, and then to reassure them you have heard them and ask the group’s permission to return to the subject under discussion. This works with dominant participants as well, you can also use your own body language to momentarily exclude them from the discussion (for example by pointedly looking away or if you are standing by briefly turning your back on them – neither should be allowed to last so long as to seem a deliberate and permanent exclusion). You can also use verbal techniques such as:
“…thank you very much for that opinion, perhaps we can return to it at the end of the group if time allows…”

This must be genuine, they generally are making a very good if unrelated point, and follow this up with a specific topic related question to get the group back on track.

4.5 It isn’t all about what they say

An important component of the focus group process is the non-verbal cues that underpin the group.

It is important to observe the group interaction noting:

- Does body language suggest the group are uncomfortable or support the views of the dominant person; and
- What are the non-verbal cues telling you?

As previously discussed, the issue in this is that the moderator is engaged in leading the discussion, keeping the discussion flowing and exploring the how and why of the participant’s responses. This means they are not always able to observe and record this non-verbal element, the ideal, but not always possible, solution is a two person moderation team consisting of an:

- Active moderator; and
- Observer/ note taker.

4.6 It’s all over but how do we know if we did well?

On completion of the focus group it is important that all participants are offered the opportunity to provide feedback on the event which is a part of the formal Path to Excellence consultation. To do this provide all participants with the standardised Evaluation and Monitoring form, including opportunities to feedback on the session, which is embedded as a PDF below.

Path to Excellence
Focus Group Evaluatic

The reasons for this are:

- There is a statutory duty on South Tyneside and Sunderland NHS partnership to provide mechanisms to collect this information; and

- It is good practice to ask participants what they thought

It is important to note that completing this form can be strongly encouraged but it cannot be made compulsory, it is a matter for the individual to decide. It is usually more effective to gather this information as the event closes than to wait for participants to return them at a later date.

5 REPORTING GROUP DISCUSSIONS

On completion of the group, the outcomes need to be reported and submitted for consideration in the formal consultation. The simple test of the reported outcomes are:

- Could you give this to the average person to read?
- Would they understand it?

In terms of format, it is encouraged that the report follows the structure of the Discussion Guide, providing a standardised approach across all the groups.

In summary, this should include:

- An introduction section, detailing the date of the group, the venue, the number of people attending (anonymous demographic information only i.e. 8 attendees, 4 male, 4 female, aged xx to zz, all of whom were service users) and some general info about the group
- An individual section for each of the topic/service areas in the Discussion Guide;
- Some form of overall summary and any conclusions the group were able to reach, including their preferred scenario and the rationale for selection.

NB: Please use the 'Focus Group Reporting Template' document provided to report on the sessions. The report will be needed electronically.

A good quality report is essential in ensuring the voice of the sector is effectively heard. If it follows the structure of the Discussion Guide and is completed on the Reporting Template provided, it will be able to stand up to scrutiny and avoid challenge, however unlikely that is. This will have the added benefit of a format that is easily analysed to ensure your group's opinion is included as they were presented.

The outcomes of the Focus Groups, along with the other consultation processes is being analysed by an independent research agency.
NB: Evaluation and Monitoring forms should also be collated.

Please return your reports on the Focus Group Sessions **electronically by 2nd October 2017** to: Alex Rodger - Alexandra.Rodger@nhs.net

6 FURTHER CONTACT

If you have any queries about the consultation or would like further assistance, you can contact us at NECS by:

- **Email:** nhs.excellence@nhs.net
- **Phone:** 0191 217 2670
- **Write:** The Path to Excellence

Freepost RTUS–LYHZ–BRLE
North of England Commissioning Support
Riverside House, Goldcrest Way
Newcastle upon Tyne
NE15 8NY