



College of  
Policing

## How to Guide: Conducting Focus Groups



## What is this guide for?

It's an introductory level overview of how to conduct successful focus groups. The guide includes hints, tips and key considerations at each stage of the process. At the end of each section, you'll find a checklist of essential points.

The guide aims to be short and accessible for busy practitioners and researchers. A suggested reading list is available at the end of the guide if you would like to know more.

## Who is this guide for?

Anyone considering using focus groups for a research project who has not conducted one before. It may also be helpful for those who need a refresher.

## What is a focus group?

A focus group is a qualitative research method in which the researcher asks questions in a group setting and participants are encouraged to discuss their answers with others. The researcher facilitates the discussion and uses the group interaction to gather data.

## When should you use a focus group?

- Focus groups are best used to explore the attitudes, opinions, self-reported behaviours, or experiences of a particular group in relation to a specific topic.
- Typical uses include testing out new ideas, advancing understanding of how a process, system or organisation works, or exploring why a group think or behave in a certain way. For example understanding public opinion regarding a police tactic, or how investigating officers use digital evidence.
- Focus groups should not be used to understand how effective something is, but are great for gathering additional information to complement methods that measure effectiveness. Focus groups can tell you **how** a new tactic or project has been implemented and **why** it did or didn't work.

## Advantages of focus groups

- Focus groups allow you to gather qualitative data on multiple topics drawn from multiple people over a short period of time.
- The interaction of participants can generate new ideas and add depth to existing ones.
- You can immediately follow up on comments made by participants, to explore issues in greater depth.
- Through group discussion you can uncover and explore ideas and issues you may not have anticipated.

## Is a focus group the best method for you?

It is important to use the best method for your research aims. Other methods may be more appropriate. If you want to:

- Explore individual's attitudes in depth - consider one to one interviews.
- Generalise the views you collect to the wider population, or want to understand views of a large number of individuals - consider a survey.
- Research a sensitive or controversial topic - consider one to one interviews.

### Still not sure?



You can contact the research team for advice on research methods by e-mailing [research@college.pnn.police.uk](mailto:research@college.pnn.police.uk).

### Move on if you understand...



- what a focus group is
- when focus groups are an appropriate method to use

# Design and Sampling

Firstly, you need to determine your research aims, select your participants, and decide what questions you'll ask them to achieve your aims.

In research, your aims are determined by forming 'research questions.' Your research questions are the overarching questions your research will answer.

It helps if your research question is as specific as possible. For example, if you're interested in public views of Anti-Social Behaviour (ASB) in a specific area your research questions might be:

**“How does ASB affect the lives of residents of Central District?”**

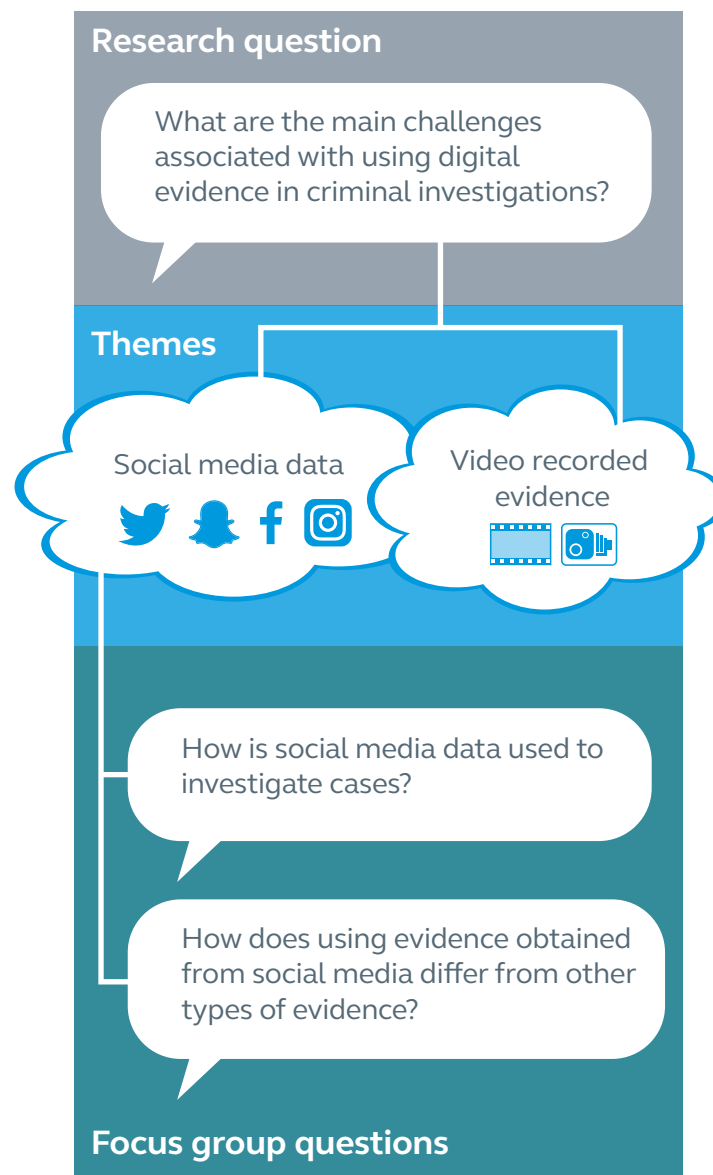
**“What are the residents of Central District's views on police responses to ASB?”**

Once you've defined your research questions, you should think about what key themes you need to explore to answer them, and map out specific questions you will ask to gather information on each theme. You then need to arrange these themes and questions into a structured 'topic guide.'

## Topic Guide

Your topic guide is a series of questions and prompts to help you facilitate discussion during your focus group. It is your most important tool in running a successful focus group (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: An example of a research question, themes and focus group questions



## Developing your topic guide

The level of detail in a topic guide can vary greatly but should include as a minimum:

- Key themes you want to explore.
- Questions and/or prompts to promote discussion.
- Space to take notes.

It is important to allow flexibility as you are aiming to explore topics and provoke discussion.

Use open questions (see Figure 2 overleaf) throughout to encourage free flowing group discussion.

Start with non-contentious questions to prompt discussion and ease participants into the session. Introducing sensitive subjects too early can discourage open discussion.

Always start with broad and then move to specific questions, this helps people consider their responses to a certain issue and encourages the discussion to be participant-led.

Structure your topic guide so it flows. Group questions into themes and try to link the themes to mimic a natural conversation. If you do have to significantly change topic, make sure you take time to introduce the new topic to avoid disorientating your participants.

Ensure each question in your topic guide helps answer your research questions. If it doesn't, don't include it.

Consider incorporating exercises or group tasks into your topic guide. This is often a more effective way of stimulating discussion than asking questions in an 'interview style' format. You can prepare tasks, scenarios or other stimuli to be discussed. For example, you could ask the group to work together to rank the importance of a list of items, or group items into meaningful categories, explaining their decisions during the exercise.

When using exercises remember to record discussion between participants as they complete the exercises (e.g. record why the group ranked one item to be more important than another). This data can be as insightful, if not more, than the outcome of the exercise itself.

Consider testing questions with individuals similar to your participants to check they are understood as you intend. This is particularly important for group exercises – if the group misses the point, you're unlikely to gather the information you need.

### How long should your focus group be?

It depends! But between 90 minutes and two hours is typical. Too short and you may be rushed and not everyone will have chance to express their view. Too long and participants may tire, or be deterred from attending in the first place.



Don't be too ambitious with the number of topics. Remember – discussions will go off topic and you'll need to time to check others' views (you can always have some optional topics in case things are discussed quicker than anticipated).

If participants are being paid to participate then it's reasonable to ask for more time.

If participants have travelled far to participate, avoid short sessions as they may be perceived as a waste of time.

### Sampling

Next you need to decide on your sample. Your sample are the individuals who will participate in your focus group[s]. You're very unlikely to be able to include the whole population of interest so you take a 'sample' of people from that population.

Figure 2: Examples of question formats

#### Open question

Can you tell us about your experience of obtaining evidence from mobile phones?

What do you think about the current process?

What changes do you think might improve the current process?

#### Closed question

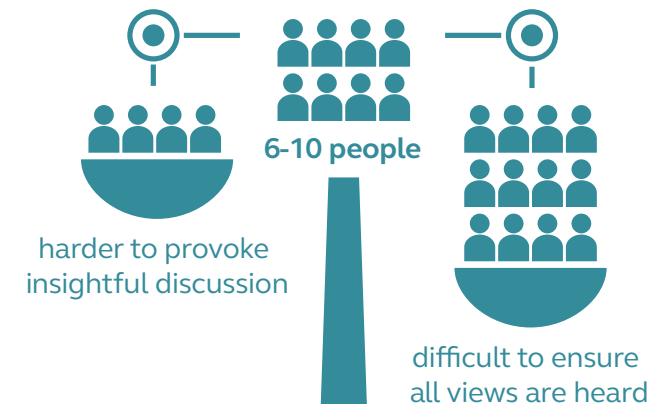
Do you have problems obtaining evidence from mobile phones?

Are you happy with the current process?

Can any changes improve the current process?

### How many to sample?

In most cases, 6-10 people is the optimal size for one focus group.



It may be worth 'over sampling' to account for cancellations and 'no-shows'. However, make sure you let the extra participants know that they are a 'back-up' and they may not be needed.

There are no rules about how many groups you should run, and this will depend heavily on the purpose of your research as well as available time and resources. You should run as many focus groups as you need to achieve a diverse range of views. Nonetheless, at some point in your research you will reach a '**saturation point**'. This is when you aren't getting any new information so there is little benefit from running more focus groups.

**Saturation =** 

### Who to sample?

Focus groups in social science generally use a **purposive sampling** approach to select participants. Purposive sampling selects participants based on the characteristics of your population of interest and objectives of your research. You should think about what factors might affect people's attitudes and behaviours in relation to your research topic and aim to sample from a range of backgrounds (see Figure 3).

If you have very specific needs you may need to screen participants using a short screening questionnaire.

**Figure 3: An example of purposive sampling**

**In our example you may want to sample...**

- investigators from a range of specialisms
- different ranks/roles
- different levels of policing experience
- different levels of IT skills

...in order to obtain a variety of views on using digital evidence in investigations.



If your research is focused on a harder to reach group (e.g. homeless people) you might take a snowball sampling approach. When using **snowball sampling** you start with a small number of known individuals and recruit more participants by asking your initial contacts to refer you to other relevant people.

Other types of sampling include convenience and quota sampling. You can learn more about sampling methods from sources in our reading list.

Getting the dynamics of a focus group right is essential for promoting open, productive and lively discussion. It is important to consider how your sample composition might affect participants' willingness to speak openly and encourage a lively debate.

While you should aim to have a good mix of backgrounds within each focus group, consider this carefully. Sometimes having participants from different backgrounds in the same group might discourage participation in the discussion (e.g. different ranks, staff from other agencies, socio-demographics differences or pre-existing relationships). This often depends on the nature of your research question.

If you are interested in the views of two or more distinct groups (e.g. senior leaders and front line officers/staff), consider running separate focus groups for each group.

### Move on if you understand...



- what a topic guide is and how you should structure one
- what purposive sampling is and how you might use this to select the sample for your focus group
- the considerations involved in determining the number and duration of your focus group(s)

# Planning and Logistics

Now you've decided on your research questions, your topic guide, and recruited your participants, it's time to arrange the logistics. If everything runs smoothly, you'll have a better chance of gathering the information you need.

## The location

- Select a time and place that is as easy as possible for all participants to attend. If it's inconvenient, you're more likely to get last minute cancellations.
- Make sure the room is a suitable size so your participants are comfortable.
- Put your participants at ease by selecting a neutral location (e.g. if you're asking officers to be honest about how the force is run, best not to hold your session next door to the Chief's office).
- Book the room for longer than you need and do not facilitate too many focus groups in one day. Participants may be running late and you may find conversations take longer than expected.
- Arrive well before your participants to set out the room and confirm housekeeping issues (e.g. toilets, fire alarm etc.).
- Set the room out in a horse shoe style with you sat in the 'gap' (see below). This ensures everyone can see each other and makes it easier for you to manage the discussion.



## Communication

You should send out information to participants well in advance of the focus group. Including:

- The purpose and broad topics of the focus group.
- What is expected of them.
- Location, directions, timings, contact details and arrival procedure - invite participants to arrive 10 minutes before the start time.
- Financial implications of participation (e.g. any incentives you can offer, expenses procedures).
- Benefits and risks of participation.
- Data handling and confidentiality procedures (anonymity, data recording procedure, access and storage of data).
- Dress code- it may be appropriate to use a 'no uniform' policy, especially if facilitating a mixed rank/agency group.
- Their right to withdraw participation at any time and to not answer specific questions.

Ethically, you must obtain informed consent to take part from the participant. This can be via a form or response to an email that contains all the relevant information.

## Don't forget...

- Topic guides.
- Materials to facilitate (e.g. flipcharts, pens, pads, post its etc.).



- Recording device (e.g. dictaphone), spare batteries and a backup device (test it in advance).
- Clock/watch to keep track of time.
- Refreshments - biscuits can be a great icebreaker!
- Name tags, if using.

## Roles

Ideally, focus groups should be run by at least two people. One to focus on facilitation and the other on taking notes – you can swap over at an agreed time to share the workload. Without agreeing this in advance you risk having a poor record of the session or both focusing on note-taking and losing control of the discussion. If you're a single-crewed researcher a recording device is essential.

## Move on if you know...



- what information you need to provide your participants with so they can give informed consent to participate
- considerations when selecting an appropriate time and place for your focus group
- what equipment you need to run your focus group

# Data Collection

Everything is in place, now it's time to run your focus group. This section provides some hints and tips on how to manage the focus group.

## Set the scene

How you introduce the focus group will have an effect on how participants engage so a well thought out introduction is important. Make sure your participants are comfortable, understand why they are there and what is expected of them. Take time to refresh their memories by introducing the focus group clearly and allow time to answer any questions that arise. It can be helpful to provide this information on handouts or PowerPoint slides, particularly if you are using an exercise in your focus group. You should:

- Introduce yourself and ask participants to introduce themselves.
- Reaffirm the purpose of the research.
- Give an overview of topics that will be discussed and format of the session (including timings and explanation of any exercises planned).
- Set any ground rules (e.g. turn mobile phones off, allow and speak one at a time, respect confidentiality, no right or wrong answers, keep on topic).
- Confirm housekeeping.



## Facilitation

Your role as a facilitator is to encourage discussion between participants that is:

**FOCUS**<sub>ed</sub>  
on your topic guide  
...and includes the whole  
**GROUP**

## How to keep discussions focused

It's important to strike a balance between letting the discussion flow and keeping it on track.

It's fine to politely interrupt people, but make sure you explain why so you don't offend or discourage participation (e.g. "that's very interesting but can I bring us back to [the topic] as we're short of time").

If the topic discussed is relevant but the discussion is not generating any new information, try suggesting the topic can be revisited at the end if there is time. This can act as motivation for the individuals who have been talking to keep focused for the rest of the session.

Giving the group an idea of what other topics need to be covered can encourage them to self-regulate their time as there may be topics they're keen to discuss.

## How to include the whole group

- Address the whole group when introducing a new topic or question.
- Use phrases like "can you tell the group about...?" You want them to discuss with each other, not you.
- Encourage other participants to question and respond to each other (e.g. "Does anyone have any views on what [participant] said?").
- Neutralise the 'conversation dominator' (they'll always be one!) –
  - Use eye contact to bring others into the conversation.
  - Ask others for their views on the points they're making.
  - If necessary, politely remind them you need to get everyone's views.
- Involve the quiet ones
  - Don't let anyone stay silent for too long.
  - But don't stifle the discussion by over-regulating who speaks – some people just talk more than others.



## Getting more detail

Here are some tips on how to get more information from your group and explore issues in greater detail.

Use silence effectively – people don't like silence, if you stay quiet, people will talk!

Be 'devil's advocate' if the group's views are too consistent – more insight is generated from a lively debate.

- **Probe** – probing is essential to ensuring you have fully explored a theme. Probes can be used to:
  - o Encourage more ideas – “Are there other circumstances when that occurs?”
  - o Explore an idea further – “Can you tell me more about that?”
  - o Include others – “Has anyone else experienced that?”
  - o You can also combine a summary with a probe to check your understanding – “So suspects don't comply with that? Why do think that is?”
- **Prompt** - If you have specific questions that aren't being discussed naturally or after probing, you can prompt to suggest ideas. But be careful – prompts should be reserved for the most important points and used cautiously as you risk 'putting words in participants' mouths.' You should have prompts on your topic guide and tick them off as they are discussed to your satisfaction.

## Figure 4 : Example of probing and prompting

**Question:** How has evidence gathering changed over the course of your careers?

**Probe:** Are there any other changes that have taken place?

**Prompt:** Has the increase in internet use in society changed anything?

## Phrasing and minimising bias

- Remember – facilitate, don't participate! It is very important you don't add your own views to the discussion as this influences opinions and can bias your findings.
- Ask open questions to encourage more detailed answers.
- Avoid double-barrelled questions (e.g. “How did the change in policy and new office change your approach to work?”).
- Avoid too much summing up. Summing up to clarify what people mean is helpful, but do it sparingly. Every time you paraphrase you risk inadvertently changing the meaning of what was said.
- Avoid jargon – you should identify problematic phrases when you test your topic guide.
- Consider introducing sensitive/controversial topics in a way that legitimises both points of view (e.g. “some people suggest [topic] is good...but others don't, what do you think?”).
- Don't finish people's sentences.

## Note taking tip!

Consider assigning a number to each participant and drawing a plan of the room to show where each person is sitting and their key info (e.g. number, name, and role). This can help you remember people's names during facilitation and also speed up your note taking.

## Closing

Don't forget to debrief your group. Debriefs should be a minimum:

- Restate the purpose of the research.
- Describe the next steps (e.g. other data collection, estimated date you'll complete your research).
- Provide opportunity for follow up questions.
- Thank participants for their time.

## Move on if you know...

- your role as a focus group facilitator
- ways to keep the discussion on topic and to include all participants
- the difference between prompts and probes and when to use them
- things to avoid to minimise researcher bias



# Analysis and Reporting

There are many different methods of analysis of qualitative data. This guide cannot summarise all of these and so provides an overview of a pragmatic approach. Explore our reading list if you wish to learn more about qualitative data analysis.

Analysis of qualitative data involves ‘coding’ and interpreting the record of your focus group(s) to identify similarities and differences of what was said and draw out the key themes relevant to your research questions.

## Preparing for analysis

**Transcribe** your recording to reduce the chance of adding your own opinion (bias) to your data. If this isn’t practical due to time take very detailed notes and cross-check with your co-facilitator. You should also be clear about this limitation when you report your findings.

**Familiarise** yourself with the data - listen to the recordings and read your notes before you start coding to re-familiarise yourself with the key issues/ themes.

**Choose an approach.** There are different options for preparing and analysing your data:

- Using specialist analysis software – efficient but likely to have a cost.
- By hand - using a highlighter or putting themes onto post it notes – cheap but can be hard to manage if you have a lot of data.

- Use an Excel spread sheet – cheap and manageable but version control can be a problem if working with others.

## Coding

Coding is a process of categorisation to make it easier to interpret your unstructured data. A code is a word/phrase that helps you identify what the quote/sentence in your data relates to. By linking the quote/sentence to your codes you can build an overall picture of what was said about a particular topic across your whole sample.



It is likely that a quote may relate to more than one code. In these cases you should assign multiple codes to the same quote to help your interpretation of your themes (see Figure 5).

You should develop a coding framework to help structure your analysis. A coding framework consists of all the codes (or categories) you will assign to your data.

To get started it’s helpful to base your coding framework on the themes in your topic guide. By doing this you’re basing your coding on your research question or theories. This approach is called ‘deductive’ coding. However, it’s important to be flexible, you may need to add or adapt codes as new themes emerge from your data. The aim of coding is to structure your data meaningfully, not make your data fit your framework.

Sometimes researchers will base their coding framework purely on what is emerging from the data. This approach is called ‘inductive’ coding and is usually used when you are researching new topics. It tends to take longer as you need to review your data more times.

Figure 5: Example of codes

Quote:	Codes:
“On some jobs you will seize their mobile phones, laptops, consoles, smart watches... the list is endless... ...people have a lot more tech in their lives these days, ...and that means more things to check and more of your time”	 Increase in technology ownership  Workload

Coding frameworks are often multi-layered. You may have a broad code with sub-codes that sit within them. If you have too many codes it can become hard to interpret your data but using sub-codes can help give your data more specific labels while keeping things manageable, as your labels will be grouped in broader themes (see example below).

Defining your codes is important (e.g. a short description) to ensure coding is consistent and that others understand your results and methods.

Your approach must be systematic. Ideally with more than one person coding independently. If possible, all coders should code a portion of the data first then discuss and compare their coding to ensure a consistent approach and agree any 'coding rules.' It is good practice to statistically test and report the level of agreement between coders. This is known as inter-rater reliability.

Remember – coding can be time consuming, if something is not relevant to your research aims, you don't have to code it.

## Interpretation

Once you have finished coding you can then interpret the data linked to each code. You should ask yourself, "taking all the information into account what are the key insights and how do they relate to my research questions?"

If any interesting themes emerge from your data outside of your research questions you may wish to explore these too.

At this stage you should take lots of notes to help focus in on areas of interest. By recording possible areas for further enquiry, such as similarities and conflicts between different quotes, you can check these as you go.

Like coding, you will need to review your data more than once. It is important to do this systematically so you don't miss anything.

**Figure 6: An example of codes and sub codes**

Quotes	Codes	Sub-codes
<p>"Certain jobs you will seize their mobile phones, laptops, games consoles, smart watches the list is endless... people have a lot more tech in their lives these days, and that means more things to check and more of your time"</p>	← Workload	← Amount of evidence
<p>"It's not a problem if you have the right IT, but when you have to do it manually it really impacts on your workload"</p>	← Workload	← IT capabilities
<p>"When a big job comes in, like a major crime, you'll get put onto that and your evidence collection for other jobs has to wait, and you'll need a long shift to get back on track"</p>	← Workload	← Prioritising cases

## Reporting

**Golden Rule - confidentiality! Do not reveal the identity of your participants.**

**Executive summary** - always include a 1-2 page summary explaining the key points of the study to allow busy people to understand your research.

**Introduction**- include background information explaining the topic, purpose and relevance of your research. This might include a brief review of relevant literature.

**Methods** – you must be transparent about your methodology so readers understand how you reached your conclusions. Specifically, you should include:

- Study design.
- Sample (characteristics and how they were recruited).
- Overview of your topic guide.
- Format of focus groups (e.g. any exercises).
- Approach to coding and analysis.

**Limitations** – be clear about them. It is important people understand the context which your findings were obtained so they are not misunderstood. For example:

- Any issues encountered when sampling.
- Analytical issues (e.g. if only one person analysed the data this may add bias).
- Issues of generalisability (e.g. results only represent the views of those participated).

## Findings

Only report findings most relevant to your research questions, otherwise your key points won't be clear to the reader.

Use quotes sparingly and keep them short - if they clearly illustrate a point they are useful but too many quotes can make reports hard to follow.

Do not describe your findings numerically, this may mislead people into thinking the views are representative. Simply indicate the extent to which views were shared among participants (i.e. use terms like 'some' 'most' and 'few'). Quantifying views during analysis can help you understand your data, but you should only report the range and diversity of views, not the numbers.

## Conclusions and recommendations

Be sure to sum up your key findings into a succinct conclusion.

If appropriate, provide recommendations based on your findings to encourage others to use your research.

Don't forget to share your research as widely as you can. All your hard work won't have any impact if it's just sat on your hard drive!

And finally, you should now know...



- the process for analysing focus group data
- what codes and coding frameworks are
- what information to include in your research report
- the importance of being transparent about the methods and any limitations of your research
- the golden rule - ensure participant confidentiality

If you have any feedback regarding this guide please e-mail [research@college.pnn.police.uk](mailto:research@college.pnn.police.uk)

If you would like support with your research you can book a research surgery to discuss any part of your project with College researchers by clicking [here](#).



# Reading List

Braun, V., and Clarke, V. (2013) [Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners](#). London: SAGE.

Bloor, M, Frankland, J, Thomas, M, Robson, K. (2001). [Focus Groups in Social Research](#), London: SAGE.

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Ritchie, J., Lewis, J., Nicholls, M. C. and Ormston, R. (2013). [Qualitative Research Practice. A Guide for Social Science Students and Researchers](#). London: SAGE.

\*Focused on sampling

Some of these texts are available via the National Police Library. If you are not a member of the National Police Library you can join [here](#).