**Discussion Groups**

**What are they?**

Discussion groups (sometimes more formally called focus groups) allow people to discuss their ideas in an open and relaxed manner. They are designed to concentrate on either a single issue or variety of topics.

**Advantages**

* A good way to include those who cannot read, write or wish to communicate in other languages/have special communication needs.
* Useful for encouraging those who may feel uncomfortable speaking in larger groups
* Can be an empowering experience for attendees
* Attendees can be chosen according to specific criteria, therefore can target hard to reach groups (e.g. young people or ethnic minorities)
* Can be used with groups who already meet, such as lunch clubs and Carers cafés.
* Less time consuming than speaking to individuals
* Can generate a large amount of ideas and feedback

**Disadvantages**

* Not good for gathering numerical data
* Skilled facilitators may be needed, especially those who need to speak a specific language. This may be costly.
* Responses will not be confidential. Rules will need to be set out at the start to not share information outside of the group.
* Analysis of findings may be time consuming and require skill

**How to use?**

Discussion groups usually includes around 6-10 people, this is large enough to generate discussion but not so large that people are left out or topics watered down.

Aim for discussion to last 1-2 hours. Include people with characteristics in common and aim to give between 4 and 6 weeks for planning and recruiting. If you plan to go along to an already existing event/group, make sure you contact the organiser well ahead of time as may groups organise speakers well in advance.

Make sure you gain consent from those attending beforehand. Explain the reason for the discussion and set the rules of the group (be non-judgemental and keep what is said in the room). Begin by asking a warm up question to get people thinking about the main topic and build rapport. Then ask a few detailed questions surrounding the topic. Make sure to use open ended questions instead of closed “yes/no” type questions.

Where possible, try to capture quotes from attendees on their experiences. It is a good idea to have someone to ask questions and lead the discussion and someone else to take notes and observe body language. If the setting is appropriate, use a voice recorder to record conversations, which will enable you to add direct quotes from attendees to your write up. Get permission from attendees to do this and make it clear that you are happy to take notes if they would prefer.

 If possible, it’s best to write up the focus group notes within a week of carrying out the focus group, while the findings are still fresh in your mind.

More information, a consent form template and examples of discussion groups can be found on the companion website: <https://bit.ly/2UXC2Xk>