

# Facilitating Focus Groups and Stakeholder Meetings

---

Local Government organisations are using focus groups to engage with their communities. They are a very useful methodology but require a clear purpose, skilled facilitation and careful administration.

Focus groups are small discussion groups with local familiarity or interest in an issue, brought together to provide qualitative data or opinions, describe critical incidents, analyse problems, identify critical issues, consider or review options, and sometimes to suggest solutions.

Most focus groups include discussion of one or a number of related issues of shared concern to participants. The facilitator is by preference neutral to the outcomes with expert or policy information provided as necessary by organisational staff or others.

The value of a focus group lies in the richness of the data, the depth of discussion and the sharing and development of understanding.

Focus groups can have a range of purposes, from consultation on the impact of organisational decisions through to active community participation. It is imperative that the purpose and authority of the focus group be clearly defined at the beginning.

Participants are often not those who seek involvement in broader community engagement activities. Rather they get involved in particular issues because of their specific interests or needs. These interests and the related opinions are often strongly held and directly conveyed!

A typical focus group runs from one to two hours. At their best, focus groups are a good intimate chat. They are free ranging discussions and can be about many aspects of an entire service; an inquiry into specific elements of service, or into community or staff attitudes. They should not be an attempt to 'sell' specific proposals.

The results are carefully recorded and distributed to participants as well as being used by the organisation.

Preparation is critical. It is most important to clarify and have clear organisational endorsement for the purpose of the focus group. This can range, as described, from seeking opinions and attitudes towards a service or proposal through to more shared or collaborative purposes. These modified forms of the traditional focus group may be called a 'reference group', 'consultative committee' or 'working group'. They will all still benefit from a clear purpose and mandate and from the support of a relatively neutral facilitator or chair-person

The facilitator can be from the sponsoring organization, but it is helpful if they can maintain neutrality to the content being discussed. The key content, often a summary of service and key issues is best presented by the most senior appropriate person – often the service manager. The facilitator should open the discussion, state the purpose and introduce themselves and their role. They can then invite the manager to 'say a few words', describing the service, summarizing plans, initiatives, options and / or key issues. This should be



well prepared beforehand and perhaps accompanied by a brief written summary. It is difficult to both present service content, answer questions and facilitate the discussion. The group will inevitably 'read' the facilitator as biased. It is far preferable, if not essential to have someone else present this material. This person, usually a manager can then remain in the room, listening and taking notes. This is also the most efficient way to collate and summarise the discussion.

CLM conducted a series of six focus groups across five Branches of a library service as part of a service review. Inevitably about half of each group involved educating participants about the service – despite most participants being actively involved and very interested. The balance of the groups were then very useful. They identified service policies and procedures – with the manager in the corner writing down all the variations in formal practice and identifying a range of novel service initiatives. By the end of the sixth group the manager had a new draft procedures manual as well as many useful comments for the review

It is common practice to have a series of key questions prepared beforehand that the group is asked to address. The facilitator should of course begin by asking people to introduce themselves. It can assist the group to form if participants are asked to also say something about what they value in the service; to summarise their interest in the service or why they have come. It is important to progressively hear from everybody, but often these introductions merge into a free ranging discussion. This style often suits participants better – being a more natural and conversational process. The facilitator should listen very carefully to what is being discussed, trying to clarify the key issues or questions of the participants and those that were of concern to the organization. Trying to rigidly control discussion will dampen down participation. Focus groups are trying to identify the participants responses, beliefs or values, needs, wishes and wants, their knowledge and information needs about the service, their shared or particular expectations and their opinions. Free ranging discussion allows more of these responses to be heard. A good focus group also often has robust discussion, exploration, debate, analysis and dialogue.

Good facilitation is helping the group to move ahead with its task. Focus groups should be good-natured, allowing all to participate. The facilitator should preferably be relatively unobtrusive, allowing the discussion to flow freely. The facilitator can still keep a good grip on the process. A good facilitator is neutral to the content – neutral to people's opinions and attitudes, but very in-control of the process; of how the discussion is conducted and emotionally engaged with the participants. Effective facilitation may include overt declaration of ground rules, such as courtesy, shared participation, moderate not extreme language, listening, valuing each other's point of view without having to agree, etcetera. At times, with some groups the facilitator may have to be quite firm about these behaviors or interpersonal processes in the group. This is still effective facilitation.

It is useful to conduct the meeting in a comfortable room on neutral turf, seated around a table and providing refreshments. The discussion works best if it moves from general to specific issues. The facilitator should keep their own comments neutral and non-judgmental, asking open questions and always clarifying technical terms, jargon and complex ideas. Focus groups are good for qualitative exploration of issues; for a higher degree of interaction and input; and for obtaining representation from of broad cross section of communities and interests. It can be difficult to process and analyse all the information.

Focus groups can be quite emotionally demanding – especially if discussing a service that people really care about. CLM conducted a series of HACC focus groups in a regional centre. In a number of groups participants began to cry as they described specific circumstances and events. The events were often complimentary to the service but aroused strong feelings in the participant. The other participants were



supportive and on a number of occasions were then 'warmed up' to talking more directly about their own experiences. Participants value the engagement and discussion. They are not particularly concerned about the emotion, providing it is managed well. At the end of these HACCC focus groups, several participants thanked us for the invitation to 'morning tea' and asked us when the Council was going to do this again. They had enjoyed themselves and neither knew nor cared that the little 'get together' was a focus group. This is a good group discussion but requires the facilitator be 'available' to the group.

Finally when a participant makes a strong statement or has an interesting or novel idea, ask other participants how they feel about it – but be sure to protect the original speaker. And before closing, ask if there is anything else that people want to say. Some people come with one thing to say and will feel disappointed if not given clear opportunity to do so. At the end, summarise the content and ask participants what they are taking from the meeting.

Focus groups are a direct and personal way for organisations to engage their communities. They provide rich and varied information about our services – and they can be very enjoyable

Greg Cook, Director, **Centre for Leadership and Management**  
Telephone: 03 9863 7280; Web: [centrelm.com.au](http://centrelm.com.au); Email: [office@centrelm.com.au](mailto:office@centrelm.com.au)

