

Example of a Focus Group schedule

Theme: Use of computer facilities in public libraries

*Note to facilitators: Instructions to you are in standard print. Questions for you to read out are in **bold**.*

Establishing the Focus Groups

Allow yourself plenty of time to set up the focus group sessions - try to establish a good relationship with the library staff (if you don't already know them) and make sure they are aware of the purpose of the Longitude II project. Also, be prepared to be flexible!

Focus groups should be made up of around six to twelve people. The absolute minimum number of people should be five - any less and the group will become more of a one-on-one interview, any more and it will become difficult to allow everyone to participate.

If this is the second or third phase of data collection, the same focus groups that were used for previous phases should be contacted in the first instance in order to measure impact of the groups over time. These were:

It is likely that some group members will have left and new ones will have joined - this is fine as the ethos of the group as a whole is likely to be the same.

It may also be necessary to set up new groups. These could be part of an established library user group - a book club, a coffee morning group, or a computer class for example. If there are not enough people in an established group that are willing/able to take part, then it is acceptable to merge groups together. It is also acceptable to create a focus group purely for the purpose of the project - this might include a group of people who visit the library individually to use the computer facilities.

It is important to ensure the focus groups are made up of people who are currently using or have previously used computer facilities in the library. It is also important to check that people are happy to talk in a group situation - and can converse reasonably well in English. If some group members find it difficult to speak English (ESOL students for example) then it will be necessary to ask someone along who can interpret for them - or at least help them to understand and participate in the more complex issues that may be discussed.

Running the Focus Group Sessions

Please refer back to these notes just before the group is due to meet to refresh your memory.

Ideally have two people to facilitate the sessions - one to lead the session, the other to take notes and make sure the recording equipment is running properly.

Remember to take a note of the group session and to record this on any tapes or note sheets used during that session.

The purpose of the focus group is to gather evidence of the impact of library-based IT services over time. If it is the first meeting of a group you will need to establish a baseline of evidence – you want to know about past experiences and about the group's current experience of IT facilities and services, and how such use has affected them.

It is important to remember that you are seeking to reach a group viewpoint as far as possible. You should try to get everyone involved in the discussion. This does not mean that everyone must have the same view, but the discussion should lead to some conclusions. You need to record both majority and minority views.

Before the group assembles, test the recording equipment to make sure it is working and that the sound is recording at an acceptable level.

As people assemble try to offer them some refreshment. Once people are settled, check with the group whether they all know each other. If not start by going round the group and getting everyone to introduce themselves. For your own convenience it helps to draw a 'map' of where everyone is sitting. You may not be able to do this if the group all know one another beforehand, but you can develop it as the session proceeds.

Make sure that everyone is comfortable before you start and that everyone can see each other.

Read out the statement on confidentiality:

Opinions expressed will be treated in confidence among project staff for the purpose of evaluating the long-term impact of IT-based services, and in the production of the project report. All responses will remain anonymous.

Check that there are no objections to the use of the audio recorder; then switch it on.

You need to start off by reiterating the purpose of the meeting. Use a statement like the following:

I'm very grateful to you all for sparing time to talk about the library service this morning/afternoon/evening. Today I want to concentrate on discussing the library's computer facilities and I'd particularly like to hear from you what difference it has made to you having

these facilities (here) in the library. There are no right or wrong opinions, I would like you to feel comfortable saying what you really think and how you really feel.

Then to get the conversation going, use a simple opener:

Is everyone familiar with (or aware of) the computer facilities in the library?

This gives an opportunity to go round the group if the conversation doesn't start naturally. Continue with something like this:

How many of you actually make use of the computers?

Do you use computers anywhere else? *e.g. at home, work, cybercafé.*

Encourage people to expand on a Yes/No answer by getting them to talk about specific applications *e.g.* email.

In some groups the discussion will automatically turn to the purpose of such use (*e.g.* I use email to keep in touch with my family in Australia") – in others you will need to prompt.

What sorts of activities do you use the library computers for?

Try to involve everyone: if you have non-users of computers, involve them by asking *e.g.* **"Is that something you might do in the future?"**.

Once you have established purposes use prompts to turn the discussion towards effects (*i.e.* impact). *e.g.*

What does it mean to you - *e.g.* being able to contact your family so easily?

Did this activity (*e.g.* learning to use IT) lead on to anything work-wise?

How has using the computers affected your involvement in that? (*e.g.* a hobby)

Do you think the group's activities have changed in any way since the computers were installed?

Establishing the effects IT facilities provided by the library has had on people should be the focus of the discussion (rather than just getting people to say what IT facilities they use), so allow plenty of time and let people 'go off at a tangent' for short periods. However, your role is to keep the conversation on track, but using as little direct intervention as possible.

Keep a close eye on the time and ensure that you don't over-run the allocated slot. In the last few minutes do the following:

Try to summarise the discussion in very broad terms:

It sounds as if you make quite a lot of use of the computers.

Give the group chance to make comments on ways of improving the service:

Is there anything the library could do to improve the IT service?

..... promise to pass on such comments (and don't forget to do so!)

Remind the group that you are particularly interested in how things change over the next year and that you'd like to come back and talk to them again then.

Ask each group member to fill out the demographic tick-sheet, this will provide a picture of the make-up of each group. Remember to collect the sheets before people leave.

Finally thank the group for their time and tell them that the discussion has been most valuable.

At the end of the session, facilitators should make some notes about the session - how they felt it went, if there were any problems etc.