

# how to...

## ...design and conduct interviews

Interviews have been described by evaluators as '*conversations with a purpose*'. They are a very flexible and valuable evaluation technique. This guide describes different types of interviews, including focus groups. It also gives some tips for successful interviewing and facilitation techniques.

### Structured interviews

- A structured interview collects data in an identical way for every interviewer.
- The interview schedule (a guide that is used by the interviewer) can look very similar to a questionnaire.
- Structured interviews are a good way of collecting data when questionnaires are not appropriate, e.g. from those with poor written skills, or to achieve a random sample of participants.

### Semi-structured interviews

- Semi-structured interviews have a set of similar questions at the core of each interview.
- The interviewer is free to move the questions around as he or she sees fit.
- The interviewer would also encourage respondents to expand on their answers and digress to include other relevant points.
- Semi-structured interviews are a useful way to collect quantitative and qualitative data at the same time.

### Unstructured interviews

- The interview is completely open-ended.
- The interviewer may note down a few topics of interest beforehand, but there is no formal interview schedule.
- The idea of the interview is to allow the respondent to define the situation and their opinions in their own words.
- These types of interviews can be very useful at the start of an evaluation to help identify evaluation questions.

### Group interviews (focus groups)

- A group interview typically brings together six to ten participants for a discussion around a particular topic, or set of topics.
- Respondents are encouraged to explain and qualify opinions, which can spark ideas from others in the group. For this reason, focus groups can provide a very rich source of information.
- It is important to select group members carefully: a diverse range of opinions is desirable, but some individuals may feel intimidated if they disagree, and not speak up.

- Focus groups in school or college work well if participants in each group are in the same year group.
- Facilitators should ensure the discussion is not dominated by any individual, and should seek to bring out opinions from quieter group members.
- Flashcards and other exercises can be used to stimulate discussion.

## **Interview technique**

Conducting a good interview is a skill best developed through experience. The *Toolkit techniques* training workshop will give colleagues a chance to try out interview techniques. In the meantime, here are a few tips for conducting good interviews.

- As an interviewer, you should be neutral and non-judgemental. Use non-leading prompts such as '*why do you feel that way?*' or '*tell me a bit more about that*'.
- Ask questions clearly and succinctly.
- Be sensitive to the cultural issues and concerns of different groups. If possible, the interviewer should have similar demographics to the participants; consider ethnicity, age, disability, gender etc.
- Make sure you know enough about the evaluation to ask good follow-up questions. It can be useful to prepare these in advance.
- You can tell if an interview/focus group is going well – as the interviewer/facilitator you will not be doing much talking!
- If you record the interviews/focus groups, listen back critically to the questions and prompts you used and note areas where you could improve next time.

## **Recording data during interviews**

There are a number of ways of recording the data collected during interviews and focus groups.

- Recording the interview on tape or digitally can provide a useful record. It also allows others to listen to the interview without having attended.
- If you are recording, remember to check with the interviewee/s that they are happy to be recorded.
- The recording can be transcribed word-for-word, which is time-consuming but the most accurate approach.
- Alternatively, the interviewer or someone else could make notes from the recording after the interview.
- The interviewer can make notes during the interview, but this can disrupt the flow of the interview, and some points may be missed. However, it is useful to do this even if the interview is recorded – the notes can then be added to later.
- An observer could take notes during the interview, but they must be non-intrusive.
- Notes on flipcharts or post-it notes used during focus groups are also useful records.