

Focus groups

Focus groups can be a great way to gather evaluation data and keep track of outcomes throughout a project. They can offer an opportunity to gather a lot of data at once, as well as to instigate debate and collect a range of opinions. If used at different times across a project they can also show how things are progressing. Focus groups can be used with participants, practitioners, wider community members, or anyone attached to the project.

Focus groups can be more formal 'separate' activities in a project (i.e. a focus group session held after a main delivery session), or a shorter reflective time at the beginning or end of a delivery session. It is important in both instances to be clear that you are looking to discuss particular questions or topics, and that people are aware that they are contributing to project evaluation. As with interviews, focus groups are guided conversations aiming to focus on particular outcome areas and 'delve deeper' into why certain changes may or may not be taking place.

Focus groups are not solely intended to shape delivery although this is a really useful function and an important way to involve people in how projects are run (i.e. in many projects, participants will be consulted on what kind of musical content they may want, or which music practitioner will lead a particular session). If this type of consultation is already taking place, it is a great opportunity to gather evaluation data relating to your intended outcomes and insert some other questions (e.g. how the group feel they are progressing musically, or how well they are getting on with one another).

Consent, confidentiality, and anonymity are also very important when using focus groups for evaluation. Participants must be clear that they are contributing their thoughts and opinions to the evaluation and their names (or any other identifying information) should be taken off all transcripts and reports. Confidentiality is particularly important, since these are group situations, participants must be made to feel safe and all should commit to honouring confidentiality beyond the focus group situation. This last point should be especially considered if working with a group of young people who don't know each other very well, or are not mature enough to honour confidentiality.

Box 1. Example Focus Group Topic Guide – Making Sounds

Q1. What are the best things about making music?

Q2. List the three things you most want to learn from this project and let's talk about how we can best do that

Q3. What are the best ways for us to improve our music making?



Box 2. Example Focus Group Topic Guide – Making Sounds

In order to explore changes in musical ability over the course of the project we held two focus groups with the same 5 participants (one after the first session and one after the penultimate session). In the first session the group agreed that they most wanted to learn how to play the guitar and keyboard, as well as song-writing, and how to record a track. They recognised that each of these things would take time and dedication, as well as continued learning and practice beyond the project. When asked to reflect on this as a group at the end of the project, every participant noted that they had clearly increased their skills in the three key areas they had hoped to. One participant, Jo (name changed), noted how they had been forced to work together in order to progress musically:

We all spoke about how we would have to practice loads to be good enough to record the track, but it was only when we were all doing our different instruments in the studio that I realised that we had to all be really good, if one person hadn't done their bit, then we would've sounded rubbish.

