Action Research

by, in and for

Communities

A Practical Guide to Community-led Action Research

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Introduction

This guide was developed by the Scottish Community Development Centre (SCDC) to help community and voluntary groups carry out research in and with their communities. The guide is based on our experience of developing and delivering 3 Community-led Action Research programmes between 2003 and 2011. These programmes culminated in over 90 groups carrying out research that helped them to achieve positive change in their communities.

Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF) funded by Communities Scotland enabled groups and projects to apply for mentor support and a small grant to undertake research. SCARF ended in 2009 but you can read about the large variety of research that was carried out on our website.
http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research/scarf/

Demonstrating the Links (DtL) funded by Greenspace Scotland supported community groups to research the impact of their community green spaces on the quality of life of local people.
http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/community-led-action-research/demonstrating-links/

Learning through Doing (LtD), funded by Scottish Natural Heritage supported community projects/groups to explore what the barriers and enablers are for people from disadvantaged communities in accessing nature and the outdoors.
http://www.scdc.org.uk/who/experience/examples/learning-through-doing/

The community groups and organisations involved in these programmes had access to a mentor who supported them to work through the research process. The mentor did not carry out the research on behalf of the groups but helped them to develop the skills necessary to plan and carry out their own research. The purpose of this guidance is to take you through the same process and pass on what we've learned from our experience of working with these groups.

We would like to take this opportunity to thank the many hard working and inspiring groups we worked with across Scotland, all working to address their own issues and concerns; from fuel poverty in the North to village halls in the South, environmental issues in the East to learning disability in the West. We learned so much from working with you all!

We would also like to thank SNH who funded and supported the Demonstrating the Links project and, more recently, People and Nature; Learning through Doing Action Research programme. The latter allowed us to try out and experiment with the material in this guide and helped us deepen our learning about what works in supporting community groups in undertaking research. A huge thanks to Elaine Macintosh, Scott Ferguson and the six Learning through Doing projects who worked with us on this: Blarbuie Woodland; Broughty Ferry Environment Project/ Dighty Connect; Clackmannanshire Disability Awarenesss Group; GalGael Trust, Neilston Development Trust and Chrysalis project (Scottish Association for Mental Health).

Finally, thank you to Education Scotland for funding the publication and launch of this guide.

Robert Cuthbert and Kate McHendry

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Community-led Action Research

Section 1

What is community-led action research?

The programmes highlighted in the introduction to this guidance were based on a particular way of thinking about and doing research which we refer to as 'community-led action research'. Here are the key characteristics of community-led action research that make it different from more 'traditional' approaches to research.

Community-led action research always focuses on an issue identified by the community.

In community-led action research the issue to be researched, the way the research is carried out, and how the research results are used is decided by the community. Community-led action research is carried out to try and make a difference to the problems or issues that affect people's lives. The starting point for this type of research is that these issues need to be identified by the people that experience them. This is very different from a traditional research approach where someone from outside the community might decide what the issue to be researched is. They arrive in the community, ask some questions and then leave, sometimes not even telling the community what they have found out.

Example: Creetown Initiative

Creetown Initiative is concerned with the regeneration of the village of Creetown and surrounding area within Dumfries & Galloway. Their research was to identify which one, of three existing facilities (all under used and in varying states of disrepair), would be suitable for development as a multi-purpose community facility. The group engaged the professional support of architects and quantity surveyors to evaluate current facilities and develop options for how each of the three sites could be utilised. The group provided each household with a questionnaire which was hand delivered and collected three days later. They also held several open community meetings held for people to engage in dialogue and discussion over the potential developments

By providing this information to members of the community and seeking their views the group were able to gain a clear understanding of peoples' preference for which hall they wished to see developed for future community use. Their research also gave them the evidence needed to raise monies for the development of the preferred site.

In community-led action research the people who are concerned about and affected by the issue carry out the research.

You might think that, because you have a real concern about an issue, you can't be involved in carrying out research because your values and beliefs would lead others to criticise your findings as being biased. An important feature of community-led action research is that your experience of an issue puts you in a really good position to design a research process that will produce learning that helps you to take action and to put that learning into practice. As long as you ensure that you are asking your community what they think, rather than simply asking them to support your own view. In short, your approach to the research and methods should be open to exploring the issue. This is very different from the idea that we need independent or professional 'researchers' to carry out research and that some people are the 'subjects' of research rather than 'actors' in the research process.

Example: SCARF

The SCARF programme supported groups of people with a very personal interest in the issue they wanted to research e.g.

- Homeless people researching the attitudes - positive and negative - encountered by people affected by homelessness;
- People with learning disabilities and their support organisations researching how accessible paper information from public agencies is for people with a learning disability;
- Elderly carers researching their own and other elderly carers' support needs.

These groups successfully carried out research into issues that affected them and, more importantly, used what they learned to achieve positive change in services or in their community.

Community-led action research is about people taking action on the issue affecting them in their lives.

Community-led action research is not research for the sake of it, to prove a theory or to satisfy the curious. It is research that is about finding practical solutions to the very real problems that people face in their everyday lives.

It is research that wants to make change,

- to a situation - for example, a community meeting space, youth services, people wishing to engage with the nature environment;
- to a practice - for example, how can we be more effective in what we are doing? How can we respond to the needs of a particular group/or our wider community better?
- to a policy - for example, to influence policy on service needs of elderly carers; or communication needs of people with a learning disability.

Example: ENABLE

This was a joint research project between the Castle Douglas and North Ayrshire branches of ENABLE Scotland. ENABLE Scotland, founded in 1954, is a Scotland wide organisation ‘of and for children and adults with learning disabilities, their families and carers’.

The branches involved were keen to research the experiences of older family carers. Through their own and others experience they were aware that as health provision has improved ‘we are entering an era when, as many parents are getting older, their sons and daughters living at home are also aging’.

Their research focused on issues of support and resources available to carers in the over 50 age group. Through their research the group identified key issues to take forward and are seeking to use their findings to influence future planning and development and delivery of services at a local level.

At a national level, their research findings have been added to a developing national campaign to raise awareness of the issues faced by elderly carers and to promote change.

Community-led action research involves reflection - reflection on our values and attitudes as well as on the progress of the research process.

As mentioned earlier, many people assume that research has to be 'objective' in the sense of being untouched by our own values and experiences and has to follow rigid 'scientific' methods - but action research is different. It openly says that each of us is an amalgam of our histories and conditioning and, as such, come to any given situation with a whole host of values, opinions, experiences. So the thing about action research is not to strip ourselves of this, of what could be valuable, rich and alive experiences that contribute to the research process, but to be aware of how our values, experiences may impact on it.

For instance,

- How open am I to hearing a different viewpoint from my own?
- Are there people that I stop listening to even before they start speaking?
- How well do I really listen?
- Does my need to be right stop me from asking certain questions?
- Does my need to feel in control stop other people from contributing?

These are some of the critical question that you will ask of yourself and other group members as you go through the research process and it is important that you build time and space into your process to reflect on these.

This kind of reflection is important in creating the ethos that different people bring different perspectives and different ways of understanding a situation to the process. This is important in the task of learning about an issue and taking action for change. As an approach Community-led Action Research challenges inequality and regards dialogue between different people with different ways of seeing the same issue as an important part of the process of bringing about positive and lasting change.

In summary;

"Action research is a participatory, democratic process concerned with developing practical knowing in the pursuit of worthwhile human purposes … It seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others, in the pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concern to people, and more generally the flourishing of individual persons and their communities"

(**Reason and Bradbury, 2001** - Handbook of Action Reasearch: Participative Inquiry and Practice)

For more information on the background and theory of Action Research visit: http://people.bath.ac.uk/mnspwr/ and http://www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm.

Section 2

Community-led action research – why do it?

As well as enabling us to gather rich information and pose probing questions on issues that are important to us in our communities, community-led action research is so much more than the sum of its parts. The evaluation of the SCARF programme showed that using the above approach led to the following benefits for the groups and communities involved:

- Increased skills and confidence for individuals and groups carrying out the research.
- Increased levels of support from the wider community as a result of using an inclusive approach to the research. Several groups have seen membership and support increase and others have seen new community groups being set up as a direct response to the interest they have generated within the community.
- Ability to influence decision-making processes because the research findings reflected the needs and aspirations of the community as a whole.

Here are just a few examples,

- A group in Dumfries and Galloway have taken over the ownership of a run down community hall, are in the process of selling that site, and have acquired land to build a new all purpose facility which will meet the needs of everyone in their community as identified in their research.
- A group in Ayrshire used their research evidence to convince the local authority to reopen a facility for local access to services. They also got funding for increased community support.
- A group of homeless people made a DVD on how poor service provision impacted on them. The Director of Housing from their local council was so impressed by their evidence that she has given them a further grant to do more work on the issues they identified.
- A group in the Highlands used their research to highlight the issue of fuel poverty in their community. They received funding to carry on their work in other areas, and increased services to deal with the issue in their own community.

One SCARF participant said a couple of years after their group completed their research,

“We are still taking things forward from our findings and people have the energy and enthusiasm for it. You see, if we had brought in outside people to carry out the research, it would have given us some valuable information but they would have taken most of the lived experience away with them. But us carrying out the research ourselves meant that we can speak authoritatively and passionately about our findings as we were the ones posing the questions, doing the interviews, running the focus groups. It has brought more life into our group and we now have the skills to carry out further research in the future.”

And, if you are daunted at taking on a research role, one participant, at the beginning of the process said;

"If you want a welder or an Elvis impersonator, I'm yer man but this research stuff is all a bit beyond me."

By the end of the research process he said,

"It was a wonderful learning experience and the research process gave me a greater insight into some of the deeper concerns of the people I work with every day."

So go on, give it a go!

Carrying Out Your Research

From the description in **Part 1** you can see that community-led action research is not just about the technical side of research like designing questionnaires and surveys. It is based on a clear set of principles and values and is intended to be a process that empowers communities to take action for change. Carrying out community-led action research involves putting these principles and values into practice throughout the research process.

In this section we set out the key steps involved in carrying out a typical research process and discuss what you need to think about and do at each stage from both a practical level and a values perspective.

Key steps in the research process

An essential first step in any research process is to clarify what you want to do, why you want to do it and what it might involve. At the outset, a **Research Plan** should be developed.

To help you with this, we have split **Part 2** into 10 sections, each of which sets out some key questions and issues that you will need to address to successfully carry out your research. These are both a guide to planning and carrying out your research.

As you go through each of these sections, you will find guidance on both the questions you should be asking yourself whilst planning to undertake a piece of research and guidance on how to actually carry it through.

It is important not to think of the following as a list of things you do one after the other but as a set of issues that all inter-relate. For example, how you choose your **research methods** will be influenced by the **skills and resources** you have available to you. So you will have to consider both these areas together rather than as individual parts.

In the same way, you may have to adjust your approach as you go through the research process. You may not be able to access the resources that you first thought you could get or something unexpected happens that might allow you to expand what you are doing. The key point is that once you have gone through and addressed these questions and issues, nothing is set in tablets of stone. Go back revise and change things, but always make sure that whatever you change doesn't have a negative impact on what you are trying to achieve and that you are still focused on the answer to your research question.

In this section we outline the questions and issues we would recommend you address in planning and carrying out your research. The headings used here can serve as a template which you can use to write up a research plan. From experience, many of the groups we have worked with have also found it useful to use these headings as a guide for writing up their final research report.

In **Part 3**, Tools and Resources, we have more detailed information on research methods and signpost you to other resources that you may find useful in carrying out your research.

A point to note: It is worth checking at the outset if anyone has carried out any similar research in the recent past or if there is any other research which might be of help to you or save you doing all or part of the work. Relevant council departments or agencies that have an interest in your area of research are good starting places for this.

Section 1

Thinking about your research question

When you decide to do a piece of research, it is very important that you have a clear focus for what you want to find out and why so that you are putting your energy and resources towards a clear goal. To aid you in this, it is essential that you have a **clear and specific research question**.

Developing a clear and specific research question can be trickier than it sounds. An example of a poor research question would be:

We need a brand new community facility for our area – do you agree?

This is a poor research question because it presents the question/issue as a statement of fact. The way it is constructed tries to 'persuade' the person being asked to agree with the statement and it is therefore fundamentally biased. Also, it dismisses any community facility that might be available at the moment. The truth is you don't know if you need a brand new facility until you have carried out the research. A much better question would be:

Are there sufficient community facilities to meet the needs and aspirations of our community?

By putting the question in a more open way it becomes a wider inquiry. So there are now a whole set of sub questions for you to explore such as:

- What facilities do we have at the moment?
- How are these used?
- What's good and bad about them?
- Could they be improved?
- Is there a demand for activities they can't accommodate?
- What are the alternatives?
- Do we need something new?
- If so how do we demonstrate that?

The second thing to think about is whether or not getting the answer to your question is going to be possible. So for example, given you are probably a relatively small group, if your question starts with 'Does everyone in our town or city think ….' then you are in trouble – you probably don't have the resources or ability to find out what the whole country thinks. Keep your question within your resource capabilities.

The last thing to think about is making sure your question is specific. Questions such as;

'What facilities do we need to make this a better place to live?'

are probably a bit too broad and vague and you may end up with a massive shopping list of issues that you would be unable to actually address.

Here are a couple of examples

Good examples:

"What would you use a village community centre for?"

“How can the local community effectively participate in regeneration of the our town?”

In contrast, poor examples might be:

To what extent are adults intimidated by teenagers and to what extent is this justified?"

What if we all stopped eating meat?”

So consider the following:

1. **Is it the right question?**
2. **Is it going to be possible to answer it?**
3. **Is the question too broad or too narrow?**

To answer the above questions, you will also need to think about:

- How will we collect information - what methods could we use?
- What skills will be needed?
- What resources (people, training, time, facilities, equipment etc) will be required?

Although we may identify what we think are important questions, we are often tempted to try to answer things that are too complicated. Often evidence is too difficult to collect and because of this it may be incomplete and unconvincing. So getting the balance right is essential. The research question needs to be one that really matters to the community but it also has to be feasible in terms of the time and resources that are available to you.

Key Points

- Review your research question a few times to make sure its clear and specific.
- Make sure it's answerable.
- Check no one else has researched the same issue.
- Clarify the sub questions that need to be explored.
- Make sure it matters to the community.
- Review your question having gone through the rest of the issues/questions raised in this document.

Section 2

Engaging with your community

What do we mean by community?

In community development terms there are different types of community.

There are:

Communities of geography: where the community consists of everyone living within a geographical area. For example everyone who lives in a particular town or neighbourhood.

Communities of interest: Where the community is identified as being a group of people with a particular interest. For example parents of children at a particular school or people who have an interest in a particular sport or hobby.

Communities of identity: Where the community is that of a group who identify themselves as being distinct. For example refugees or people from a specific country of origin.

When deciding who the people are whose views you want to gain from your research it is worth taking some time to think through what type of community you are dealing with and what the implications are.

Let's assume your research relates to your own neighbourhood; **a community of geography**. What you have to ask yourself is: How would you define that neighbourhood geographically? Where does it start and stop? Does everybody else agree with your definition? Can you draw a line around your neighbourhood on a map and defend your decision as to why you are only going to seek the views of people within that line?

The same issues arise with a **community of interest**. Let's assume your research is about an issue relating to traffic problems and children getting to a local primary school. Here the people whose views you want to get will not just be those who live next to the school but all parents/carers within the schools catchment area, which could be, in geographical terms, quite wide. So here, the line on your map could be quite a lot bigger than the area immediately next to the school.

As a final example, consider a community of identity. Imagine you are a refugee in a big city and your research interest is refugees. The questions you have to ask are things like; would your research concern all refugees, only those from particular countries, all refugees in the city or only those from a particular area?

Remember that defining your community for the research needs some careful thought. You have to be clear about who is to be involved and who is not and be able to provide a justification as to why you have made that decision.

Being Inclusive

Any good research project should demonstrate that it is committed to being inclusive. Think about how you will try to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in and benefit from the research project. This will include noting any barriers that you think people in your community may experience and how you will seek to overcome them. Take a bit of time to think this through.

You may want to refer to the National Standards for Community Engagement http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/national-standards/. They will help you to identify what you need to think about to ensure that anyone who has an interest in the focus of your research can be involved if they want to be. The10 standards are...

The involvement standard
The support standard
The planning standard
The methods standard
The working together standard
The sharing information standard
The working with others standard
The improvement standard
The feedback standard
The monitoring and evaluation standard.

First think through all the possible groups of people in your community of interest, geography or identity and identify who they are. They may be as diverse as young people, people in sheltered housing, people with disabilities, minority ethnic groups and so on. Once you have done this then think through how you are going to make it possible to positively engage them in your research. For some it might be easier than others – you could for example arrange to visit the sheltered housing complex and speak to people there or, even better arrange transport for them to come to an event. Other groups are more difficult to engage with. For example, if part of your community is people with learning disabilities then how do you identify and engage with them? It might be that you can only do this with specialist help, for example, carers' groups.

One of the SCARF groups was successful in getting the local doctors' surgery to pass on information to carers asking them to contact the researchers. There may also be specialist support organisations which would act as intermediaries for you in reaching these vulnerable groups of people.

Think about organisations and clubs which might gain you access to particular groups in your community: Churches, Mothers and Toddler groups, Youth Clubs, Bowling Clubs, Sports Clubs, Schools, and Pensioners Groups. But remember not everyone is a member of a group or club.

Equally there may be local events such as Fetes and Gala Days which would give you access to a wider audience than you would normally get.

Remember the things that people do as part of their everyday lives, for example, shopping. One solution may be that you get access to the entrance of the local supermarket to engage people as they go in or out.

People often tell us that getting adult males to take part in surveys is difficult but that they have managed to overcome this by going to where they choose to meet, for example local clubs, sports facilities or local pubs rather than expecting them to take part by chance.

If you want people to take part in an event remember that they may need suitable transport, assistance with care for dependants, or need help with out of pocket expenses, and there may be particular times when they are able to participate and when they are not. Equally, if you are holding a meeting, is the venue accessible for people with wheelchairs or who have other disabilities?

You have to think these kinds of questions through carefully if you are really going to engage meaningfully with your community.

Key Points

- Determine what definition of community is appropriate for your research question.
- Who does it include or exclude.
- If possible draw a line on a map to show the boundaries within which you will be researching.
- Be clear and able to justify why you have set those boundaries.
- Determine the various groups within your community.
- Think specifically how you are going to engage with them effectively.

Section 3

What will you gain from your research?

Don't think of your research as simply a means to an end. Certainly gathering evidence to put forward a case for change and making that change happen is important - but so is the process. If you had enough money you could simply buy in someone with research experience and get them to do the research for you but that would be missing the point.

A community-led research approach has a large number of additional benefits that have very positive outcomes for groups and their communities. Drawing from our SCARF experience we have clear evidence that community-led action research delivers:

- Increased skills and confidence for individuals and groups.

  We have evidence of people, working at their own pace and giving things a go, who feel a lot more confident in their abilities. For groups involved it's about a sense of achievement, of having done a good job, and achieving change.
- The wider community sees what you are doing, learns more about your group and begins to understand and be positive about your group and what you are trying to achieve. As a consequence you may get more people joining your group. In some cases we have seen groups grow substantially in membership or additional groups formed to take on some part of the work or to develop other areas of community interest. All as a result of using the approach we are suggesting.
- In terms of decision makers you will have demonstrated a commitment to what you are seeking to change and they will recognise that you are not just a few individuals asking for something you want but that you are, through your research approach and findings, reflecting the needs and aspirations of your community as a whole. They will find it difficult to argue against your case.

This is not to forget or understate the purpose for doing it – to get something changed, to instigate some action. You will see from the case studies on our website many examples where change has been achieved. But here are just a few examples of what groups have achieved as a result of their research:

- Securing funding ranging from £2k to £100+k.
- Winning awards such as the Energy Action Scotland's Energy Savers Award.
- Funding secured from the council to extend research.
- The local council handing over community facilities to local ownership.
- Funding awarded for project workers.
- Using evidence to support £1m funding application.
- Immediate commitment to improve landscaping and de-littering services at launch of report.
- Local research becoming part of a national campaign.

The evidence is clear that it can be done and it can achieve positive change

Key Points

- It's not just about the result it's also about the process.
- Consider how the process can strengthen your skills and confidence.
- Think how you can make sure the process enables you to engage more with your community.
- Be clear about what you ultimately want to achieve.

Section 4

Thinking about your research methods

What methods will be used and why?

There is a wide range of research methods you can choose from. A range of popular methods are described in **Part 3**. You should think carefully about which methods are appropriate to the people who will be taking part in the research.

It's a good idea to use different methods to get answers to the same question, if you can. The idea is that you can be more confident with a result if different methods lead to the same result. But it's also about thinking about the type or age of people you will be approaching and using research methods appropriate to engaging them and answering your research question.

For example, you might ask some people their views through a questionnaire, for others through getting them to do drawings, or take part in a focus group. It doesn't matter as long as you are gathering appropriate information. You could also use the same method but employ different technique so, for example, you might run a focus group with young people differently from one attended by adults. Our experience shows that some groups like active involvement in things so you might want them to move to different spaces in a room to indicate what they think whereas other people may prefer to talk and discuss things so you might just have them sitting and talking.

You may want to use different methods for different groups so think about how you are going to apply those methods to get to the people whose views you want to capture.

In section 2, being inclusive, we suggested a range of ways you might go about making sure you get to all sections of the community. In doing so you need to ensure you are using the method that best suits the situation.

For example: if you are going to try to get people's views whilst they are out shopping – would it be appropriate to try to go through a big long questionnaire? Would it be better to have some post its and pens and simply ask them to quickly jot down their reactions to a couple of questions that are on display?

You may also want to use different methods at different stages of your research as you build up a picture of people's thoughts and views. You could for example start off with people taking pictures of things relevant to your research and getting them to talk about what their picture means to them. You could then hold an exhibition of the photographs and get the wider community to come and see them and give their views to build your research from there.

Remember that when you are choosing your methods you will also have to think about how you capture views and how you are going to collate and analyse the information gathered. This will have implications for the skills and resources required to apply your chosen methods and collect the results effectively.

Key Points

- Choose appropriate methods for the different groups of people you are going to engage.
- Make sure you determine the correct way to apply the methods chosen.
- Be clear what the appropriate methods to use at different stages of your research are.

Section 5

Making sense of your findings

This is the part of the research that people usually find the most demanding but ultimately the most rewarding, as they take all the data they have collected and pull it together to try and make sense of it. It is essential that you give yourself plenty of time to go through this process as this is where you will pull out all the rich information and use it to influence change or take action. Don't limit the impact of all your hard work by skimping on this bit! Ensure that you factor in the time and resources that you need for this element of your research.

We will highlight the key points around making sense of your findings by focusing on two examples: **focus groups** and **questionnaires**, learning from these can be readily translated to other research methods.

The first thing that you need to do is organise your data.

If you have run **focus groups**, make sure that you have your tapes or films transcribed, or your flipcharts and notes typed up. It is a good idea to have good size margins and double line spaces in your transcripts or notes. This will leave plenty of space for you to make comments or notes as you analyse your data. Remember to keep a saved copy.

For **questionnaires,** as a first step, if you have identifying information on respondents, for example their contact details so that you can feedback the results of the research to them, separate these immediately from the rest of questionnaires and keep in a safe place. It is then a good idea to number each of your questionnaires and put that number on each page so that if you split up the questionnaire you know that this relates to 'respondent49'. Once this is done, photocopy your questionnaire and keep the masters in a safe place. If you are analysing by certain categories for instance 'age groups' then you may want to photocopy the various age groups in different coloured paper, for example, all under 18's blue, all over 50's yellow. This may ease further analysis.

Next you need to get to know your data.

For **focus groups**, this is really about reading over and/ or listening to your focus group to get a feel for any themes that are coming up; write down observations as you go. It can be really helpful to do this a few times as each time you will catch more of what is said or notice what is left unsaid. It is also good practice to sit with others to check out what they are hearing. This is a good time to take some time out and reflect on what you are finding and to check out that you are not dismissing or discounting some comment because it does not fit in with your view of the world.

For **questionnaires,** depending on numbers, this is about having a read through all or a sample of the responses to get a feeling for how people have responded. This can be good for identifying a theme or response that you weren't expecting that you may want to look out for in other responses.

Sorting and categorising your data

For **focus groups**, this is about identifying key themes and patterns and putting these into categories. You will have pre-set categories that you know you want to find out about so you can start sorting your data in relation to these. But look out for emerging categories that you did not expect to find. For example in exploring 'what are the key barriers to people engaging with the outdoors?' you may expect responses relating to money or transport but not expect 'company – having no one to go with' to be an issue, yet it comes up again and again. Be sure to include it because this is new information and could really have an impact on findings and be used to influence change. You may then begin within categories to identify sub categories. For example in answering the question 'what are the key barriers to people engaging with the outdoors?' – a category of that may be 'access' and the subcategories of that may be 'transport' 'money' 'rights of access' and 'information'. You can then begin to explore what are the connections or even paradoxes between these sub categories.

As you are identifying categories, it is also useful to highlight or copy a quote that you think highlights a certain point really well. This would be the same when going through responses to open questions in a **questionnaire.**

For **questionnaires**, you will usually have a combination of closed and open questions. (Please see fuller information under research methods in part 3.)

Closed means that people are given options to choose from and they tick or circle as appropriate. This format is good for easy analysis in terms of getting numbers and percentages quickly. It is simply a case of recording your findings. You can do this manually or in a spreadsheet, simply plotting, how many people responded a, b, or c to question 1 and so on.

For open question, you are asking people to provide their response to a certain question, for this you have to categorise and sub categorise the responses the same as in the focus group, so this does take more work but can give you a deeper and fuller picture of the issues you are researching.

Interpreting your findings

Now that you have both your questionnaire and focus group findings collated and categorised you need to make sense of the information.

- What are the relationships within and between the categories?
- What are people actually telling us?
- How does one issue relate to another?
- Do certain age groups/ethnic groups share common responses?
- Or do people from a geographical area share common issues or concerns?

If you have used more than one research method

- How do the findings of each relate to one another?
- Do they paint a similar picture or contradict one another?
- What could be the cause of this contradiction? What does this tell us?

As you are going through this process of interpreting the data it is essential that you continually question your interpretations.

- What is this really telling us?
- Why does that group differ so much from another?
- Where is the evidence to back my interpretation, could this be interpreted another way?

It is good to keep checking out our findings with others so that we are coming up with clear robust evidence.

Key Points

- Organise you data, e.g. put ID numbers on questionnaires. Gather all your notes together.
- Prepare data for analysis; e.g. transcribe focus groups.
- Make hard copies and/or electronic copies of your findings – one working copy and one for safe keeping.
- Keep both copies in a safe place, particularly if you have any identifying information on them.
- Get to know your data, read over it several times.
- Start to identify themes and categories and sub categories.
- Develop connections and evidence.
- Take time to reflect on your findings

Section 6

Using your findings

Who are the key audiences for your research findings and how will you communicate your findings to them?

Now is your opportunity to influence how things are done and even be creative about it! By now you and your group will be so knowledgeable about your area of research that you will be confident and perhaps even excited about sharing it with others. It is time to put all that energy built up over the course of the research to good use and influence those that could make a difference to your lives or the lives of others.

By now, you will be very aware of your skills and abilities and those of your group so you can strategically deploy people where their skills will be best used.

What skills in your group could be used to really get your message across? Did you discover a great artist? A cartoonist in your midst, a comedian, a photographer, a persuader or an engaging public speaker? Use what you have discovered about yourselves and what you have energy for and get your message across in your own unique way.

You have at least two audiences to think about. There is the **community** who have taken part in your research and there are the **decision makers** who you want to influence to get things changed.

Letting the community know your findings

It is an important part of community-led action research that you ensure that those who have taken part in your research get the opportunity to see what you have found out and to know what you intend to do with the evidence you have gathered. In the same way as you thought about appropriate research methods think about appropriate ways to feed back to the community and this may well be different from how you present to decision makers.

It is unlikely that community members will want to read a big report; they may be interested in a 2 page summary of your findings but probably not much more than that. You could consider doing things differently, maybe getting a short piece in the local paper, revisiting groups and giving them a brief update on your findings or even holding a public meeting. It's entirely up to you.

Influencing decision makers

This part is the culmination of your work so you should have a clear plan of how you are going to do this. There is no right or wrong approach and you have to decide what works for you. You need to think about your approach carefully.

Getting an 'angle'

The first thing to think about is who your allies are. Are there community organisations, councillors, or other people with influence who have shown an interest in or a commitment to what you have been doing? If so, how can you get them on board to help you lobby for the change you want?

Next, do your research findings fit in with or run against existing policy? If it fits in then how can you identify the right people and show them that what you want to change will be to their benefit? If it runs against existing policy be very clear why that policy should be changed, based on your findings.

If what you have found demonstrates a failure or lack of service then how do you deal with this in a positive and constructive way? How are you going to win people over?

Generally think about who the decision makers you need to influence are – is it a local manager, a Director or a councillor. Alternatively, you may find you need to influence members of a committee. In this case you may wish to develop a strategy whereby you target specific individuals on a committee to get their backing before you take things forward to the full committee. Consider the environment which the decision makers you are trying to influence are working in. What are the issues for them? What constraints are they working under?

There is a real trick here and it should not be missed. Far too often people think that the only thing that will be taken seriously by people we want to influence is a detailed and formal report. There is nothing wrong with formal reporting but the question is whether people have sufficient time and interest to read such a lengthy document (for guidance on writing your research report please see Part 3). One method is to present something that is short, interesting and gets attention, possibly a two page summary of your findings. Then you can follow that up showing in more detail how you carried out your research, how you came to your conclusions and what changes you are recommending as a result of your work.

Think about whether it would be appropriate for you to hold a meeting to launch the report of your findings and who it would be appropriate to ask along. But there are other methods. You could for example, hold an exhibition, or make a DVD. Use whatever you think will attract the interest of key decision makers and make them open for further discussion with you.

Whichever way you choose to reach decision makers always have in your mind what you want from them. This will vary depending on who you are engaging with. It might be that you are; looking for an MP or MSP to raise a question with a particular organisation; asking for funding or a change to some aspect of service provision. It's not just about submitting your evidence it's also about knowing what change you want to influence when dealing with decision makers.

As part of their research one group found that, due to bits of land being owned by different bits of the Council and Housing Associations, de-littering and general maintenance was not happening properly. They decided to invite senior managers from the Council and Housing Associations to the launch of their report and asked them at that meeting if they could do something to rectify the situation. They got what they asked for there and then.

Finally

Don't forget the local/national press or radio stations as a means to get across to people what you have done, what you are looking to achieve as a result of your work and when you have achieved it.

Key Points

- Consider the best way to put your findings across.
- Remember you have at least 2 audiences: your community and decision makers.
- Think creatively: get attention and make an impact.
- Consider what you want from different people and ask for it.
- Press and radio might well be interested. Use them if you can.

Section 7

Ethical Issues

Ethical considerations should inform your whole approach to carrying out your research. Research ethics ensure that the research is carried out responsibly and no one is harmed (physically, emotionally or mentally) in the course of the research, including the researcher. Equally no participant should be quoted or identified without their permission

Ethical issues cover areas such as,

Ensuring confidentiality - this means that research participants are assured that identifying information will not be made available to anyone who is not directly involved in the research. This preserves the integrity of the data because respondents feel safe to express their true opinions.

Informed consent - this means that prospective research participants must be fully informed about the procedures and risks involved in the research and must give their consent to participate. This is particularly important if you want to quote someone or use their photograph.

Anonymity - this means that the participant will remain anonymous throughout the study. A way of doing this with questionnaires is to keep any personal information on a separate sheet, then put a number on the rest of the questionnaire. As a result, you are now dealing with a number when analysing the questionnaire

Avoiding intrusiveness - this means that researchers must strive to be aware of the intrusive potential of their work. They have no special entitlement to keep trying to get information if there is a potential negative impact on the research participant. So, if a participant is getting upset or cutting off, the researcher should change tack; move on, see if the participant wants a break before continuing or ask if the person wants to continue at all.

Protecting against risk or harm - this means that some research activities may place the researcher in some degree of risk of physical and/or mental harm. Where possible the research group should anticipate the risks and ensure that field researchers are protected, as far as possible, from any harm whilst undertaking the research. For instance if you are doing door to door questionnaires then it is better to do this in pairs for safety reasons.

Providing feedback - this means that the researchers provide feedback to those who have participated in the research thereby acknowledging their input and informing them of the results of the research.

Ensuring equal opportunities - this means that researchers have a responsibility to ensure participation of all people, by dealing with potential barriers of: communication, understanding, access or financial expense. Such issues should be considered at the design stage of the research as there are resource implications for research budgets for example, the cost of interpreters, signers, and care expenses.

You should specify the code of ethical conduct that you will use. The projects from which this guidance has been developed used the Social Research Association's Ethical Guidelines which can be found at: http://www.the-sra.org.uk/. Check for the most up to date version before quoting them.

Note: The above does not cover medical ethical issues and if you are dealing with an issue where medical ethics are potentially involved you may find it necessary to present a case to a medical ethics committee. Be aware this can be very tricky and take considerable time to get permission to undertake your research. In these circumstances we would suggest you seek specialist advice from someone who has dealt with this issue in the past.

Key Points

- Ensure confidentiality.
- Make sure you get informed consent when appropriate..
- Ensure anonymity.
- Avoid being intrusive, know when to back away or use another approach.
- Ensure that researchers are not put into potential risk or harm.
- Provide feedback to those who participated in the research.
- Ensure everyone is able to take part in the research by removing all potential barriers at the design stage.

Section 8

What skills are needed?

What skills do you have and is additional development required?

The first question is - does your group, or members within it, have experience of carrying out action research in communities. If you do then you have real assets that you can draw on. If not, don't worry - consider what areas you need any further support or training to undertake a successful project and who you could ask for help.

There may well be individuals within your community who, although not active members of your group, have experience and may be interested in your research subject or in just doing research more generally and would be willing to help you.

Alternatively community development staff in your local authority, CVS or local college, may be willing to provide you with training and/or support.

Remember, even if you don't have research experience, you will be bringing a lot of skills and knowledge to the process. You know your local community, you know how to get to people, you know what the issue is you want to research and you have a good idea what methods you want to use. It's just about getting some help to get you started.

Key Points

- Check the skills within the group.
- Are there people in your group willing to give things a go and develop research skills?
- Is there anyone in the community who could help?
- Consider where else help could be found.

Section 9

What resources do you need?

Think about what resources you need to complete the research project

When we think about resources we naturally think about money in the first instance. Things that have a financial implication might include:

- Training required by community group members and community researchers to enable them to carry out the research plan. This may extend wider than research skills training depending on the needs of the community group.
- Hire of equipment and venues.
- Purchase of materials such as paper, flipcharts, post its, felt tip pens, clip boards etc.
- Caring expenses, such as childcare costs, for researchers.
- Payment for someone to guide the progress of the research or to conduct key elements of the work if required.
- Reasonable expenses incurred by researchers, community groups and volunteers such as transport, telephone, photocopying, administration costs and use of meeting rooms.
- Training required to promote the active communication of the findings.
- Publication of written reports and other products of the project.
- Holding seminars, workshops or other events to share research findings with the wider community, decision makers or other community groups.

You should do your best to work out how much each element of your research methodology will cost and consequently how much you will need overall.

Remember, if you are on a tight budget, it may well be possible to get grants or help in kind from other organisations. You could approach local council departments, elected members or colleges for help. Churches and other organisations with halls or meeting spaces may be willing to let you use their premises free of charge as what you are doing is of benefit to the community.

Finally start out with a rough idea of how much time your group will be putting into the project and record your time as you go along. Too often the amount of time members of voluntary organisations commit to carrying out work is either overlooked or underestimated. So demonstrate how much commitment and effort you have put in by being able to quote the hours that have been put in to obtain your research findings.

Key Points

- Time is probably the most precious resource when undertaking research so ensure your group has the necessary time to give and are willing to do so.
- Keep a record of the amount of time members of your group contribute to let decision makers and funders know just how committed your group is to the issue
- Work out what finance you need to complete your research.
- Are there members of the community out with your group who have skills you could draw on?
- Can you get in-kind support and where from?

Section 10

How will the project be implemented, by whom and within what timescales?

Having decided what the best research methods are for your research you now have to think about the how, who and when questions.

How?

Clearly a lot will depend on which research methods you choose to use but generally this is about thinking through the practicalities of actually conducting the research process. Two possible examples are given below:

Example: Questionnaire

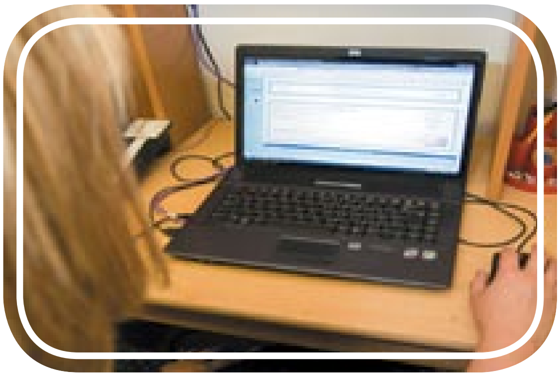
- Who is it aimed at?
- How are you going to get it developed and printed?
- How are you going to distribute it?
- How are you going to get returns back?
- How are you going to analyse it?

Example: Focus group

- What questions do we want answers to?
- Who do we want to invite?
- How are we going to run it?
- What materials do we need and how will we get them?
- Who will facilitate the group and who will record on the day?
- How will we record the responses from the group?
- Where are we going to run it?
- When are we going to run it?
- Who books the venue?
- When do the invitations go out?
- What will we do to confirm people are attending?

The above are illustrations which may not be comprehensive - there may be other things you will have to factor in.

If there are several parts to your research you should work out when you need the findings from one part to inform another. For example: if you need to get the results from a questionnaire to use as a basis for a focus group discussion then you will need to ensure you leave enough time to collate and analyse your questionnaire findings before holding the focus group.



The key thing is to plan everything in detail and think through all the things you need to do to ensure everything works well. A useful tip is to do a checklist of all the things that need to be done and check them off as you go. It might also be useful to create a timeline of what needs to be done and when.

Who?

It is important that everyone in the group has a meaningful task and can contribute to the success of your research. The people in your group will have specific skills that you can make the most of depending on which research methods you are going to use. For example if you are going to stop people in the street and ask questions you need someone who can be friendly, confident and good at chatting to people. If you are going to hold a large meeting you will need someone with the skills and confidence to be able to chair and direct the meeting. If there is someone in the group with that experience then great. Equally there might be someone who is keen to develop their skills and would like to have a go. If so then they should look to get tips and hints from people who have done it before and if possible get some training. It may be the case that someone is not confident at speaking out but is good at administration so they might be best suited to the co-ordination of the research, making sure venues are booked, and so on.

The key thing is not to try and push people into undertaking tasks they are not comfortable with; equally if they are willing to give it a go then you should support them to do it.

Further, as an individual it is important that you think through what your role is and if you are comfortable with it. If not, it is important to say so and possibly volunteer to do something else. Don’t be afraid to do this even if you have started a task, we have all thought something would be fine till we tried doing it and then found out it wasn’t for us. As a group you should be supportive of such changes.

Remember this should be fun and rewarding for everyone!

Thinking about the timescale for the research

As a group you should agree when you are going to start and finish your research. Unless you have good reason you should try to complete the research within a reasonably short space of time to keep interest and enthusiasm going. We suggest 3 - 6 months as a rough guide. Make sure you take account of things like school holidays which may affect your ability to undertake your research or particular events happening in your community that make it possible to get access to a larger number of people than normal, such as a Fête, Gala Day or sports event.

Example Timeline

Month	Activities
January	Complete research plan template Check no similar research previously undertaken Review template Seek additional resources as required
February	Design and test questionnaire Print questionnaire Begin planning for focus group during 2nd week in April
March	Disseminate questionnaire: 1st Week Collect questionnaires: 3rd Week Analyse questionnaires and provide findings: 4th Week Check all ready for focus group Review progress against research plan – revise as required
April	Hold focus group: 2nd Week Carry out surveys during local Gala Day: 2nd Week Attend and carry out surveys at Youth Club and Sheltered Complex: 2nd Week Weeks 3 and 4 collate findings Review against research plan
May	Write report using research plan template. Whole month Send out invites to launch of Report. Week 2
June	Print 2 page Executive Summary Prepare article for local Paper Launch report Set up follow up meetings with decision makers Feedback to community Reflect on and evaluate what you have done. **Celebrate - have a party!!!**

Key Points

- Go through in detail the practicalities of how you are going to do it.
- When does each interdependent part need to be completed?
- Who is the best person to do what?
- Check, and double check, people are happy and comfortable in their roles.
- Set a timeframe to start and finish your research.
- Look out for things like school holidays.
- Are there opportunities for you to get access to larger numbers in your community?

Have a Party!!!

Barriers
enablers
we are here!

Tools and Resources

Section 1

Research Methods

Here we provide some tips and guidance about using some of the more common research methods used by SCARF, Demonstrating the Links and Learning through Doing projects in the past.

You could also have a look at some websites such as

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk
http://www.arvac.org.uk/gettingstarted
http://www.evaluationtrust.org/tools/profile

Questionnaires

There is a range of ways in which you can use a questionnaire:

Postal

As a general rule, if you post questionnaires out to people, even with a stamped address return envelope, you will be lucky if you get 20% of people returning their questionnaires.

You can increase the number of responses if you deliver and pick up the questionnaires by hand. This is only practical if you are dealing with a small number of people/ houses. A tip if you plan to pick up by hand, is to attach a note to the questionnaire stating the day and rough time you will be calling back to pick the questionnaire up.

By using this method you are providing the opportunity for everyone in the community to express their views. You are less likely to be accused of ‘Nobody asked me for my opinion’ at a later date.

Stopping people in the street

This works well if you are asking very few questions and you can clarify that the person you stop is part of your ‘target group‘. The people carrying out the research will need to be confident about stopping strangers and engaging with them. It might help, of course, if you are doing this locally and people know who you are.

Leaving questionnaires out in a public place

This is not a good way to get a high number of returns as people tend to ignore them or one person might fill in several so you get a biased response. We would suggest you don't use such an approach for this reason.

Sampling

It is possible to select a sample number of people (or households) to complete questionnaires or to do face-to-face interviews with.

Knowing what size of sample to take can be done in various ways. You could decide to go to every second door, or just to ask as many people as you can with the time and resources available to you. Be careful that you don't just pick the same type of people. Make sure, if it's a general questionnaire, in a community of geography, that you get a range of ages, both male and female respondents and that different minority groups are represented.

Snowballing

This is a technique where you just keep interviewing till you stop getting any different answers and then stop. The argument goes that there is a point when there is nothing more to be gained and all you are doing is carrying on for the sake of it. If you are using this approach you should not just ask two or three people but a realistic number. For example if you are asking questions relating to an issue concerning a street of 100 houses and the first 20 to 30 people all give you the same answers to your questions then there is not much chance that by carrying on with the research you are likely to get anything significantly different. You probably have the answers you need.

Size of Questionnaire

You have to be very disciplined in devising your questionnaire. We all tend to start thinking we need to ask more and more questions just to make sure we have everything covered. The result is you end up asking loads of questions, which take up a lot of time, takes a long time to analyse, and gathers information you are unlikely to ever use. Worst of all people tend to get put off and many will terminate the interview or not return your questionnaire.

For every question think about why you need the information and what purpose it serves in relation to the issue you are researching. What will it tell you and how will you use that information? If you can't clearly identify a reason and purpose you probably don't need to ask it.

A good questionnaire is short and to the point but it is important to get it right as you really don't have a second chance.

The Questions

Be very careful that you are not asking leading questions. A leading question is one where the way the question is constructed in such a way that the person answering is encouraged to give an answer that might not actually reflect what they think but what you want to hear.

If you use leading questions you could be accused of obtaining false results and have your findings discredited. Here is an example of a leading question:

'Do you agree the community facilities here are rubbish?'

Good questions should always be phrased in a neutral, unbiased, way so that the person answering reflects their own views or feelings. An example of a better, unbiased question would be:

'How would you rate the community facilities here?' (Please tick one)

Very Good

Good

Alright

Poor

Very Poor

Question formats

Formats tend to fall into two types. The first is called an **'open format'** where the person answering is asked/ encouraged to give a full answer, for example,

'What do you think of the local community facilities?'

This type of question provides you with qualitative information. This is about getting some detail of the person's views and opinions rather than a straight yes or no answer.

Open format is good for getting a more developed, longer response but it is much more difficult to analyse. Not only do you have to read all the responses but it can be difficult putting responses into categories if you want to demonstrate how many people have said what, using percentages for example.

The second format is **'closed'**. These are quantitative questions which are the 'how many' questions. This means people are given options to choose from and you/they tick or circle as appropriate. This format is good for easy analysis in terms of getting numbers and percentages quickly. The drawback is that the responses you get don't answer the question 'why?' You might have to ask supplementary questions to get more detail.

Closed questions can be set up in a number of ways, the most popular being:

Example 1

'Do you think the local community facilities are adequate for community needs?'

Yes □ *No* □

If you are using this format make sure there are clear boxes where people tick 'yes' or 'no'. If you don't, your respondents, or even the person conducting the interview, might put the tick in a place between possible answers and make it impossible for you to judge, at a later date, what their response was.

Example 2

'What do you think of the local community facilities? Circle the response that best represents your view.'

Very poor □ *poor* □ *average* □ *good* □ *very good* □

Supplementary Questions

These are important if you want to find out more detailed information. Consider the example above; you may get 200 returns all saying the community facilities are poor or very poor. You have a number but you don't know why people think that or what they think would be an improvement. Is it because:

a. They are in poor physical condition

b. They are not big enough

c. They don't open at the right times

d. They don't put on the right kind of activities

e. They are difficult to get to by public transport

f. Other. Please state ----------------------

Your supplementary question or questions can also be open or closed for example,

'Why do you say that?'	*(open)*
'Is it because; *a. They are in poor physical condition* *b. They are not big enough* *c. They don't open at the right times* *d. They don't put on the right kind of activities* *e. They are difficult to get to by public transport* *f. Other. Please state ----------------------*	*(closed)* *N.B. The option f) 'other' is important as it allows for reasons to be given that you might not have thought of.*

Testing

If there could be one golden rule for carrying out research by questionnaire 'testing' would be it.

Testing self-completed questionnaires

If you are using self-completed questionnaires it is really important to get some people who have had no involvement with the design of the questionnaire to complete it.

Things to look for are;

How long did it take them to fill it in?

Did they understand the questions?

Did the question get a response relevant to what you wanted to know?

How did they feel about it? Were there any questions they thought were too personal?

Did they have enough room to write down their responses?

Could they easily fill it in themselves or did they prefer you to ask the questions and fill it out for them?

Testing interview questionnaires

If you are going to use questionnaires on a face to face basis then you should actually test it out by asking someone the questions. It is often the case that although a question makes sense written down it doesn't make sense when said out loud. Again look for how long it took to go through, did the person being interviewed understand the question and how did they feel about it? But in addition consider how comfortable, positive and friendly the interviewer was and check that they were not trying to illicit a response that they wanted to hear.

From your point of view, in either type of questionnaires check whether:

- **You get the information you were looking for.**
- **The information is in a format that is easy to analyse.**
- **If you need more information.**
- **If there is any information you could do without.**

Semi-structured interviews

These are based on the idea of a questionnaire and are usually open questions which form a framework for an interview. The questions will be the key areas where you want a person's opinions or views but will allow you the flexibility to probe responses or ask other questions as they come to you during the interview whilst still keeping you on track.

Semi-structured interviews are good for interviewing very specific people such as Councillors, service managers, people who deliver services, or capturing the personal views of service users. Such interviews can serve a number of purposes such as finding out why certain policies have been implemented or what impact a change of service has had on someone.

The same rules apply here as they do with questionnaires. Questions should not be biased or leading. Again test out your questions to make sure they are the right ones and to get an idea of how long the interview is going to take. Don't go over the one hour mark for interview time – people will get bored or lost after that amount of time.

What interviews are really good for is getting quotes. Often people will say something that you find sums up a feeling or a view. If they do, ask if you can use the quote to illustrate a point in your final report. Remember quotes don't need to be attributed to a person specifically but just put in quotation marks. Nevertheless if you want to use the exact words then you should ask permission.

If you are going to use this approach you should contact the person you want to interview at least two weeks in advance explaining why you want to interview them, what you want to ask them, how long the interview will take and for them to contact you with a time and place which is suitable for them for the interview to take place.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are good for getting in depth views from a relatively small number of people usually with a shared interest. Focus groups are basically about getting a group of people together, usually around 7-15 people in total, and asking their views on a set of questions relevant to your research. They are particularly good for exploring questions in more depth. A really good aspect of focus groups are that people's ideas can build on and challenge one another's' thereby creating some rich learning. So for example you can get people to discuss some findings that you already have, explore ideas, ask why they came to a particular view and generally probe answers.

For this to work effectively, it is a good idea to have both a facilitator to guide the discussion and a second person to take notes. If you are going to take photographs or film the focus group you need a consent form **(a sample form is provided at the end of this section)** for people to agree to and sign at the beginning of the focus group session. This can include statements that evidence that they are willing to take part but can withdraw at any point; that quotes can be used anonymously and that they agree for photos or film footage to be used.

Confidentiality should be stated and agreed by everyone at the outset of the group; and should be respected after the event whilst collating, analysing and reporting the findings.

To work well focus groups need to be really well planned in advance to ensure you get the information you are looking for.

A focus group doesn't always have to take place indoors. In Learning through Doing, GalGael researched 'what works in engaging socially disadvantaged groups from Glasgow with their cultural and natural heritage'. To get into a good space and promote discussion around this topic, GalGael held the focus group in Pollok Park, Glasgow around a camp fire. The time spent arriving there and building the camp and camp fire enabled the participants to get into the space to recall and discuss experiences of being in the outdoors. To be in the moment of the lived experience really supported this process and enabled GalGael to get rich information.

You can see GalGael's report and DVD in the ARC Resource Bank.

Things to think about before the focus group event

- Who and how many people do you want to invite? Give them plenty of notice
- Is there a good place and time to hold the focus group? This will depend on who you want to attend. There is no point asking people who work to attend a focus group at 4pm in the afternoon.
- Equally, think about any events that are happening, even if it is only on the television, which might cause people not to come. If there is a big football match, or a final of a reality show being televised have you got a realistic chance that many people will turn up?
- How much/ what kind of space do you need? Ensure it is appropriate for a focus group – comfortable, warm, and conducive to people wanting to stay and contribute.
- Do you need any support facilities i.e. crèche, wheelchair access? Make sure these are available and meet the requirements of the participants.
- Can you provide tea and coffee? This will help people chat and break the ice on first arriving.
- What are the key questions you want to ask? Is there a logical order to put those questions in? How long have you got altogether and how much time can you reasonably allocate for each question?
- How are you going to record what people are saying ? Do you need someone to take notes? Or are you going to record or film the session? If so, make sure all equipment is working properly – do a test run beforehand.
- How many people do you need to help facilitate the event? Do you need others to help work with smaller groups?
- Can you pay people's expenses? Some organisations pay people a small amount of money, say £10, to cover travel costs and as a thank you for their time – and use this as an incentive to get them to attend.

At the actual focus group event

- Start by introducing yourself and say a little about what you are hoping to get from the focus group.
- Explain the purpose of the consent form and ask the participants to fill it in.
- Let participants know that the focus group will be confidential and that any comments will not be attributed to any individual.
- Then ask everyone else to introduce themselves, saying who they are and how they became involved, what they hope to get out of participating.
- In a number of cases, not just focus groups, the event is started with a general discussion about 'ground rules' which are written up and kept in full view for reference. These would be offered and agreed by all the participants for example
    - No interrupting
    - Respect other people's opinion.
- You will be prepared with your list of questions that you want to cover.
- It is a good idea to start with the more general light questions at the beginning moving onto the more in depth, controversial or challenging ones when people have got into the flow. And you can deviate from your list if the discussion is going down an interesting road that you didn't envisage. But keep in mind the overall objective of the focus group and make sure you will still cover all relevant areas.
- How can you make people feel comfortable enough to contribute? Try to think of ways you can vary the way people can contribute. Small group discussions, use of aids like flip chart paper, photographs and post-its, etc. It is good if you can use a range of methods to give variety and maintain interest.
- It is sometimes helpful to let people to move around a room. Have opportunities to let people stick things up on flip chart paper or put their comments up on an information wall.
- It is important to keep things moving and encourage people to get involved and say what they think. You should always be on the lookout to see if someone is not contributing and not getting involved and take steps to encourage them to do so. If they seem particularly interested or disagree with a certain point but lack of confidence is stopping them from speaking out, gently ask them what their thinking is around that point.
- Be positive and upbeat. Work hard to get behind what people are saying so that you can develop a really good picture of the issues around your focus group topic.
- At the end of the focus group it is good to take some time to sum up what the key messages have been, checking with the group that you have a clear understanding of their input.
- Inform the group of what will happen now and how you will feedback the findings of the research to them. And thank them for their input.

Larger Consultative Events

There are different ways of making such events useful and meaningful.

You could organise an event along the lines already suggested whereby people come along to see an exhibition and where you can find ways of recording their comments or views.

You could plan an event whereby you have a general introduction stating the focus of the meeting then break people up into small groups to discuss specific questions, with a facilitator for each group. You could then bring their answers or views back together at the end of their discussion.

A third way would be to hold a meeting to present your general research findings. This would allow you to get people's views and opinions on the findings and how you could take them forward. Again, depending on funds, or availability, it might be possible to hire or borrow electronic voting equipment, which you often see being used on television programmes. Some local councils have this equipment and lend it out to community groups. This allows people sitting in the audience to vote by pressing a button and you to get an indication of the level of response. If you can get hold of the equipment it would be great for getting feedback on issues/areas of concern in the community. It would also allow you to present your research findings and ask the people at the meeting to endorse and support your recommendations. Or a cheaper alternative is to ask people to raise red or yellow cards and take a vote that way.

This was used by Glasgow Good Information Group in asking an audience of adults with Learning Disabilities what constituted 'good' or 'bad' information. They voted by holding up green 'good' or red 'not good' table tennis bats. This was also recorded by a graphic artist who created pictorial feedback of the whole event and checked that it was in keeping with participants' opinions.

We would not recommend starting off your research by inviting lots of people to a public meeting and just asking for their views. It would be very difficult to keep things on track, it would be difficult to control and you would have great difficulty in recording the views expressed.

Large scale events require just as much preparation, probably more so, as all the other parts of the research process. Think about whether there is a need for microphones, who is going to put out the seating, how you are going to programme it, keep control it of it, capture views and opinions and, finally, who is going to clean up?

A big tip here is to check any electrical equipment before needing to use it. Never accept the promise that "it worked fine last night". We know from bitter experience - always check it!

Other methods of carrying out action research that have proved popular with groups involved in previous projects are listed below and are great ways of getting people active, creative and involved.

Story Dialogue

Story Dialogue is a method that speaks to the story telling traditions that unite us as human beings in our need and love of sharing experiences and making sense of our world through stories. Below is just a brief introduction to Story Dialogue. For deeper guidance please see Beyond the Anecdote; Story Dialogue in action at: http://www.chex.org.uk/what-we-do/information-and-resources/briefings/

Background

Story Dialogue was developed in Canada by Labonte and Featherstone (1997). Labonte developed the method as a means of recognising and respecting the expertise that people have in their own lives in relation to community development and health issues. The process is structured so that valuable personal experiences are used to draw out important themes and issues affecting the community and then action can be planned around these insights.

Generative theme

The process begins with a generative theme; that is a theme that will 'generate' animated discussion amongst the people who are coming to the workshop – a 'hot topic'. The generative theme usually speaks to specific 'tensions' around an issue or within a practice.

Story Telling (7-10 minutes)

Once the generative theme is decided then story tellers are identified to share in a small group (6-10 people) their experience around this theme. It is really important that the story tellers are fully briefed on the generative theme and are given a briefing to guide them in this process (see Beyond the Anecdote).

Reflection Circle (5-10 minutes)

Once the storyteller has told their story (without interruptions) each person in the group shares with the rest of the group 'how this story is also my story' or 'how my story differs from this one' with no interruptions or comments. People are allowed to 'pass'.

Structured Dialogue (30-45 minutes)

Four categories of open questions are then used to generate a structured dialogue:

1) What? *(Description)*
'What' questions invite people to describe what is happening in the story from their perspective. They ground the explanation in experience.

2) Why? *(Explanation)*
'Why' questions invite a discussion on causes, where participants begin to interpret or make sense of what has been described.

3) So What? *(Synthesis)*
'So what' questions invite a synthesis, or distillation, of new knowledge.

4) Now What? *(Action)*
'Now what' questions translates this new knowledge into new actions we can take based on our insights.

Review Story Records (5 minutes)

It is important that all story – listeners (everyone other than 'teller') jot down notes throughout the whole process so that they can share feelings, thoughts and insights with others. At this point people would review their notes to identify any **aha!!!** moments or highlight issues that held some energy for them.

Create insight cards (15-20minutes)

These **aha!!!** moments would then be shared amongst the members of the story group enabling them to distill the key lessons learned from the story and structure dialogue into insight cards. These insight cards can then be arranged into common themes.

Story Dialogue can be used with one group or you can have several groups running simultaneously, pooling the insight cards from all the groups into common themes.

As part of the Learning through Doing programme, Broughty Ferry Environment Project used Story Dialogue to explore how their approach was important in attracting and retaining volunteers. You can view their Research Plan, Research Report and the DVD they made of the process in our ARC Resource Bank on SCDC's website.

Points to note:

- Story Dialogue really gets to the heart of the matter and helps to develop a deep shared understanding of a situation, issue, practice.
- You do the research, collation, and analysis all at the one event so there is not a lot of work to be done after.
- It is essential that you take time framing your generative theme so that you are really hitting on an issue that folk have the energy for.
- Choosing and briefing story tellers effectively is key to the process. Everything else unfolds from the story so it is essential that the story is relevant and the story teller engaging.
- Listening well is key to Story Dialogue so it is a good idea at the start of a session to ask people what they understand by 'active or profound' listening and put this up on a flipchart.

Drawings

These are good for working with children. You ask the children to draw their street, neighbourhood, area and then ask why they chose to draw particular bits or things and why they are important to them, what they like and don't like. You can record that discussion and use that and their drawings as evidence of their distinct perspective but you could also use their drawings as a display, at a focus group for example, to help prompt discussion.

Remember anyone doing any kind of work with children or vulnerable people requires a Disclosure check so be careful how you proceed. Please refer to the Protecting Vulnerable Group scheme at http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/People/Young-People/children-families/pvglegislation If you haven't got disclosure perhaps you could you ask a school or playgroup teacher if they could make the activity part of curricular activity? Could you ask carers if they would help?

Drawings can be used equally well with small groups of adults. You ask them to draw their area, community or experience of something and then ask them to explain their drawing or map. You can be as straightforward as getting each person to explain one by one or you can generate more general discussion by asking if others in the group drew the same or different things. Make sure everyone gets a chance to talk about what they have drawn.

Make sure you keep a record of the discussion and views expressed. Again there is no reason why the drawings, in certain circumstances, could not be used as evidence in its own right, but generally they would be used as supporting evidence to other findings. They can also be used to great effect in your research report to highlight certain issues.

Drawings were used very effectively by one group who used them to gather the views of children about their local community, by asking them to draw what they saw on their route to school. This threw up some interesting findings….. a lot of the children drew the homeless people they saw on their way to school. When asked about this, the children said that they made them feel safe as they were in the same place everyday and said hello to the children as they passed. Before this many of the parents considered the homeless people to be a menace. The views of the children challenged this.

Photographs

Mobile phone, digital or cheap disposable cameras can be given to people, or they can use their own, to take photographs of things that mean something to them, good or bad, in their area or places they visit.

Examples of how photographs have been used are:

- People have used them in housing schemes to show litter problems, dampness, vandalism, spaces they like, an object that sums up their feelings about their community.
- Others have given the cameras to people using parks and other open spaces to photograph specific bits of the park or space they like.

Again there needs to be time and opportunity for them to talk about the picture they have taken and why.

Photographs are also good to record the activity in your research for example people at a meeting, exhibition etc. The photographs can be good to use in your report to illustrate how you carried out your research as well as illustrate the points you want to make.

Again you have to be very careful and make sure that if people are being photographed they have given permission for this to happen and that the photo can be used.

Observation and recording

This is very straightforward but does take skill. It involves looking at what is happening and making a note of what you see. For example: if you want to know who is using a park and for what purpose then you could simply watch and note down how many people use the park, what for and when. You could then follow this up with questionnaires to find out some more detailed information.

Remember usage in terms of the ages of people and what activities they undertake may vary at different times of the year, school holidays, parts of the week – weekend use may be quite different from that of weekdays, or even times of the day. So consider when are the most appropriate times to go along to get the information you want

There are issues here with permissions in terms of how intrusive you are. Think carefully about how obvious you may seem or whether people might take offence at what you are doing.

Visible recording

Flip chart paper and post-it pads.

There is a whole range of ways that these can be used.

You can write a question on the flip chart paper, stick it on a wall and get people to write their thoughts on the post-its and stick it to the paper or just write directly on to the paper.

You can for example have one sheet with '*What I like about*' and another '*What I don't like*' and people can write things up. You could even have a third '*What can we do about the problems'.*

You could then look for commonality in the post-its and group them to see what the top priorities or issues are.

Again you can use the findings as a basis for discussion then or at a later date.

Nominal Voting

Nominal voting is where you write a list of issues on the flipchart or on different sheets pinned up around the room and give people an equal number of sticky dots and ask them to allocate the dots to their top priorities. Say for example you have done a questionnaire on what improvements people would like to see made to their area and you have 20 different things people want – but really what you want is to identify the top 5. You could use this method at a focus group or open meeting to narrow down the most important priorities.

One useful nominal voting technique is to give each person 5 dots and ask them to put their dots on one or more priority. They can put all their dots on 1 or spread them over all 5. When they are finished you simply count up the dots for each priority and the ones with the most dots can be considered to be of the highest priority; the one with the next highest number being the second priority and so on.

If you use this approach make sure you have a wide range of different groups in your community represented or a sample of the people who identified the 20 things. If you have 20 suggestions from teenagers don't ask the pensioners club to do the prioritising.

Some groups have used variations of this in the street, in community halls and at supermarket entrances (with permission).

If you are using these methods it is important that people have enough space to feel comfortable and have privacy to write what they like. So make sure you are not hanging over them as they do it.

Post it notes sometimes fall off so if you are keeping the flipchart paper to work on later, use sticky tape to hold the post its in place!

Walking along with people (Transect Walk)

This approach has been used quite a lot in parks and other outdoor settings where the researchers, with permission, walk along with the person using the space and get the person to show them their favourite space, tell them what activities they undertake or what they enjoy about the place. Views can be recorded either in note form or by using recording equipment.

Blarbuie Woodland Project used this in their SCARF Research. They spoke to people who were using the woodland area and asked them a number of questions about when, how and why they used the woodland. Responses were recorded on to tape and later transcribed for analysis. This, along with photographs of the woodland and the people using it, were combined to make a very visual and striking presentation of their research findings. This has been used very effectively to achieve additional funding and support for the work they are doing.

Vox box/ Video box

This method is the provision of a quiet private space and sound recording/ DVD equipment where you get people to go and record their views on the issue you are researching. By getting as many people as you can to do this you then build up a picture of commonality or difference in people's views or experience. This very much depends on your ability to access the necessary resources.

Case Studies

As a research methodology case studies are not recommended as a stand alone technique as they are difficult to build a general argument from. They can however be used as a very powerful support, often in a different format, for example using a DVD or personal diary format to illustrate and put a very personalised perspective on wider research findings that have been collected.

This was done to very good effect by the Castle Douglas Enable Branch who as well as running focus groups on the needs of elderly carers also produced a DVD of 'A day in the life of an elderly carer'. This case study really lets us get behind the needs of elderly carers and experience first hand the demands on people in that predicament. It is a powerful story and as such a powerful tool for highlighting the many issues. You can see the Enable Report and DVD in the ARC Resource Bank

Making a DVD might seem appealing but you need someone with very good skills in filming and editing. To have an impact DVDs have to be short and very well made.

For more information on writing case studies there is some very good guidance from Evaluation Support Scotland.

http://www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/downloads/SupportGuide3.2casestudiesjul09.pdf

Section 2

Appendices

Appendix 1 – Sample Consent Form
Appendix 2 – Suggested layout for research report

Sample Consent Form

(This consent form can be used for a focus group or a one to one interview)

Participant consent.

I agree to take part in the study and understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time without giving reason.

I agree to be contacted by (*name of organisation*) regarding the study if necessary.

I agree to allow (*name of organisation*) to use quotes from the research (anonymously).

I am happy for (*name of organisation*) to use photographs or film footage to illustrate the report in which I may be depicted. Yes No.

Name of participant.

Date.

Signature.

Age range.

18 – 25 26 – 45 46 – 59 60 – 69 Over 70

Male Female

If you wish to know about the findings of the survey, please add your contact details below.

Address…………………………………………………………………………..

……………………………………………….................…Post code…………………......................

Email……………………………………………………………………………..…

Writing your research report – a possible layout

1. Executive summary - normally appears at the beginning of the full report as well as being produced on its own in a variety of ways.
2. Introduction - the background to study and what the report is about.
3. Your organisation - a profile containing a brief history; activities, aims and aspirations.
4. The research proposal - drawing on sections 1-3 of your research plan.
5. Research process and methods - drawing on sections 4-9 of your research plan giving details of what you actually did.
6. Research results - ordered into sections for each of your research questions / themes.
7. Key findings - what you have learned.
8. Conclusions - where do you go from here? Recommendations and planned actions for your organisation and recommendations for organisations who support your work.
9. Project team and acknowledgements.
10. Appendices - could include: project timeline, project costs (including your own in-kind contributions), questionnaires, focus group outlines, other key documents that relate to how you carried out your research.

Section 3

Further Resources

SCDC

- National Standards for Community Engagement and VOICE (Visioning Outcomes in Community Engagement)
  http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/national-standards/
- LEAP (Learning, Evaluation and Planning)
  http://www.scdc.org.uk/what/LEAP/
- Community Research
  http://www.scdc.org.uk/community-research/

Other organisations

- ARVAC The Association for Research in the Voluntary and Community Sector
  www.arvac.org.uk
- Evaluation Trust
  www.evaluationtrust.org
- Evaluation Support Scotland
  www.evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/
- Centre for Action Research in Professional Practice (CARPP) papers;
  http://people.bath.ac.uk/mnspwr/doc_theses_links/index.html
- Infed, Encyclopdia of Informal Education
  http://www.infed.org/research/b-actres.htm
- Web Centre for Social Research Methods
  http://www.socialresearchmethods.net
- Scottish Government Methods Guide
  http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/Research/About/Social-Research/Methods-Guides
- Sage Research Methods Online
  http://srmo.sagepub.com/publicstart;jsessionid=D423840C60F5DAFAA0FFE4ED07A2D125?authRejection=true
- VolResource
  http://www.volresource.org.uk/info/research.htm

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