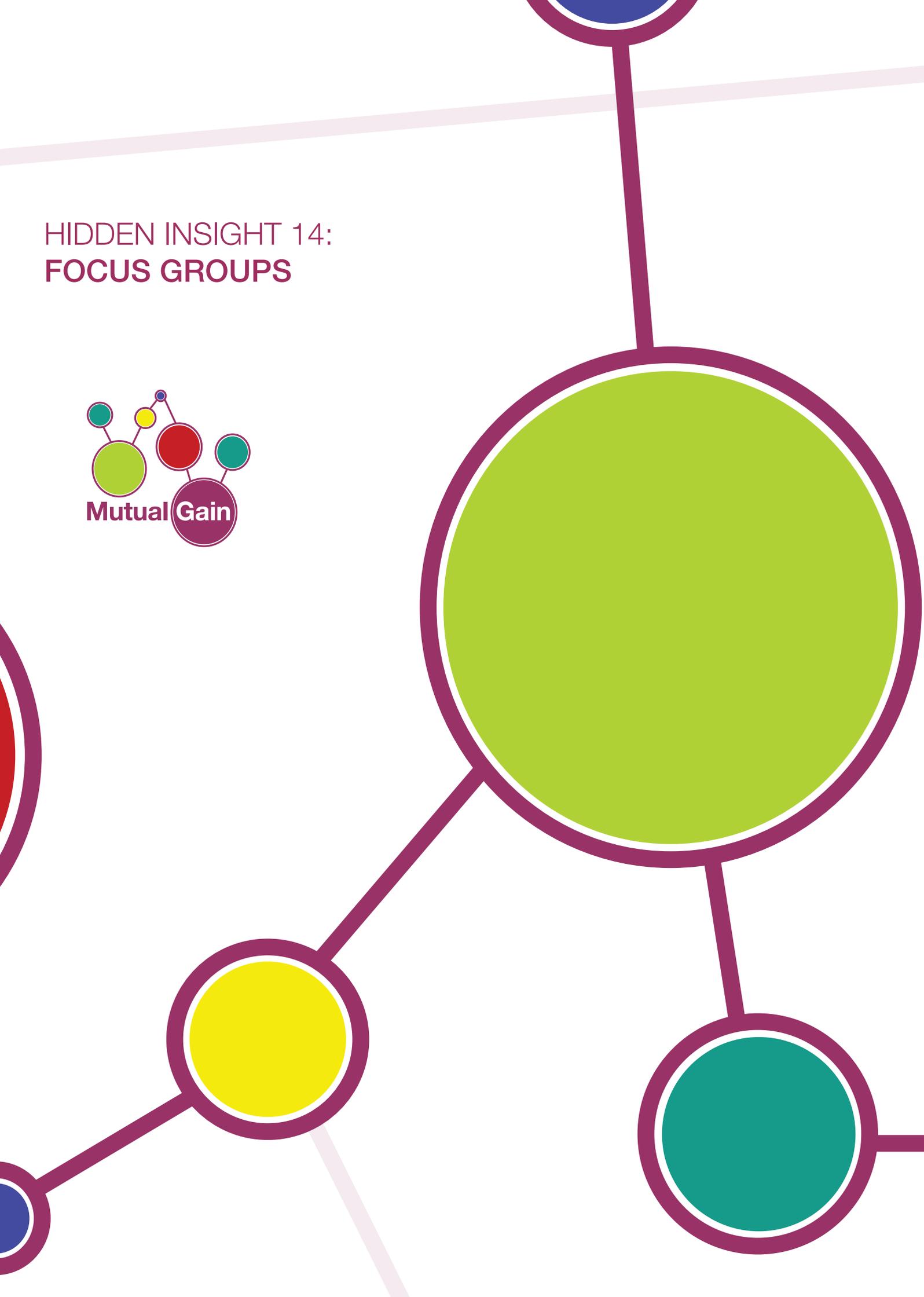


HIDDEN INSIGHT 14:
FOCUS GROUPS



This insight considers the philosophy, principles and practice of appreciative enquiry, it considers an approach that enables communities to be heard through reframing the dialogue with statutory agencies and listening to the concerns and issues from communities that are sometimes “hard to reach”. It is an approach that seeks to build on the strengths of local communities.

*#Appreciative enquiry #Listening to communities #Building social capital #Reframing the dialogue
#strengths based approach #Generating new ideas*

Focus groups are small focused conversations: they are not group interviewing or meetings. They rely on interaction between participants of the group based on topics that are supplied by the researcher: the researcher does not participate in the discussion.

Within statutory agencies this can be a challenge for two reasons: first it is difficult for public sector staff not to become embroiled in the discussion and share their knowledge; and second there are those who are so familiar with interviewing that they cannot see the value of a focus group over a group interview. Focus groups ‘focus’ on a specific topic (they are not targeted Q&A sessions).

Defined as “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” you may find that you need to hold a series of focus groups to identify themes and differences.

Public sector staff in Durham wanted to ascertain the views from residents of Deneside and Northgate in preparation for larger scale community engagement events. They were specific in their topic and were specific in terms of those they wished to hear from, but open enough to hear the voice of those in the room as they shared their experiences and opinions.

Focus groups are an excellent way of conducting research, but often those in statutory organisations have not been trained in using them for engagement. There were participants on the programme who had to plan and deliver focus groups as part of their role but not had specific training in them.

Preparing for focus groups is key to its success. Both groups designed a set of questions and tested them to ensure that they were valid and they could elicit answers that would assist them in their future plans.

Why choose a focus group?

The main purpose of focus group research is to draw upon respondents’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions in a way in which would not be feasible using other methods, for example observation, one-to-one interviewing, or surveys. Compared to individual interviews, which aim to obtain individual attitudes, beliefs and feelings, focus groups elicit a multiplicity of views and emotional processes within a group context: it is difficult to read emotion in a survey response.

When to use a focus group? Focus groups can be used:

✓ At the preliminary or exploratory stages of a study.

- During a study.
- To evaluate or develop a particular programme of activities.
- After a programme has been completed, to assess its impact or to generate further avenues of research.

✓ As a method in their own right or as a complement to other methods, especially for triangulation and validity checking.

The 'ticked' options above indicate how the teams in Seaham and Darlington used their focus groups.

Testing the Questions

Time has to be taken to design and test the questions. The insight here is that rather than facilitate a conversation there was a tendency to want to design a survey tool, which is the technique that people are most familiar with.

The groups tested their questions at the Action Learning Sets, where they also practiced playing the role of a 'facilitator' and a 'scribe.' Both roles look to be a lot easier than they really are, so practising asking questions, listening to the answers and ensuring that everyone has had their say is a skill in itself. Similarly, being able to listen and make notes in a cogent and competent fashion is again a skill in its own right, so practice really can make perfect in this instance.

Roles and skills.

The essential element when running a focus group is listening. The facilitator of the group should NOT scribe. Both roles require active listening skills, and judgement to be suspended – facilitators are curious and interested in the group; they should not be 'telling' the group anything. Scribes say nothing as they capture the conversation taking place. With the email support from MutualGain to make the appropriate changes, the teams learned that only three questions were needed (with relevant prompts) and they should deepen in their focus as the group discussion progresses.

After role-play with the teams, it became clear to some that their personality wasn't suited to facilitation (they would find it too difficult not to step in and start to answer challenges). This is a common finding in command and control organisations where 'knowing the answers' is seen to be a good thing, and often, expected. When conducting focus groups you should be curious and listen for new answers and gather your insight through conversations: this is contrast to interviewing techniques that can feel more interrogatory.

It was refreshing to hear one group challenge their supervisor who thought he had followed the rules from the training, only to be told that, in fact, he had probably held a group interview and had contributed as much as the people attending! He promptly reflected and changed his practice testing his new approach in conducting focus groups with health. The results provided him with significantly different set of data than he might have obtained by informing the group or interviewing them:

Instead he was able to listen to their experiences, code the responses and analyse them for a report in a way he wouldn't have done previously. The recommendations in the report were accepted and led to better shared working with the NHS. His honesty and reflection with the group was most welcome and enabled others to learn from him prior to conducting their community focus groups.

Structure and participation of focus groups

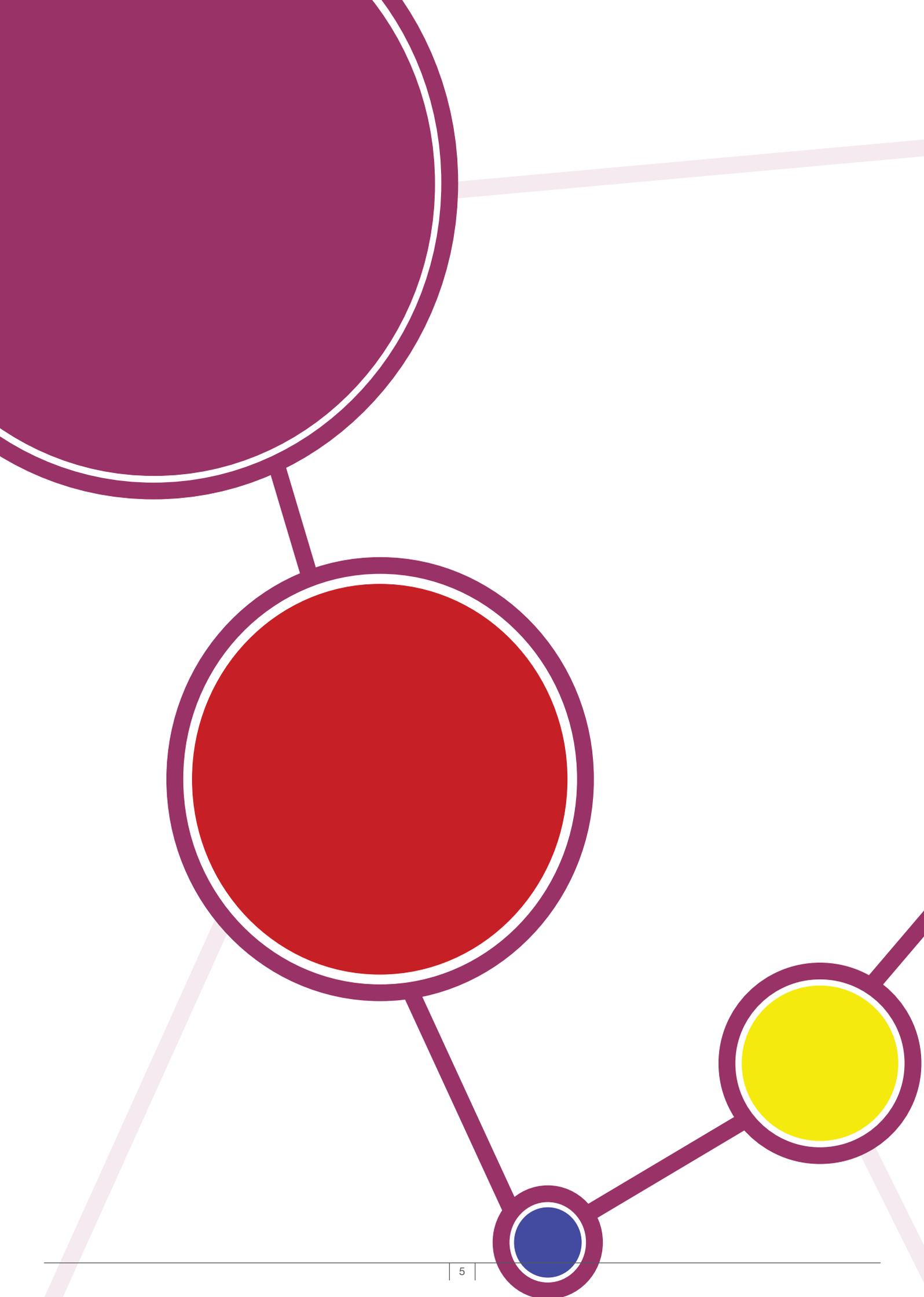
The recommended number of people per group is usually six to ten and the focus group sessions usually last one and a half hours. Neutral locations can be helpful for avoiding either negative or positive associations with a particular site or building. This was an issue in Seaham (Deneside) where council premises were used (on the advice from the council). Feedback from the community revealed that residents would be uncomfortable attending this venue as it was associated with authority.

Focus groups can be held in a variety of places, for example, people's homes, in rented facilities, or where the participants hold their regular meetings if they are a pre-existing group. This was the case in Deneside where a resident made her house available and offered to make tea/coffee and provide cakes!

Participants need to feel comfortable with each other. Meeting with others whom they think of as possessing similar characteristics or levels of understanding about a given topic, will be more appealing than meeting with those who are perceived to be different. As a result you will often conduct a series of focus groups to look for similarities amongst diverse groups and diversity in similar groups.

You don't know what you don't know. The training in focus groups received positive feedback, with one member of staff reflecting that she could use focus groups in a variety of aspects of her work. When it came to coding and analysing the information gained there was an acknowledgement that the information gained would not have been as easily obtained, if it at all, using existing methods of engagement. Participants spoke freely and openly about their perceptions of statutory agencies resulting in the team from Deneside using the information to plan their Participatory Budgeting event and Northgate were able to use the information to plan and deliver two successful Appreciative Inquiry events.

Focus groups are an essential element of social science research. Using them in policing to ascertain the views of the public on any police related issue should receive the highest consideration. It is a simple and effective method that when planned and undertaken correctly can capture useful insights about the community.



020 3887 2859
info@mutualgain.org
www.mutualgain.org

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