# Focus Groups Tool Review

*Public Engagement Tools*

| TABLES Project 2012: Mini reviews | |
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| **Guidance** | *Using your experience and expertise, consider the following tasks in relation to the tool. It may not be possible to complete all tasks for each tool due to a lack of available information, the task not applying to the tool, etc.* **Please note where this is the case by writing in the reason in the space provided**. *Please use a maximum of 6 pages of A4 (excluding diagrams and appendices).* **Your responses are required in the white spaces**. |
| **Task 1: Basic information** | |
| **Name of the tool** | Focus Groups |
| **Type of tool (list all that apply)** | Participatory; Collaborative; Decision; Futures. |
| **Group members** | 1. Alister Scott |
| | 2. Michael Hardman |
| | 3. |
| | 4. |
| | 5. |
| **Please provide a brief synopsis of the tool** | The use and application of focus groups has a long history, rooted firmly in market research where they were used for a range of consumer-related purposes for marketing (Morgan, 1997). They were first used in World War 2 to test responses to radio programmes aimed at raising domestic morale (Kahan, 2001). More recently, as their multi-disciplinary potential has been recognised and applied, they have expanded into the fields of medicine, psychology and social work (Gibbs, 2002). Simply stated, Powell et al. (1996: 499) define focus groups 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'. Their key defining characteristic is that the selected individuals (normally 6–15) react and interact with each other during a managed or facilitated discussion, workshop or seminar based activity. Focus groups are also flexible and adaptable, performing a variety of methodological roles: for example, being used in an exploratory capacity (particularly for questionnaire design, Hoppe et al., 1995), to evaluate programme of activities and to generate further avenues of research (Powell and Single, 1996) or as complementary activities to improve triangulation (Bullen et al., 1998). They also have the capacity to recognise and target silent and excluded voices such as children (Hoppe et al., 1995) or facilitate deliberation and social learning and deal with more intangible and complex subject matter such as values, emotions and perceptions or inequality and social justice (Burningham and Thrush, 2003). Whilst they can be used as a method in their own right, most researchers advocate their use in conjunction with other survey methods to improve overall verification and triangulation. There is also general agreement over participant selection in that, as far as possible, respondents should be drawn from a homogenous group with respect to the topic of interest. Additionally, other demographic variables might be kept constant according to the issue under study (Kahan, 2001). |

| Task 2: Use of the tool | | | |
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| **Position / Use** | **Stage** | **Currently used** | **Could be used** |
| | Ideas | Y | Y |
| | Survey | Y | Y |
| | Assess | Y | Y |
| | Policy / decision | Y | Y |
| | Implement | N | Poss |
| | Evaluate | Y | Y |
| | Please add any further comments here: The focus group can be tailored for practically any setting; involving evaluation or simply the discussion of ideas. | | |
| Task 3: Existing literature about the tool | | | |
| **Are you aware of any KEY policy and / or academic literature evaluating your tool?** | Please add any further comments here: | | |

| Author & Date | Title  Vol pages | Web link (if available) |
|---|---|---|
| Bull, R., Petts, J., Evans, J., 2008. | Social learning from public engagement: dreaming the impossible? Journal of Environmental Planning and Management 51 (5), 701–716. | |
| Burningham, K., Thrush, D., 2003. | Experiencing environmental inequality: the everyday concerns  of  disadvantaged groups. Housing Studies 18 (4), 517–536. | |
| Gibbs, A., 2002. | Focus Groups, Social Research Update, University of Surrey, http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU19.html (accessed 02.07.09). | |
| Hoppe, M.J., Wells, E.A., Morrison, D.M., Gilmore, M.R., Wilsdon, A., 1995. | Using focus groups to discuss sensitive topics with children. Evaluation Review 19 (1), 102–114. | http://www.soc.surrey.ac.uk/sru/SRU19.html |
| Kahan, J., 2001. | Focus groups as a tool for policy analysis. Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy, 129–146. | |
| Madsen, L.M., Adriansen, H.K., 2004. | Understanding the use of rural space: the need for multi methods. Journal of Rural Studies 20, 485–497. | |
| Powell, R.A., Single, H.M., Lloyd, K.R., 1996. | Focus groups in mental health research: enhancing the validity of user and provider questionnaires. | |
| Scott, A. J. 2010 | Focussing in on focus | doi:10.1016/j.landusepol.2 |

| | | groups: Effective participative tools or cheap fixes for land use policy? | 010.12.004 |
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| **Task 4: Your experience of working on the tool** | |
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| **Have you done any research/consultancy work on this tool in terms of its development, testing and/or evaluation?** | This tool has been used in a variety of research projects, including the champions course (see champion tool) which used focus groups to construct the session: ultimately providing the community with a 'buy in' and ownership of the module. This enabled members to choose speakers and tailor the course to suit their needs. |
| **Guidance** | For Tasks 5-7, please also try to consider the **future** development and application of this tool in the TABLES project in your answers. |
| **Task 5: Incorporating the ecosystem approach (EA) and ecosystem services (ES)** | |
| **Using examples (from practice, research or consultancy), explain how EA and/or ES are currently incorporated in/by the tool** | The general nature of this tool results in EA and ES incorporation being relatively easy: an explicit focus on ecosystems can be the main drive of a group for instance. In a similar manner to other public engagement tools, focus groups can be tailored to suit the needs of the topic or individuals. A focus group could be used to better engage the community on information regarding ecosystems and generate feedback on key decisions. The tool can also be used to provide the community with some form of control, thus touching on numerous principles of the wider EA. |
| **How could the ecosystem approach and/or ecosystem services be (further) incorporated within the existing tool?** | The tool could be used in a more explicit fashion to aid with local control and the delegation of appropriate decision-making to this scale. |

| **Task 6: Situating the tool within priority questions/criteria arising from the scoping interviews** | | |
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| **Explain how the tool can be situated within the priority questions/criteria that arose in the scoping interviews** | **Priority question/criteria** | **Does your tool address/implement this question/criteria? Or does it have the potential if it was better integrated with an EA/ES approach?** *Please explain how.* |
| | **Language and communication** | |
| | 1. Contribution to aiding the development of shared vocabulary within which principles of EA and ES can be | The tool's core focus involves bringing together stakeholders: whether communities, organisations or other, there is an opportunity to use focus groups to engage multiple actors regarding EA and ES. |

| | | shared with multiple stakeholders across built and/or natural environment | |
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| | 2. | Capacity of the tool to develop shared understandings of the many identities and values of places from the perspectives of multiple visitors, residents and businesses | Focus groups enable individuals to present their perspectives and values in a relaxed setting. Furthermore, the tool has often been argued to be more effective than interviews, since actors could feel more comfortable in the informal setting and are willing to divulge more material. |
| | 3. | Capacity of the tool to improve or enable engagement across different publics so avoiding the usual suspect problem | This entirely depends on how the tool is used, but ultimately focus groups allow those who lay outside the 'usual suspects' realm to have a say on matters. |
| **Learning from experience/pedagogy** | | | |
| | 4. | Capacity of the tool to help reveal and value 'hidden' assets that are not recognised by communities or publics that use them | Focus groups needs close coordination and thus the chair is able to steer the discussion depending on the topic in question. Arguably, the tool could be used to raise awareness, and discussion, regarding EA/ES. |
| | 5. | Extent to which tool is building on other tools or EA/ES progress | This is not applicable here. |
| | 6. | Extent to which tool is locally derived or grounded or can be adjusted to closely reflect 'local' context. Is the tool suitable for an open source approach? | The tool is solely grounded in local context and can be engineered to rely entirely on community views. This fits well with the EA principles which call for this form of engagement. |
| | 7. | Extent to which the tool is open to interpretation and application in a variety of forms (that reflect 'cultural' differences) | The tool is entirely interpretive, with coordinators able to shape the discussion, or session, around specific topics or events. |
| **Developing and selecting tools** | | | |
| | 8. | Is the tool dependent on a specific funding source? How onerous is the application procedure? What are the chances of success? | The tool does not require funding specifically; however considerable time will need to be sent arranging a focus group and using the material after the discussions (writing-up stage). |
| | 9. | Does skills development (essential or optional?) and support exist for the tool or is there a body to ensure the optimal and correct use of it? | Bodies exist which advise on the use of focus groups, such as the British Sociological Association, who provide guidance on best practice. |
| | 10. | Extent to which current statutory hooks can be exploited by the tool or will benefit the quality or application of the tool (e.g. NNPF's duty to cooperate, SUDS, ecol. networks) | The tool's ability to engage with the local scale could fit well with several 'statutory hooks': the NPPF for instance, promotes more engagement with communities on matters such as ecosystems. |
| **Informing resultant policies effectively** | | | |

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| 11. Extent to which the tool informs or improves policies/decisions.  What does the tool cover? (full range of positive and negative economic, social and environment impacts / tradeoffs?) | The open format of the tool allows for policies to be discussed in a format with communities. Furthermore, decisions can be passed through this mechanism, ensuring that certain actors have a say with choices. |
| 12. How does the tool link into the planning system (applications and processes).  At what cost / extra burden? | The tool does not explicitly link in with the planning system, but can be morphed to focus specifically on this element if required. |

**Delivering management objectives**

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| 13. Suitability or capacity of the tool to assist with managing visitor needs and pressures within protected areas / the considered area? How? | The engaging nature of this tool enables objectives to be discussed in an open format, with solutions perhaps being presented from a variety of actors who may lie outside the usual decision-making structures. |

**Local ownership/new governance**

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| 14. To what extent can the tool assist in developing statutory plans (local and management plans) and improve ownership and use by publics? | The public element of this tool is perhaps its strongest point in the context of EA/ES. Essentially, focus groups can be designed to give communities direct input into management plans or other strategies: providing a voice to the local scale. |
| 15. To what extent does/could the tool contribute to a new form of community governance in management of the environment? | As stated in previous sections, the tool enables communities to directly influence decision-makers, if used effectively. It is important that any knowledge exchanged in a focus group is recorded and fed back to those with such responsibilities. |

**Improved tools: understanding flows, interconnections and spatial issues**

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| 16. Capacity to improve spatial understandings of the flows and interactions of various ecosystem services between sectors and at different scales | The tool can be used in an educational capacity, getting actors to discuss issues regarding ES if required: helping to breakdown local flows and the importance of natural services. |
| 17. Capacity of the tool to reconcile assessments of options and benefits across different scales (and sectors) | The feedback generated from focus groups could allow the assessment of a multitude of options: from large national organisations to local communities. A variety of individuals could be engaged in this manner. |
| 18. Extent to which the tools is capable or can be manipulated to work across sectoral and administrative boundaries | The tool is entirely flexible and can be manipulated to work across boundaries. |
| 19. Extent to which the tool can handle data shortages and gaps (or is effectiveness considerably compromised?) | This is irrelevant in the context of this tool. |
| 20. To what extent has/could the tool put landscape/nature conservation and designated species/sites on the radar | This tool has huge potential with engaging the 'unusual suspects' on aspects relating to landscape and nature generally: focus groups can be engineered |

| | (positively or resulting in resentment?) | to inform communities and instigate discussions surrounding these themes. | |
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| | *Please add any further comments here:* | | |

| Task 7: A SWOT analysis of the tool |
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| Referring back to the relevant policy and academic literature (listed in Task 3), plus your own expertise (listed in Task 4) and the way in which the tool is situated within the priority questions/criteria (listed in Task 6), please complete a summary SWOT analysis ensuring that each point is well justified | **Strengths** *(of the tool in delivering intended outcomes)*<br><br>• Focus groups are able to engage with a variety of scales, including the local: involving communities in decision-making processes.<br><br>• The tool is entirely flexible and can be constructed around themes designated by the coordinator.<br><br>• The focus group format allows views to be expressed in an informal environment; perhaps enabling those otherwise without a voice to feed into issues raised.<br><br>• The tool can be used in an educational capacity, engaging communities regarding EA/ES. |
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| | **Weaknesses** *(factors that detract from the tool's ability to deliver intended outcomes)*<br><br>• Focus groups need a strong chair; otherwise discussion could lapse from the original aims.<br><br>• This tool has a tendency to fall into disorder if not correctly coordinated. Discussions can sometimes erupt into feuds.<br><br>• This takes a considerable amount of time to set up, run effectively and write up following the group discussions. |

**Opportunities** *(consider opportunities for application of the ecosystem approach and services)*

- EA and ES can become the focal point of this tool, with actors engaging the concepts on an informal level and discussing related issues.

- The tools education angle could inform communities on the concepts and how they play a part in decision-making processes.

- Ultimately, communities can play a part in this decision-making process: providing those without a voice, something to say on EA/ES-related issues.

**Threats** *(factors which negatively affect the tool and its outcomes)*

- Logistical issues could play a part in affecting this tool: accommodation needs to be sought close to communities or other actors involved in these groups. A mutual, central location tends to make this easier for those taking part.

- On the topic of logistics, it is important to realise that focus groups involve a variety of people, and thus it may be difficult arranging a suitable time for everyone, depending on the context.

| Threat | Seriousness (high, medium, low) | Probability of occurrence (high, medium, low) |
|---|---|---|
| Logistics | Medium | High |

Please add further comments here:

| Guidance | *Please now use the remainder of the document (box below) to make any general comments, observations or analyses of the tool* |
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| **Further comments** | |