



Explanation

The Sustainable Food Places programme recognises how important it is that food partnerships and local place-based food strategies reflect the many communities and sectors they represent. The SFP programme adopts a whole food system and cross-sectoral approach that aims to incorporate the range of different perspectives, issues and challenges faced by local people, organisations, and businesses. To do this food partnerships have undertaken different activities to gather information from people, organisations, and businesses in their food systems.

This **Food focus group facilitation** tool focuses on participatory processes that can be used to facilitate the engagement and inclusion of different groups and communities of interest in food partnerships and food strategy development and delivery. It is important that Food Focus Groups are seen as part of the ongoing process of responding to the interests, needs and challenges faced by different groups and communities in your place – an integral part of the food partnership. Engagement with these groups is not a one-off at the beginning of the process – it should be part of the partnership's engagement work throughout the lifespan of a food strategy. Neither is it only about listening and learning – Food Focus Groups can become directly and actively involved in food strategy delivery and representatives of the groups could be involved in partnership decision-making on strategy and governance.

SFP has particularly recognised the importance of including the voices of vulnerable and marginalised communities, including individuals experiencing food poverty, in the food partnerships. Over the next few years SFP will be listening to and learning from the experiences of food partnerships and others outside SFP and co-producing additional tools and guides to support community representation.

Introduction

The aim of a **food focus group** is to listen to and understand the opinions and views of stakeholders on the local food system and how to make it more sustainable. Depending on your capacity and resources you may want to convene focus groups for a range of food system stakeholders as well as different vulnerable and marginalised communities whose voices are seldom heard.

Vulnerable and marginalised communities could include:

- Specific ethnic minority communities
- Families on low incomes
- People living with long term conditions e.g. Diabetes, Heart Disease
- Homeless and rough sleepers
- Refugee and asylum seekers
- People with learning difficulties

- People with sensory impairments
- Care leavers
- Young offenders
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities

It might also be helpful to hear from specific age group categories e.g.

- Teenagers
- Over 65's
- Young adults

Planning

When setting up a focus group there are a few factors to pay careful attention to:

- **Location:** Think carefully about where the focus group will take place to ensure it is in a space that is safe, comfortable, and accessible to all group participants. Where possible go to existing gatherings in venues where communities are located rather than organising a new session away from the community.
- **Layout:** Seating participants in a circle can help with engagement.
- **Size:** Who should be there? A good size for a focus group is about 10 participants.
- **Recording:** How will the discussion be recorded? Do you need a notetaker / flip chart?
- **Timing:** No longer than 2 hours.
- **Use of information:** How will the information gathered be used? Participants need clear information on this and may need to agree to use of quotes.

Programme Design and the Role of Facilitator

To maximise inclusion and participation it is important to design a programme that includes a combination of activities aimed at facilitating participation, the sharing of opinions and engagement in answering a series of questions.

The facilitators job is to guide and structure the discussion and to create the conditions and process that enable the group to progress. Remember the role of the facilitator is to stay neutral and to conduct the discussion without trying to secure a particular outcome. Effective facilitation is a skilled job which involves:

- Creating an inclusive environment
- Communicating clear guidelines and instructions
- Active listening
- Managing any conflict in the group and overseeing group dynamics
- Building consensus
- Timekeeping

It is a good idea to plan out the programme for the session in some detail, thinking carefully about the questions that will be asked, the tools and activities that will enable greater participation and the timeframe.

Questions

Think carefully about the way questions are asked. It is also recommended to sequence questions from opening questions (to get people talking), general questions (introducing broad themes), focused questions (to start looking in more detail), to concluding questions (to summarise thinking).

- Use open ended questions e.g. what do you think of the food partnership?
- Avoid asking questions that can be answered with a 'yes' or 'no'.
- Ask questions that encourage participants to think back e.g. Think back over the past year of the things that your food project did. What went particularly well?
- It can be good to finish by asking 'Have we missed anything?'

Example questions for individuals

- How easy is it for you to get the food you want?
- How important is it for you to eat healthily?
- How easy is it for you to eat healthily?
- How important is it for you to eat local produce?
- How easy is it for you to eat local produce?
- What would you consider to be a healthy diet?
- Which issues are priorities and how could they be addressed?
- Do you agree with the draft aims and objectives?

Themes

To maximise participation in focus group conversations it might be helpful to structure the group with key themes around food e.g. Food and Health, before digging deeper into more specific issues.

Example themes for conversations with individuals

Your Food and Your Health	Attitudes on the meaning and importance of a 'healthy' diet
Your Food Environment	Food access, who purchases food and where, factors influencing food choices and food security, how often food is eaten out of home, how easy it is to get the food that you feel is good for you and what you want
Your Food Choices	The bigger food picture and the way food choices impact on the local and global food system, attitudes and opinions on food waste, awareness of relationship between food and climate change

Tools and Activities

There are a range of tools and activities which enable interaction, the sharing of knowledge and experience on an equal footing. These activities allow everyone, regardless of language skills, background, and literacy skills the opportunity to contribute their perspective and opinions. Whilst

there are a wide range of tools available this guide highlights a few of the key ones that have proved useful for food focus groups.

It may also be useful to read through the [Leapfrog Food Stories Toolbox](#) in the SFP Toolkit.

Warm up / Who's Who

A good way of starting off is to have an introductory question. This can be pre-written on a flip chart for example prior to the group arrival. Its purpose is to help participants relax about speaking and sharing thoughts in front of others and for them to get to know each other's names.

What to do:

- Write an opening question on a flip chart ready for the start of the session.
- Keep it general and open e.g. Going for the Silver SFP Award – what one word sums up how you are feeling? Or 'Good Food in Birmingham – what does it mean to you?' Or 'A healthy diet – what 3 words sum it up for you?'
- Provide people with post-it notes and ask them to write their ONE word and add it to the flip chart.
- Ask people to introduce themselves and share their one word along with a short explanation. (Alternatively split into pairs and discuss the question then the pairs share each other's responses and thoughts)
- Capture any additional information relating to the context for their word/s on a flipchart.

Spectrum Exercise

Participants are given a statement or question by the facilitator e.g. 'How easy do you find it to access a healthy diet?' They have a few moments to think about it and are then asked to position themselves on an imaginary line or continuum. In this instance one end of the line would represent 'easy' and the other end 'difficult'. The facilitator can then ask participants to share their opinions and feelings on the topic with the rest of the group if they wish.

What to do:

- Introduce the activity, explain there is no right or wrong answer, this is about exploring ideas. If you are discussing sensitive topics explain that anything shared with the group needs to be left in the room at the end and not shared further.
- Introduce the question or statement – keep it brief and allow participants time to reflect on it.
- Ask participants to stand along an imaginary line to reflect where they stand on this particular question or statement. If they are not sure or have no opinion then they should stand near the middle of the line. (An alternative is to add a cross to a line drawn on a flip chart)
- Invite participants to share their opinions / view with the rest of the group. If the issue is particularly sensitive you may wish to ask participants to share in pairs first.
- Take a sample of people at either end of the spectrum as well as the middle to get a range of perspectives.
- You can encourage friendly debate / discussion between different viewpoints.
- Prompt questions
 - Why are you standing where you are?
 - What factors influence your position?

- You may want to repeat the exercise with other statements or questions.

This tool allows people to open up about sensitive issues as talking about where you are on the line, can be easier than talking directly about yourself. This is essentially a listening exercise, so ensure that the room is not too big to allow participants to hear. This tool can be used to evaluate almost any theme however, including the success of an activity, project effectiveness or participant confidence. This tool can also be useful for those with low levels of literacy where writing can be a barrier.

Informal Facilitated Open Discussion

In addition to working individually and in pairs it is also helpful to facilitate whole group conversations on key questions.

What to do:

- Prepare the main question/s that the group will discuss e.g. Access to a good diet - is this different for people from your culture or ethnic community?
- Prepare a series of prompt questions that you can use to encourage participants to consider different aspects of the question. E.g. you might want to consider physical access to food so might prompt with: what makes it easy or difficult to access shops? How far do you need to travel to access fresh food?
- Whilst people are discussing it is good to record key points on a flipchart. Having the discussion visibly recorded helps the group see the progress it is making.
- Summarise what is being said. This can be done by simply reflecting back to the group e.g. 'So, John agrees with Karen that this would be helpful to increase access to a healthy diet'.
- Try to identify key themes, areas of consensus and differences of opinion.
- To ensure that everyone has a chance to share their thoughts it might be useful to structure the discussion with a 'round robin' whereby everyone takes it in turn to speak for 2 or 3 minutes.
- With a larger group of participants, it might be better to break the group into two smaller groups to discuss and then feed back to the main group. This will enable more participation.
- Summarise key points at the end of the discussion for follow up / next steps.

Evaluation 'H'

Beyond a standard continuum or line method that allows participants to position themselves on a line of possibilities, a more mature focus group that has met more than once may wish to progress to other tools such as Evaluation H.

Evaluation H enables participants to also identify the positive and negative factors that influence their position on the spectrum line. Through a facilitated process, this can be used as a focus to discuss what needs to happen to build upon and strengthen positive factors and to overcome or address negative factors to support an overall objective.

More information on use of this tool can be found in our [Food Group Workshop](#) guide.

Key Statement Verification

Another tool that can be used to explore issues and opinions in greater depth and therefore most likely to be used by a focus group that has met more than once is Key Statement Verification. Further details on this tool are included in our [Food Group Workshop](#) guide.

Evaluation Person

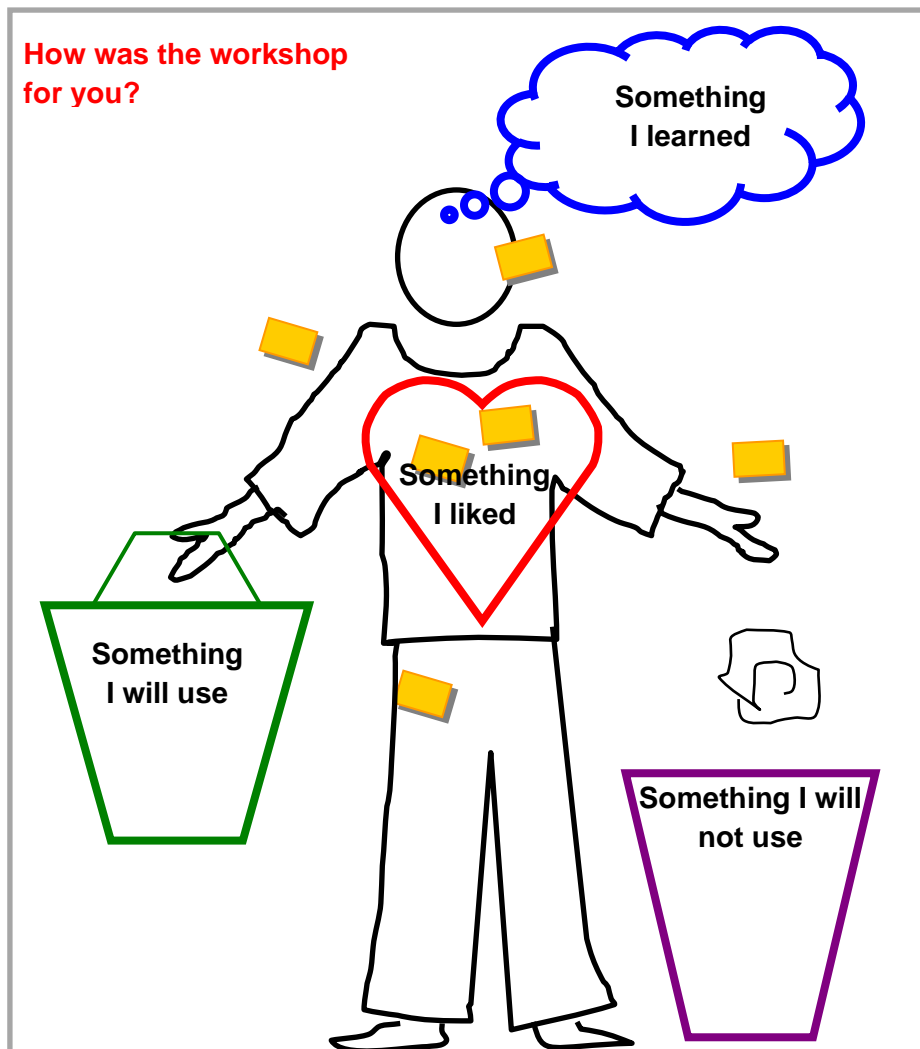
At the end of the session it is helpful to get feedback from participants. This can be done by asking questions such as:

- How has this session been for you?
- What stands out as important for you?

A simple way of gathering feedback on the session is to use a drawing of for example a person.

What to do:

- Draw a large outline of a person on flip chart paper like that below. In each of the bubbles give space for participants to add their own post-it notes at the end of the session.
- Stick it to the wall where it is easily accessed by participants.
- Ask people to add their comments / feedback before they leave.



Example Food Focus Group Outline – BAME Food Poverty

1. INTRODUCTORY QUESTION

As people arrive and settle

A GOOD DIET

Write down three words or short sentences that sum up what this means to YOU?

2. WELCOME AND INTRODUCTION

- Welcome and thank you
- Why the session is happening / How the outputs will be used / How it will work

3. INTRODUCTORY QUESTION

- Who you are
- What 3 words sum up a 'good diet' for you and why?

4. ACCESSING A GOOD DIET

How easy is it for you to access a good diet?

- Stand on the line between **VERY EASY** and **NOT AT ALL EASY**
- Share in pairs why you are standing where you are
- Discuss as a group

Prompt questions: Access, Time, Support, Action.

- Record the responses to the discussion prompts on a flipchart
- Try to identify consensus and key themes or key differences of opinion

5. PEOPLE LIKE YOU

- Lead an open discussion
- Record responses on post-its or on 2 flipcharts

Access to a good diet...

is this different for people from your cultural or ethnic community?

is it more difficult or easier for people from your cultural or ethnic community?

- Discuss as a group

6. CONCLUSIONS AND EVALUATION

7. CLOSE