Improving your evidence

Using qualitative research to assess your impact

This guide highlights the things to consider when planning qualitative research. Qualitative research is valuable to understanding the impact of organisations. It adds to quantitative measures of impact, such as reoffending rates, by describing how and why things work. This guide aims to help you collect a manageable amount of high-quality information and ensure that qualitative research you undertake is robust and informative.

What is qualitative research?

Research is often divided into two types: qualitative and quantitative. Quantitative research is concerned with measuring numbers or amounts of things. Qualitative research focuses on experiences, themes, types and qualities—things that are harder to measure. Qualitative research nearly always involves talking to service users and stakeholders about their experiences and perceptions, and allows people to answer questions in their own terms. Qualitative discussions are more free-flowing and can give greater insight into participants’ views; identifying not only what they know, think and do, but also why.

Qualitative research can be used on its own but is best deployed as part of a mixed-methods approach, combined with numerical data\(^1\). Qualitative research with service users is particularly valuable, but the approach is also suited to interviewing other stakeholders, including staff, volunteers, partners and funders, community groups and people working in other services. In our experience people tend to prefer engaging in research in this way as there is greater scope for them to express themselves.

The following are some of the potential benefits of qualitative research for Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise (VCSE) organisations:

- While numerical ratings of a service user’s experience can tell you how your service is doing, qualitative research can provide more information to help you improve it.
- Quantitative data can show that your project\(^2\) caused a change, but in-depth interviews or focus groups can help you discover how that happened, helping you adapt and refine your project for other contexts and user groups.
- Statistics can be a powerful way to show impact achieved, but well-researched case studies can show a richer, more personal story of change.

Qualitative research is particularly helpful when you are aiming to understand the experience of particular subgroups of service users, or those who have achieved particular outcomes, in order to learn why.

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\(^1\) We like the maxim: “No numbers without stories, no stories without numbers”

\(^2\) Throughout this guidance we use the word ‘project’ to refer to any kind of ‘intervention’ or ‘service’ being provided by a VCSE organisation, usually with the aim of reducing reoffending.
Quality in qualitative research

Qualitative evidence is sometimes criticised for being anecdotal and lacking rigour—it is also associated with "cherry-picking" success stories to illustrate annual reports rather than describing a representative and accurate picture of a service’s impact. However, these criticisms can be overcome and the rigour of qualitative research improved through systematic data collection and steps to ensure that you get a representative picture of the project. To help with this, the Cabinet Office has produced a framework for assessing qualitative evidence which looks at practical ways to conduct, improve and use qualitative evidence to study impact,³ which we have drawn from in writing this guidance.

Sampling in qualitative research

Qualitative research involves engaging with people and talking to them and can be time consuming and generate a large amount of data to analyse. For example, if your project reaches 50 people, setting up interviews and analysing transcripts for each of them will be expensive and may divert staff from other tasks. However, it’s perfectly acceptable to decide not to gather information from all your service users. Sampling - systematically selecting a smaller group of participants from your overall ‘population’ - can give a reliable account of the bigger picture.

The way you select your sample has implications for the conclusions you can draw. Sampling for qualitative research has a slightly different aim to sampling in quantitative research. In quantitative research, the goal is to draw a sample which is mathematically representative of the whole, so can be used to draw firm conclusions about the population. In qualitative research precise or definitive conclusions are less important so sample sizes can be smaller—the goal is to learn about the range of experiences. Instead, qualitative researchers talk about reaching a ‘saturation point’: the point when they have spoken to enough people that the same themes are being repeated and they are learning nothing new.

Although samples for qualitative research can be smaller, it’s still vital to ensure the sample resembles the whole group as closely as possible. Therefore you should:

- Have a clear idea of the characteristics of the group you are researching.
- Create a sample that attempts to reflect the range of different people in the group—for example if your service reaches equal numbers of men and women, you should try to ensure your qualitative sample matches this.

A particularly important goal of sampling for qualitative research is involving people who have been less engaged in a project, and those who do not volunteer themselves to be consulted. This is important, because if you only collect information from those who have engaged then you are not speaking to a representative group and the research will not be credible.

For further information on sampling, refer to our ‘Introduction to sampling’ guidance document (page 6 looks at qualitative research).

**Longitudinal research**

To show change over time—how your service has affected the people you are working with—it helps if your research is longitudinal; which involves speaking to the same people more than once. Longitudinal qualitative research provides rich information on people’s perspectives and how and why they have changed over time, meaning there is more scope to find stronger evidence of impact. If your project is relatively light-touch you may only need to interview people twice—once before and once after the service. But ideally, and particularly for more intense work, you will speak to them before, during and after, with a follow-up some months later to assess long-term change.

Service users may be difficult to find after you have finished working with them so it is important that strategies are put in place from the start of your research to maximise contact with participants and encourage them to re-engage. These could include reminder texts, birthday cards and incentives. For further information about engaging service users in research, see our guidance.
Methods of qualitative research

Various methods can be used to collect qualitative data. All are intended to generate rich verbal, written or video accounts of people’s experiences and attitudes. Not all methods are mentioned below, but these are probably the most useful.

Interviews

One of the most common methods of collecting qualitative data is interviewing people (i.e. talking to them 1-1, sometimes referred to as an ‘in-depth interview’). The table below describes three different approaches to interviewing:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview approaches</th>
<th>Structured</th>
<th>Semi-structured</th>
<th>Unstructured</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Questions are agreed in advance, interviewers stick rigidly to a script.</td>
<td>Main questions are fixed, but follow up questions can be improvised.</td>
<td>Interviewer may have a list of broad topics, but no set questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>When to use</td>
<td>Useful for collecting standardised, survey style information.</td>
<td>Most common in qualitative work—allows expanded opinions on the topics of the interview.</td>
<td>More appropriate for very exploratory research questions or academic research. Direction is set by the interviewee, rather than the interviewer, so topics vary.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sampling</td>
<td>Sample sizes can be large and commitment/time is minimal. Random sampling is recommended for maximum rigour.</td>
<td>Longer interviews require greater commitment/time, so more suited to smaller samples targeting particular participants.</td>
<td>Longer interviews require greater commitment, so more suited to smaller samples targeting particular participants.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transcribing</td>
<td>Easy because all responses are on the same template.</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Time consuming, full transcription or detailed notes and recording may be needed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data analysis</td>
<td>Easy to compare and analyse, but detail and richness limited.</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>Difficult to analyse, but detailed and rich data.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adapted from Arksey and Knight (1999) Interviewing for Social Scientists. London: SAGE.
Of the options above, semi-structured interviewing is likely to be the most promising approach for organisations looking for manageable amounts of qualitative data. The approach allows you to guide the direction and themes of the interview, while still allowing the respondent to articulate their experiences in detail. In addition, a conversational style builds trust between interviewer and participant.

Another valuable approach is to combine structured ‘tick box’ type questions with more open-ended questions within the same interview. This will provide both numerical impact alongside richer qualitative information.

In qualitative research interviews questions should be:

- **Open ended** to encourage full responses. Minimise yes/no questions and instead try questions beginning with how, what, why and where to encourage interviewees to explore their answers.
- **Clear and in plain English**. Avoid long or complex questions. Instead of asking ‘What was the impact of…?’ try ‘Did anything change after…?’.
- **Framing rather than leading**. Do not point interviewees towards a particular response. Instead of ‘Did you feel better after…’, ask ‘How did you feel after…’
- **Neutral**. Using emotive language or asking in a way that sounds accusatory may close down people’s responses. Instead of ‘Did you do…’, ask ‘How many times have you done…’ to imply that others also do so.

When interviewing, your aim is to keep the conversation flowing and be responsive to the interviewees’ answers. It’s best not to have too many pre-prepared questions that you read out, otherwise it’s likely to turn into more of a structured interview. The best approach is to develop a list of general themes and prompts (known as a topic or interview guide) and keep a copy of this handy to check you have covered all the topics you need.

**The role of the interviewer**

The interviewer’s role is to gain the confidence of the interviewee and encourage them to give candid and detailed responses around particular topic areas. Aside from well-worded questions these following tips may also help you get the right sort of engagement:

- Don’t start the interview cold—make several minutes of small talk and ask easy, non-threatening questions to set the interviewee at ease.
- Signpost the interview clearly by indicating when you are changing topics—e.g. ‘Thanks for that answer. I’d like to ask you a bit about X now…’
- Use probing questions. If the interviewee’s answer is short, reply with ‘Can you tell me more about that?’ rephrase their last point to prompt them to expand, or leave silence for them to elaborate.
- Don’t interrupt, even if answers are long. Guide the interviewee back to the topic with the next question.

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4 Appendix 1 provides an illustrative interview guide for a service user interview. Furthermore, this is a useful resource for developing an interview guide [https://www.msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/interviewing.htm](https://www.msu.edu/user/mkennedy/digitaladvisor/Research/interviewing.htm)
Know your audience—have an understanding of the context of the interviewee. Being aware of slang and sensitive topics will help conversation flow and build trust.

Across the whole interview try to move from general questions and topics at the beginning towards specific questions towards the end.

Consider ‘peer’ interviewing, where service users interview each other. Peer interviews can provide richer data than conventional interview techniques and are more democratic, with interviewers and interviewees both sharing their experiences, rather than an interviewer extracting information from a participant. The participant may develop more rapport with their interviewer, so they can probe more deeply while avoiding the feeling of interrogation. You can read more about involving service users in your evaluation here.

**Telephone interviews**

Telephone interviews can be a useful way to save time for both the interviewer and interviewee and can also reduce travel time and costs. However, the quality of engagement and discussion is nearly always better in face-to-face interviews. Furthermore, in some cases, it may be difficult to get hold of service users and contact details may change frequently. The location in which the call is taken may be unsuitable for sharing sensitive and private information.

**Case Study: Safe Ground, interviews**

This evaluation of the long-term effects of Safe Ground’s prison-based relationship programme Family Man used a quantitative survey and in-depth interviews. The study showed that the programme improved participants’ confidence and helped build social bonds. Qualitative work with participants and supporters explored the ways in which they had changed their attitudes and behaviour towards their families and in other aspects of their lives.

Read the report: [The 'Family Man' impact study (2011)](#)

**Focus groups**

Focus groups are interviews with small groups of people. Numbers should be restricted—perhaps to around 6-8 participants—in order to prevent sub-groups emerging and to make transcribing easier. In some cases, mini-groups of 3 or 4 may be most suitable.

Focus groups may be useful:

- Where time is too limited to conduct individual interviews.
- For a collective discussion amongst a similar or differing group – the group dynamics can encourage more lively and interesting discussions.
- Where participants do not feel confident about taking part in individual interviews.

Group interviews provide *group data*—participants play off against each other. This can be positive, allowing ideas to develop and be discussed in detail. However, you should note that
an individual's response in a focus group cannot be considered in the same way as an individual interview. Participants influence each other, and responses should be seen in that context. When analysing focus group data, avoid talking about magnitude—3 out of 6 participants making a statement doesn't necessarily mean that 50% of participants agree with it, particularly as they can be influenced by each other.

The interviewers role is to facilitate discussion and guide the conversation to topics of interest. It may help to use someone who is experienced in dealing with group dynamics and allowing all members of the group to speak, minimising the risk of one or two people dominating. A clear purpose and list of topics prepared before the discussion are essential.

Using interactive tools and visual aids in group sessions can also help provoke discussion, particularly helping children and young people to engage. You may also consider sending out discussion points or tasks in advance for the group to consider.

Case Study: Victim Support, interviews and focus groups

Victim Support used interviews and focus groups alongside a quantitative survey to investigate how people with mental health problems experience crime and the justice system. The study found that those with mental health problems were more likely to be victims of crime and suffered more adverse effects. Qualitative data gave rich detail on how crime had affected people’s lives, and their experiences of the police and courts system.

Read the report: At risk, yet dismissed (2013)

The disadvantages of focus groups are:

- They can be hard to set-up and organise (you have to find a suitable location and get everyone there at the same time).
- They can be hard to moderate (especially groups of young people, who tend to be less forthcoming).
- They are not good for discussing sensitive or personal topics.
- Unless you are skilled at drawing-out quieter members of the group, the views will tend to be strongly influenced by the most vocal or dominant participants.
Participatory methods

Research is participatory when the people being researched are actively involved in designing the research or collecting data. For example, participatory methods have been used in international development projects to give local people a say in how projects are run, and to use local knowledge to better tailor the project and its measurement to specific contexts.

Participation in impact measurement

Participatory methods can be used to collect qualitative evidence of impact. Project participants gather data using methods like photography or video, giving a highly personal account of their own lives and experiences. Other participatory methods include creating diaries or ‘route-maps’ with users, in which they plot events on a timeline. These methods can help to highlight the link between certain life events and levels of engagement with a project, giving a sense of external influences.

Participatory methods can give rich and valid information on the effects of a project, but are resource intensive and lack objectivity or any method of comparing impacts on different individuals. For more information, see resources from Better Evaluation and details on participatory methods in development at http://www.participatorymethods.org/.

Ethnography

Ethnography is about observing things from the point of view of those being studied. So rather than talking to people about their experiences, the ethnographer joins in and sees it first-hand. It may have applications in situations like drop-in services, where researchers can study how people are engaging with staff. There is also a small but growing interest in ethnography as a tool for project design. For more information, see this article from Ethnography Matters about using ethnography for ‘troubled’ families.

Lighter-touch observation techniques may be a more manageable approach for organisations with fewer resources and it may work better when done by an independent researcher, who can integrate themselves from scratch without preconceptions.

Documents and other sources

Though qualitative data collected face-to-face is ideal, in some cases you may not need to collect data directly—the information you need could be found in existing documents. For example you may have some qualitative data from open-ended questions within a quantitative survey or from key workers’ case notes. Similarly, media articles about a particular topic can be useful, or you may want to analyse local strategy documents to show variation in attitudes or services.

Although this data is already available, collecting and analysing it systematically is still important. It will help to show that you have included data from all participants or a systematically selected sample or that you have completed a thorough search for publically available material. If you confine your search to a certain area—for example, documents
from a certain set of local authorities or media articles from certain outlets—make that clear when you are writing up your results.

**Case Study: St Giles Trust**, interviews, focus groups, observations and documents

This qualitative process evaluation of the St Giles Trust Peer Advice Project combines several methods, designed to assess how the scheme was working in practice rather than showing its impact. The variety of qualitative data helped the organisation to fine-tune the project. In addition, the data collected also indicated that the impact of peer mentoring schemes is likely to be positive.

Read the report: [Peer advice project: An evaluation (2009)]

**Case study approaches**

Case studies are already widely used by VCSE organisations. They are not a method of data collection in themselves, rather an approach that focusses on gathering a range of evidence about a small number of cases. To show your impact in a balanced way through case studies, you should choose your cases systematically (as you would a sample for interviews or surveys). In particular, you need to capture a wide spectrum of experiences of your service users, not just the cases in which the project worked best.

To create credible case studies, choose a small sample of cases randomly or according to certain criteria. You can then use the methods described above to gather more information about each selected case (e.g. interviews, focus groups, observation and quantitative data alongside any reoffending rates, articles and documents relating to the case). The aim is to build up enough information to createa rich description of how your project has (or hasn’t) affected the individuals, reasons for change, and other factors that were important.

**Ethics and data protection**

As with other research methods, it is important to gain informed consent from participants in qualitative research. You should inform people about the purpose of the research, how the data will be used and ask for their agreement to take part. It is often impossible to provide complete anonymity for people since many methods require direct contact with the person conducting the research. Ensuring that responses are kept confidential—changing names to identification numbers, for example—can help you get around this. It is important to make clear to the participant how the data will be used.

Personal data like names and addresses must be stored according to the Data Protection Act 1998. For further information, see our [guidance on engaging service users](#).
**Analysing qualitative data**

**Recording and transcribing**

When collecting interview data you will ideally make recordings\(^5\) which can then be transcribed for analysis. Transcribing can be done by hand or using voice-to-text software with recordings. There are also professional transcribing services but this can add to costs. Another option is to use voice-recognition or dictation software\(^6\), which can purchased for a one-time fee and should cut down transcription time considerably.

However, it isn’t always necessary to make full transcripts, particularly if you are writing the report yourself. If you chose not to transcribe it is important to make detailed notes and keep them safe. We also suggest doing it as soon after the interview as possible; you will forget a lot of important information quite quickly.

**Analysis in three steps**

Qualitative research generates large volumes of raw data such as interview transcripts, recorded conversations or observation notes, which can be a real challenge to make sense of. Perhaps the most important advice is to set aside some time to really *think* about what the information says and to try to draw out the common themes, similarities and differences.

Beyond this, we set out a three stage process below which will help you with this, but ultimately there is no right and wrong way to do it.

The **first step** is to read all your transcripts or notes closely and thoroughly, noting down interesting themes. Try to break down the sample into different segments (e.g. engagers vs. non engagers, different characteristics of users or stakeholder type) and look at the factors and issues associated with each. Think about different themes and issues—what seemed important? What have you learned? It can also be useful to bring different staff members, volunteers and researchers into a workshop at this stage, to gain a range of perspectives on the data.

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\(^5\) With the interviewee’s consent

\(^6\) For example, Dragon Naturally Speaking [http://www.nuance.co.uk/dragon/index.htm](http://www.nuance.co.uk/dragon/index.htm)
The second step is to create a set of themes and/or ‘questions’ to categorise the data. You may already have an idea of some categories you want to investigate—for example, positive or negative attitudes toward an aspect of your service. An example is shown in the chart above, but your themes are likely to be more specific to your project and more comprehensive.

The third step is to do a second close systematic reading of your data, looking at your themes and deciding which themes and questions are relevant to sections of data. Reading through a second time will help you to identify things you may have missed and apply the categories that you developed after the first reading. You can tag extracts of text to show where you have identified evidence of different themes, labelling transcripts physically or creating a sortable spreadsheet in Excel if your sample is larger. Specialist tools such as NVivo may help (partner academic institutions and researchers may already be able to access these tools).

Through this process you should see patterns and trends emerging that may help you to examine how your service has affected users and to link different outcomes to different factors or types of users. Within each category you should also start to collect good text extracts or verbatim comments that you can use to illustrate the findings when you write them up.

A process like this can produce better insights about what impact has occurred, how it has occurred, and the areas in which your service can improve. Because the method is thorough and systematic, it offers a more comprehensive approach than simply putting down your first thoughts. Furthermore, being able to describe how you have taken a systematic approach to analysis will make the research more compelling.

Triangulation

It will almost certainly be useful to back-up your qualitative findings with results from other methods (a process known as triangulation). For example, qualitative interviewing could help explain quantitative data on changes in your service user’s feelings of wellbeing measured through a standardised tool. Qualitative research provides depth to the quantitative data, while quantitative data supports the themes identified and helps readers to feel more confident in the results. Triangulation is useful during analysis: bringing in other data and sources to compare to your qualitative information may help you to understand it better.

Validity, reliability and researcher influence

Qualitative research can have high validity—it gets to the heart of the issue, measuring what is intending to be measured. However, it is difficult for the researcher to remain completely objective, and there is a risk that they could influence the responses given by participants. Qualitative research methods may therefore risk low reliability—the response to the question may vary depending on who is asking.

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Validity is the extent to which research measures or explores what you want it to.

Reliability is the extent to which a method gives similar results when repeated, and gives similar results if different researchers work with the same participant.

Factual questions tend to be reliable, but do not give in-depth information and may have lower validity than methods allowing open-ended discussion. A 5-point satisfaction scale cannot capture nuances in a respondent’s opinion of a service.

A practical way in which you can improve reliability is by ensuring your research could be repeated by someone else. It is therefore important to keep a detailed record of your data collection, remembering to record any of the following that apply to your project:

- How you chose your sample.
- Information about the chosen participants (without violating confidentiality).
- The method you used to gather data, including the questions you asked or the places you searched for information.

Often, an external independent researcher may be best placed to conduct qualitative research as they will find it easier to be objective. When questions are asked by staff themselves, service users may feel uncomfortable giving a negative response. On the other hand, it might be convenient for key workers to conduct qualitative research themselves when they are setting up a project or as part of the normal process of working with people.

What to do with your research

As we highlighted at the beginning, good quality qualitative research can give a compelling account of impact to funders, staff and service users, and we recommend communicating the findings through a written report. We have produced guidance on writing up your results, which you can access here.

It’s also worth noting that a distinct benefit of qualitative research for VCSE organisations, is that it should help you to make evidence-based improvements to your services. Qualitative research can provide very useful information on how your services are working and who they are working for, as well as whether they are working. You can enhance this further by specifically asking participants for recommendations and improvements for you to implement (as highlighted in the illustrative interview guide in Appendix 2). It may not be necessary to present these kinds of insights in a formal report, but it will still help to show funders and commissioners that you have been through this process and used evidence to improve what you do.
Appendix 1 – a template for a qualitative project

There are similarities between many organisations we’ve met through Improving Your Evidence—they work closely with people with a range of needs over an extended period of time. Based on this experience, we’ve created a general design for a longitudinal qualitative research project that you could use as a template for your research.

| Step 1: Draw a random sample of service users from your database. | We suggest a sample size of 20-30, but this will depend on project size and resources. |
| Step 2: Think about you evaluation questions and develop topic-guides. | Use your theory of change to identify intermediate outcomes and the intended change process, which should help you determine the questions to ask. Think about the information you really need to test whether the service is working and the conditions that might affect this, and develop these into a set of questions. Topic guides should not be too structured; rather they should help you cover all relevant questions. For examples, see here for an idea of overall topics (Box 1) and here for more detailed guides (Appendix A & B). We have also drafted an illustrative guide in Appendix 2 of this document. |
| Step 3: Decide who will conduct the research. | Our guidance on involving users in research may help you decide. |
| Step 4: Conduct preliminary interviews. | You will probably be talking to people when they first enter your service, so this stage can be integrated into normal working. Aim to understand peoples’ circumstances and needs and ask questions about their worries for the future, potential barriers to success and expectations for your project. It’s unlikely you will be able to record/transcribe this so make careful notes and keep them secure. Collect as much contact information as possible. |
| Step 5: Conduct further interviews. | This is a longitudinal project, which means you will be speaking to the same people twice or more: either before and after the project, or multiple times before, during, after the project (and later for follow-up). |
| Step 6: Try to keep in contact with all of the original sample. | It’s important for the credibility of the research to try to follow-up with all the service users you originally sampled. For those who didn’t stay engaged with the project you will need to try to find out why, and what outcomes they achieved without your support. |
| Step 7: Analyse the data. | You will have lots of data, so this part can be difficult. Start by involving everyone who has been involved in the research in a brainstorming session to get initial ideas. Try to break down the sample into different themes, segments and categories during an initial reading and then go through the data thoroughly for a second time tagging it with segments and categories. |
| Step 8: Write-up the findings. | Look to convey the key findings as succinctly as possible. Use quotes from users to illustrate the main points. Include methodological details and a description of the sample so that readers can see it was robust. Our guidance on reporting findings contains more detail on this. |

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8 We suggest that developing a ‘theory of change’ should be the starting point of all evaluation. For more information go to [http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/TheoryofChangeGuide.pdf](http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/TheoryofChangeGuide.pdf)


Appendix 2: Illustrative interview guide

These are set of possible questions for a qualitative interview. We have prepared these from the standpoint of interviewing a service user after they have been engaged with a project for some time. The questions may help you to develop your own discussion guide, but we would also encourage you to use your theory of change\textsuperscript{11} to help you think about questions that are relevant to your particular project.

**Introduction:**

**Explain to interviewee:**

- Purpose of the interview, how it will work and how long it will take.
- That you have a set of questions, but you don’t need to stick to them. That you are interested in hearing what they think.
- Data will be kept confidential and encourage interviewees to be as honest as possible. They don’t have to answer any questions they don’t want to.
- Findings will be used to help improve services for others.
- Ask for permission to record the interview.

**Getting to know them:** *The aim of this part is to get interviewee talking and to build up rapport with them.*

- What’s your name, how old are you, where do you live?
- Tell me about your life. What have you been doing? What are your interests? What are the most important things to you at the moment? Ask probing questions to get them talking but try to avoid talking about your service itself at this stage.
- What’s it like to live round here? Good things/bad things

**Background:**

- Can you tell me about how you came to use our service?
  - How did you first hear about us? Who sent you?
- What was going on in your life at the time?
  - How had you got to that place? Probe to get personal stories/ histories
  - What issues / challenges were you facing?
  - What were you worried about?
- What did you expect from our service (if anything?)
  - What did you think we would do?
  - How did you feel about us?
- Had you come across a service like ours before?

\textsuperscript{11} We suggest that developing a ‘theory of change’ should be the starting point of all evaluation. For more information go to [http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/TheoryofChangeGuide.pdf](http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/TheoryofChangeGuide.pdf)
Preliminary reflections on the service received:

- Tell me about the time you have spent with us.
  - What have you done?
  - Who have you met and worked with?
- Take me through it stage-by-stage. Try to get them to talk about the journey.

Current situation: This is a key part of the interview, stress that you want them to be as honest possible. If things haven’t changed, they need to feel free to feed that back to you.

- How, if at all, are things in your life different now, compared to when you first started coming to us?
  - IF CHANGES MADE Give me some examples about how things are different
- What are you doing with your time? Probe links to communities, positive activities, relationships with others, friends.
- Probe in detail around the intermediate outcomes in your theory of change.
  - FOR EACH: Has this changed at all? Is it better or worse? In what ways?
  - FOR EACH: What has caused this change? Why has it not changed?
  - FOR EACH: What do you hope to do next?
- Have your opinions or feelings about things changed at all since you came here?
  - In general, do you feel better or worse now than when you started with us?
- How, it at all, has our service helped? If it hasn’t please tell us.
  - What, in particular, has helped?
  - What has made the biggest difference?
  - What has not helped?
  - Is there anything you know now that you didn’t know before?
- Has anything else helped you to change? Probe in detail around other services, things that have happened in their lives.
- What difficulties or challenges have you faced since you started coming here?
  - IF APPLICABLE How have you overcome these?
  - What has helped you?
- Would your life have been different now if you hadn’t come to our service?
  - IF YES In what ways? PROBE IN DETAIL
  - IF YES How has our service helped you to…PROBE IN DETAIL AROUND CHANGES HIGHLIGHTED ABOVE
  - IF NO Why not? What would have made a difference?

Criminal behaviour: Depending on your project you may need to address this directly.

- Are you still doing things that might get you into trouble with the police?
- IF NO Can you see yourself keeping this up way? What are the risks of you returning to your old life?
- IF YES What is that? What is causing it? How can you stop?
- IF YEST What else do you need to help you stop?
**Attitudes towards the service provided:** As above, the aim of this section is to encourage interviewees to speak openly and honestly. You may find some repetition with the previous section – if you feel things have already been covered it’s OK to skip things and move on.

- What do you think of the service we provide?
- What are the good things about?
- What, in particular, has worked for you?
  - What has the service helped you to do?
- What are the bad things about it?
  - Which aspects of our service haven’t really helped or made things worse?
  - Were there times you thought we weren’t helping or felt like giving up? What happened?^{12}

- This is the point to probe around the key aspects of your service, which should be reflected in your theory of change. This could include specific aspects of service, but also the relationship you have aimed to establish with service users.

- What helped/encouraged you to keep coming, to engage with us?
- What have you told other people about our service?
- How could it have been better? PROBE TO GET AS MUCH DETAIL/FEEDBACK AS POSSIBLE

**Looking ahead**

- What do you still want to do? What are priorities for the future? What do you hope to change in the short-term and long-term?
- Have these priorities been influenced by our service at all?
- What support, if any, do you need to help you in future? Is that available?

**Conclusion**

- Could you describe in one sentence what this service has meant to you?
- What would have made it even better?
  - Tell me one thing we should stop doing?
  - Tell me one thing that we should start doing?
  - Tell me what one thing we should continue to do?
- Can we contact you again in a few months’ time to see how you are getting on?
- Is there anything else you would like to say about the time you have spent here?
  - Or any other questions at all?

**Thank interviewee. Provide further reassurance about confidentiality and how findings will be used. Pay incentive (if applicable).**

^{12} You may be talking to someone who has stopped using the service, in which case you will need to probe in detail to find out why?