

Picture the Change

Qualitative Research Toolkit – part one

An introduction to qualitative research and methods

1. Introduction

This guide is starting point for any organisation in the homelessness sector that is considering:

- carrying out qualitative research, or
- collecting qualitative evidence – e.g. case studies or client testimonials

The guide explains the difference between qualitative and quantitative data and highlights the benefits to your organisation of carrying out this kind of research, as well as some common pitfalls. It outlines different qualitative research methods and highlights the advantages and disadvantages of each approach.

Part two of this toolkit provides guidance on carrying out qualitative research with your clients and can be accessed here [insert link].

2. What is qualitative data?

There are two main kinds of data – quantitative and qualitative. Quantitative data is information that can be measured in numbers – the quantity of anything. For instance, the number of people that attended a day centre drop-in or stayed in an accommodation project over the last year.

Qualitative data is information that is harder to measure with numbers – for example, the thoughts and feelings of homeless service users. Qualitative research looks beyond numbers and asks how and why. For instance, you might know that fifteen people from your project moved into independent accommodation last year but this doesn't tell you what made the difference for that individual and gave them the support they needed to move on.

Qualitative research enables you to explore in greater depth the experiences of your service users. It also gives a voice to their lived experiences, which is often not heard. Qualitative research and evidence provides a greater understanding of factors such as their support needs, the decisions they make and the barriers they face in achieving their goals. Underpinning all this is understanding why these things occur. But it can also help you to understand how and why the quantitative outcomes you collect are achieved.

3. What qualitative research can do for you

a) Why use qualitative research?

The qualitative research you carry out and information you collect can then enable you to:

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- make service improvements
- demonstrate impact
- influence decision makers with your findings

Qualitative research seeks to understand the world through its participants - it usually takes an **inductive**, rather than **deductive** approach. This means that rather than using their research to test a pre-existing hypothesis, a qualitative researcher will allow their data to build their arguments. This way of working is often known as a “bottom-up” approach.

Qualitative research is also a more flexible way of working that often follows **an iterative process**. An iterative process is one that is repeated to allow amendments to take place that will better support the specified goal. In this context, a qualitative researcher may carry out interviews, analyse the data and reflect on how well the process is working towards the research goal. The researcher can then make amendments to the interview process or analysis that make the process more effective.

b) The advantages & disadvantages of qualitative research

Qualitative research allows you to explore multiple factors and provides information that has detailed meaning to the life of each individual you interview. This approach is more open to discovering new things as the research questions are more open than quantitative methods – it tells you the why/how that numbers don't. When it comes to using your research, the voice of your clients is also more compelling in making your argument heard.

However, qualitative research also has some pitfalls. For example, qualitative interviews are difficult to replicate as the interviewer themselves is the main instrument of data collection, which also makes the data is more susceptible to researcher bias. The rich and detailed data that you collect for your participants is subjective and this can make it difficult to compare interviews directly or generalise more broadly about the data set. It is also difficult to predict what the outcomes/findings of your research will be, which may be an issue if you want to evidence a particular issue or organisational priority. When looking at qualitative research it is also difficult to establish what a researcher did and how their conclusions were arrived at, which makes sharing data and explanation of analysis problematic.

Advantages

- Detailed
- Gives a voice to client stories and experiences
- Rich
- Impactful
- Can produce unexpected results
- Iterative

Disadvantages

- Resource intensive
- Not easily replicated
- Difficult to generalise
- Difficult to predict findings
- Subjective – researcher bias
- Difficult to understand how the researcher reached their conclusions

WARNING! Do not underestimate how resource intensive and time consuming qualitative research can be. Before you decide to go ahead with a qualitative research project ask yourself if you have the time and resources needed to see it through.

4. Choosing a research topic

a) Choosing a research topic

The first step in carrying out qualitative research is deciding what your research topic will be. Think about what you would like to find more information about and define your objectives and research questions on this. Be quite specific with your subject, too broad and you may find it difficult and unwieldy to refine your questions and analyse your data.

If you have **quantitative** data then this may help you to define your research topic. As discussed, qualitative research is often used to tell the story behind the numbers, therefore it will help if you have the numbers in place to look behind. Look at your existing quantitative data, what is it telling you? Are you seeing more female service users? Are lots of your service users being sanctioned by the Job Centre? Qualitative research will help you to find the stories behind these trends and put in place more effective responses.

b) Sample Size and target group

When carrying out research of any kind it is often unachievable to speak to everyone in the group you are researching – e.g. all the homeless women in your area or all benefit claimants who have had their benefits sanctioned. For this reason, researchers pick a sample of the group on which to base their research.

In quantitative research, it is important to pick a sample that representative of the whole so that conclusions about the sample can be scaled up and applied to the whole group. In qualitative research this is less important; qualitative researchers value a range of experiences.

Nevertheless, when carrying out qualitative research you should endeavour to make sure that the sample is balanced and does not rest too strongly on one particular subset within the group – e.g. male service users over female. Crucially, qualitative research should include voices that often don't get heard. In the homelessness sector this can mean speaking to those service users who are the most difficult to engage.

Consider the following points:

- What method will you use for gathering data (see below) – some methods are more time consuming and may be more appropriate to a smaller sample – e.g. unstructured interviews
- How accessible are your sample? How easy is it to get the interviews you want?
- Where are your participants located? How will you get to them?
- What method is being proposed for recruitment e.g. do you have an accessible pool of respondents or will you have to recruit from scratch?
- Do you want to be able to contact the sample afterwards for public facing work or longitudinal/tracking study?

c) Longitudinal research

If you are interested in demonstrating the impact that services have on clients over time, you might consider using longitudinal research. This involves gathering qualitative data from your group over a period of time – e.g. interviewing them at different stages on a journey. This kind of approach can produce interesting results but is time consuming. If you are thinking of adopting this approach you should consider your strategy for staying in touch with service users and maintaining their interest in the research, even after they have left the service.

d) Mixed Methods

If you collect quantitative data or outcomes about your service it may be useful to present these alongside qualitative information. You may also want to collect quantitative data at the beginning or before the interview e.g. asking for demographics data

5. Choosing a research method

Your service may already gather some qualitative data – for instance, outcomes star data, case studies and surveys all fall into this category. Other methods of gathering qualitative data include:

- interviews - structured / semi-structured interviews;
- videos,
- questionnaires;
- peer research;
- focus groups;

Qualitative research takes these methods and applies them to a pre-determined research area, for instance, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups with people who have experienced multiple instances of homelessness to understand why they keep returning to the streets.

5.1 Interviews

Interviews are the most commonly used approach in gathering qualitative data. These are split into three categories and explored in more detail in the table below:

- Structured
- Semi-structured
- Unstructured

As most homelessness organisations have limited resources, semi-structured interviews are the most likely option for services wanting to carry out qualitative research. For this reason, the next part of our guidance – section 6 – focuses on planning and carrying out semi-structured interviews.

Table 1: Comparisons between the different interview approaches

	Unstructured	Semi-structured	Structured
Approach	The interviewer has a broad topic list, rather than set questions, which mean that the interviewer can prompt and probe around particular topics as required to draw out answers	Like unstructured interviews, semi-structured interviews use open-ended questions and allow for the flexibility to improvise prompts and probes but a broad topic guide keeps questioning focused	The interviewer has a set of fixed questions that cannot be deviated from. Interviews can be conducted more quickly than other methods but there is no flexibility to adapt questions to fit the responses
How much time is involved?	Interviews can take a long time and generate a large amount of data. This makes transcription and analysis more time consuming too	Interviews, transcription and analysis are all time-consuming	The least time consuming approach - interviews can be conducted more quickly than other methods and transcription and analysis is easier

Richness of data	Data from unstructured interviews can be very rich – each interview is unique and you can find out lots about the person and how they interact with the world around them	Semi-structured interviews allow for the richness and person-centred approach associated with qualitative data but the structured element ensures a focus is maintained	Set questions mean responses lack the depth or richness other interview types
Analysis	A large amount of data can be generated, which makes analysis time consuming and as each interview is unique, comparisons between them are difficult	A large amount of data can be generated, which makes analysis time consuming but the structured element makes comparison between the interviews easier	Responses are easy to compare, making analysis easier
Sample size	As interviews are time consuming and finding participants can be difficult, achieving a representative sample can be very challenging	Semi-structured interviews are also resource intensive and this limits the size of the sample	A larger, more representative sample can be achieved as interviews are less resource intensive

5.2 Focus Groups

Focus groups are a way of using group dynamics to produce qualitative data. Small groups of people, usually between 6 and 10 participants, are interviewed by a facilitator, who uses the same method of questioning as a semi-structured interview – e.g. topics or questions that must be covered but using a flexible, open-ended approach. Ideally, participants will bounce off each other, generating debate and sparking memories. Focus groups work well with groups of people who may lack the confidence to participate in one-to-one interviews, such as young people. However, sensitive subject areas or confidential issues are not usually suited to a focus group environment.

5.3 Participatory methods & peer research

i) Participatory methods

Qualitative research is often carried out by research professionals or academics who lack first-hand experience of the research topic and the individuals involved. In response to this, various participatory methods of research have been pioneered to allow participants to get involved in shaping the research methods.

Video, photography and diaries are some of the methods used to allow participants to contribute their own qualitative data to the research project. This approach is empowering and many of the participatory methods of qualitative data collection are already used by homeless organisations – maybe your organisation has activity groups that work with photography, for instance.

- <http://www.participatorymethods.org/>
- <http://betterevaluation.org/>
- <http://www.clinks.org/sites/default/files/AchievingUserParticipationResearch.pdf>

ii) Peer research

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Another method of collecting qualitative data is to use peer researchers. Peer researchers are people with experience of the research subject – for instance, homeless women interviewing other women who are currently homeless, about their experiences.

The peer research approach considers the people who have experienced the issue at hand to be experts in their field and for this reason peer researchers are involved in every part of the research process from developing the topic and methodology to carrying out the research and contributing to the analysis.

Peer research has the benefit of being led by people with real experiences of the subject being researched. This can empower both the interviewer and interviewee and lead to high quality qualitative data. However, due to the need for training and managing the involvement of peer research this approach is also very time consuming and resource-heavy.

More about peer research:

- <http://www.groundswell.org.uk/peer-research.html>
- http://www.shu.ac.uk/_assets/pdf/hccj-ResearchMethodology.pdf
- <http://www.homeless.org.uk/sites/default/files/site-attachments/Groundswell%20-%20Health%20and%20homelessness%20Peer%20Activity%20toolkit.pdf>

Homeless Link have produced additional guidance on carrying out qualitative research and can be accessed here in part two of the toolkit.