Focus Group & Depth Interview Guidance

Created by IFF Research

DESNZ's independent evaluation partner

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Purpose of this Guidance Document

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This guidance document covers:

- How to design and deliver depth interviews and focus groups with residents
- How to analyse and use findings to assess success and impact

Contents

Why does qualitative research matter?

Qualitative research helps to understand residents **lived experience**, by exploring **how and why** residents experience changes, beyond what quantitative methods can measure. Qualitative methods will be particularly useful for exploring the following areas in more depth:

- Perceived Value
- Behaviour Change
- Trust
- Comfort
- Disruption

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Overview of Approaches

What are Depth Interviews and Focus Groups?

Depth Interviews

- A depth interview is a **one-to-one conversation** between a researcher and a participant. Using **open ended questions**, the researcher encourages the participant to speak freely and in detail about their experiences, opinions, and decisions. This generates **rich, nuanced insights** that go beyond surface level responses.
- Because it is a private, one-to-one setting, participants **often feel more comfortable sharing personal or sensitive views,** making this method particularly useful when exploring topics that people may not feel at ease discussing in a group.

Focus Groups

- A focus groups brings together a **small number of participants** to discuss a topic **guided by a facilitator**. Like depth interviews, the method uses open ended questions to explore attitudes and experiences in depth, but **the group dynamic adds an extra dimension:** participants react to and build on each others' ideas.
- This interaction can **surface perspectives that might not emerge in a one-to-one setting**, making focus groups valuable for understanding shared experiences.

Depth Interviews: Strengths and Limitations

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Strengths	Limitations
They are well suited for **exploring individual journeys**, following residents' experiences pre-, during, and post-installation. This is particularly the case for residents that have **multiple retrofit measures or interventions.**	Not suitable for capturing **broader trends** across a large resident population, as findings are based on **smaller samples** and are not intended to be statistically representative.
They are also useful for exploring **sensitive topics, such as health, finances, fuel poverty, and trust in landlords**. A private, one-to-one setting can help residents **feel more comfortable** discussing these topics, and **encourage openness**. Residents may not feel comfortable disclosing this information in a survey or focus group setting.	Less effective for exploring **shared experiences** between residents Relies on participants being **willing and able to reflect** on and articulate their experiences. Participants may struggle to recall timelines or details of multiple retrofit works accurately.

Typical sample sizes and time commitment

- Depth interviews aim to gain a detailed understanding of individual experiences, rather than a breadth of views. Therefore, **sample sizes are typically small, around 10-40 participants**. See slide 11 for more information.
- They usually last between **30-90 minutes** depending on the **complexity** of the topic being discussed, and **how much the participant has to say.**

Focus Groups: Strengths and Limitations

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Strengths	Limitations
Focus groups are useful for exploring **shared experiences between respondents, and for identifying norms**. Areas of **consensus and disagreement** can be identified.	**Dominant voices** can influence the discussion and limit participation from others.
They can be used for **testing reactions** to communications, advice, or service changes.	**Limited confidentiality**, as participants hear each other's contributions and researchers cannot guarantee what is shared outside of the group afterwards. Some participants may therefore feel **less comfortable** discussing their experience.
Group dynamics can prompt participants to reflect on experiences they **may not have considered individually.**	Less suitable for **exploring sensitive or personal experiences** in depth.

Typical group sizes and duration

- Focus groups **typically involve between 4 and 10 participants.** The number of groups conducted in a project will depend on many factors. Please see slide 11 for more information.
- They **usually last between 1-2 hours**, depending on the number of participants and complexity of the topic being discussed.

Choosing the Right Method

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When deciding whether to use interviews or focus groups, it can be helpful to develop a simple **decision-making framework** to guide your choice of method.

What is a decision-making framework?

- A decision-making framework is **a set of criteria used to support consistent and informed choices between different research approaches**. It can be presented as a table, checklist, or set of guiding questions comparing methods against key considerations.

Key considerations:

- **Research objectives**: Consider what the research is aiming to achieve, and which method is best suited to generating that type of insight.
- **Sensitivity of the topic:** More sensitive or personal topics may be better suited to one-to-one interviews rather than group discussion.
- **Diversity of residents:** Consider whether different resident groups may have different communication needs, preferences, or levels of comfort with each method.
- **Practical constraints**: Take into account factors such as timescales, budget, staff capacity and skills.

When to Combine Interviews and Focus Groups

- Combining methods can be useful when it is important to understand **both detailed individual experiences and broader shared perspectives**.
- Different resident groups may feel more comfortable engaging in different ways, so offering multiple methods can **improve accessibility and encourage participation.**
- Findings from one method **can be used to inform the other**. For example, using interviews to identify key themes and focus groups to explore them further.

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Qualitative Sampling: Who to Speak to and Why

What is Qualitative Sampling?

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Qualitative sampling is **purposive**, rather than random, meaning participants are **deliberately selected** because their experiences, characteristics, or circumstances are relevant to the research objectives. It is not intended to be statistically representative of a wider population.

Rather than aiming for large numbers, purposive sampling focuses on:

- **Depth over volume:** Prioritising rich insight and understanding over sample size.
- **Relevance:** Recruiting people with direct, meaningful experience.
- **Range and Diversity:** Ensuring variation across key characteristics (see next slide for more information).

This will allow for an understanding of how and why residents experiences differ. By capturing this variation, you can uncover how and why measures succeed or fall short.

Defining the purpose of the sample

Sampling decisions should be **driven by your research objectives**, such as:

- Understanding residents lived experience
- Identifying implementation issues
- Exploring unintended consequences.

You need to be clear about the perspectives you require, not just how many people.

Key Characteristics to Consider

These are some examples of key characteristics you may want to include in your qualitative sample. Not all characteristics will be needed or relevant for every study; selection should be guided by your research objectives.

Property characteristics

- Building type (e.g. house, flat, high rise)
- Construction type and age

Measures installed

- For example, heat pump, solar panels, loft insulation, double glazing.
- This should be tailored to your project. It could be specific measures or broader categories.

Resident circumstances

- Household composition
- Health or mobility issues
- Energy vulnerability

Experience of retrofit

- Smooth vs challenging installations
- High vs Low satisfaction*
- Ongoing issues vs resolved cases

*You could base this on previous survey findings. Please see slide 16 for information on this.

Sample Sizes: What is “Enough”?

When planning your research, **start by thinking about how many different types of residents you want to hear from.** Consider the range of key characteristics that matter for your research and **aim to include multiple interviews for each**. A useful rule of thumb is to target a minimum of three interviews per resident group. From there, you can work out an overall target, bearing in mind that characteristics often overlap, so your total will not always be the sum of each subgroup.

Depth Interviews

- Depth interviews typically use **small, focused** samples. This means prioritising a clearly defined set of resident groups over a large number of interviews.
- The focus is on **rich insight and understanding**, not breath or statistical representation, so it is more important to have sufficient interviews within each characteristic than to maximise the overall number.

Focus Groups

- Focus groups **typically work best with six to eight participants**. Fewer than four participants risks becoming more of a paired or small group interview, while more than ten can be difficult to manage and may limit how much each participant is able to contribute.
- The number of groups will **depend on budget and the range of viewpoints you want to cover**. It is advisable to run at least two groups so that findings are not based on a single discussion.

- There is a point at which doing more interviews or focus groups is **unlikely to generate significant new insight, as the same themes will begin to repeat across sessions.** This is known as data saturation. Targets should be proportionate with this in mind.
- If you have flexibility in your approach**, it is reasonable to stop earlier if findings are clearly repeating across sessions**. However, if interviews have already been committed to, they should still go ahead.

Sampling Considerations

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The following sampling considerations should inform your sampling approach. They may not all apply, depending on your research questions and objectives, but are useful to review before finalising your sample.

Balancing your sample

- Aim to include a **range of residents that reflect the different circumstances, property types, and experiences** relevant to your project. While qualitative research is not designed to be statistically representative, a well-considered sample will make your findings more useful and credible.

Oversampling residents with complex or negative experiences

- It may be appropriate to **deliberately include more residents who have had complex or negative experiences.** Oversampling in this way is most appropriate when **understanding problems and barriers is a key objective** of the research.
- These interviews often generate richer insight into **barriers, implementation issues, and unintended consequences** that may not surface in more straightforward cases. However, it is **important to be transparent about this in reporting**, making clear that findings from this group may not reflect the broader resident experience.

Grouping participants meaningfully

- Focus groups tend to work best when **participants share enough common ground to have meaningful discussion, while still bringing varied perspectives that allow for debate**. Avoid mixing participants with very different circumstances or characteristics, as this can limit openness and lead to some voices dominating the discussion.

Balancing ambition and feasibility

- While there may be a desire for a large number of interviews or focus groups, this is **not always feasible** in practice.
- You must consider the **time, budget, and skills** you have available
- Aim for a sample that is **purposeful and well structured,** rather than just large.

Practical Considerations and Inclusion

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When designing your research, **it is important to think about who may or may not be able to take part**. Unlike quantitative research, qualitative research is **not designed to be representative, but it should still be inclusive**. Consider the **practical constraints** that might prevent certain residents from participating, and actively seek out a range of perspectives

Practical constraints

Digital access and exclusion

- Access to devices, internet, and digital confidence may affect who can take part, and should be considered when choosing your research mode (see slides 24 and 25 for more information).

Language needs

- Some residents may require translation or alternative formats to be able to participate.

Availability and willingness to take part

- Participation may be influenced by time pressures, trust, health, or prior experiences. Being flexible, reassuring participants about confidentiality, and offering supportive participation options can help enable wider participation.

Physical access

- For face-to-face focus groups or interviews held outside of a participant's home, ensure the venue is physically accessible and easy to reach, particularly for those with mobility issues or disabilities.

Costs

- For face-to-face focus groups or interviews held outside of a participant's home, reimburse travel and other costs such as childcare, so that practical expenses don't become a barrier to taking part. .

Recruitment

Recruitment

Recruitment refers to the **process of approaching and encouraging people to take part** in your interview or focus group. An effective recruitment process is important to **maximise participation** and ensure a range of **relevant perspectives and experiences** are represented in your research.

Recruitment Screeners

- A screener is a short set of questions used during recruitment to **check whether someone is eligible and appropriate** to take part in the research.
- It can also allow you to **identify participants with the key characteristics** you are interested in including in the study.

Managing no-shows and drop-outs

- Expect some no-shows or drop-outs and **plan for this where possible.**
- Send **reminders** before the interview or focus group.
- Have a clear process for **cancellations and rescheduling.**
- Consider **over-recruiting slightly** for focus groups to account for drop out.

Strategies for encouraging participation

Offer different modes of participation, and reasonable adjustments to support accessibility and inclusion. See slide 13 for more information on practical barriers to participation.

Provide a **participant information sheet and privacy notice before they agree to take part**, explaining how their views will be used, the potential impact of the research, and how their data will be used.

Consider using **incentives,** such as a shopping voucher or gift card, to encourage participation in the research. Participants must be fully informed on all aspects of the incentive prior to participation.

If you decide to use incentives, you must review the MRS regulations on incentives to inform your approach, which you can access here.

Recontacting Survey Respondents

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If you are planning to **recruit participants for interviews or focus groups from a previous survey** (this could be the A3 residents survey if you are participating in this or any other survey you run), **you will need to obtain two permissions** from respondents at the time of the survey**.**

Permission to recontact for further research

- You must ask respondents whether they are happy to be contacted again to take part in future research. Only those who have given explicit consent to be recontacted should be approached.

Permission to use survey responses for selection

- If you intend to select participants based on their answers to the survey, for example, to identify residents with particular experiences or characteristics, you must also ask respondents for permission to use their survey responses for this purpose.

These are two distinct permissions and having one does not imply the other

What this means in practice:

- Before planning your recruitment, **check that both permissions were collected in the original survey.** If neither were obtained, you will not be able to use that survey as a recruitment source. This applies not only to this project but to any survey you run where follow-up qualitative research may be needed. It is good practice to build both permission questions into your survey design from the outset.

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Designing Qualitative Discussion Guides

Linking Questions to Objectives

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A qualitative discussion guide is a document that **outlines the key topics, subtopics, and specific questions** that you will explore in a depth interview or focus group. It is important that these **questions are aligned with your research objectives**, so that the discussion generates relevant and useful insights.

An approach to effectively linking your questions to your research objectives

- **List your objectives**, then **break each one down** into the different questions that you need to know the answer to, in order to fulfil the objective.
- For example, if one objective is '*to understand how measures have affected resident's energy use and bills*', breaking that down means you might actually want to find out:
  - *Have residents seen a difference in their energy bills?*
  - *Do residents feel they have more of less control over their energy use since the installation?*
  - *Have there been any unexpected costs or bill increases that residents didn't anticipate?*
- Once you have done this for each of your objectives, you should be able to **see if any of the questions overlap**. You can then decide if you need to **combine questions** to avoid repetition.
- If you are interviewing **different audiences**, next to each of your questions, list the audiences that need to be asked each one. This may prompt you to add specific questions that are suitable for each audience.
- You should now have a **basic list of everything you want to find out**, and who from, organised under each of your objectives.

Core Principles of Discussion Guide Design

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Set section timings

- Set **broad timings for each section**, based on the relative importance of each section and the amount of time you have.
- For instance, the introduction may be 5 minutes, and the sections that are **essential to the research objectives will take the most time**.
- Setting timings will **help you stay on track** and avoid spending too long on one section at the expense of others.

Using plain, resident friendly language

- **Avoid the use of technical language and acronyms**, to ensure the interview is accessible for all participants.
- **Keep it simple**. Ask short, simple questions, one at a time. Do not ask long winded questions or ask about more than one thing at once.

Avoid leading questions

- These are questions that might **encourage a respondent to answer in a certain way,** or assume that they will answer in a certain way.
- For example: '*What was disruptive about the installation?'*
- They may not have found anything disruptive. Instead: *'How, if at all, did the installation affect your day-to day routine?'*

Core Principles of Discussion Guide Design

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Use open ended questions

- These are questions that **encourage a full response**, rather than just a yes or no answer.
- Tell me about…
- What do you know about…
- How did you find out…
- What happened next?
- What were your feelings about…

Probing

- You can add probes under each question, to **remind the interviewer of the specific detail we want to gather**, in case the participant does not give the full answer you were hoping for.
- For example: *'Has anything changed in your home since the installation?'*
- Probes: *Can you give me an example? Anything better, worse or different? How does it affect your day-to-day life?*

Building in space for unexpected issues

- Make sure you have **enough follow-up probes** in case a participant does not say much. Equally, **try to build in some flex time** so that if a participant has a lot to say on a topic you are not forced to cut them off.
- Always ask participants if **there is anything else they would like to share** that as not covered in the interview.

Structuring an Interview Guide

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1. Opening

- **Welcome and introductions**
- **Consent and confidentiality**
- **Easy opening questions** to get background, helpful context, and more general information.
- This section will allow you to **build rapport with the participant**, which is important for creating a comfortable and open environment where they are able to share their honest thoughts and experiences.

2. Core topics

- The main part of the interview, typically covering **attitudes and behaviours**, and getting more **specific detail**.
- More **sensitive questions** can be asked in this section.

Tips on handling sensitive topics:

- **Prepare.** Work on your phrasing beforehand.
- **Ask the question straight**. Do not try to talk around it or use buffer words, as this can give the impression you are uncomfortable with the topic.
- Give them **permission not to answer**.

3. Closing

- More **future focussed** questions.
- **Final thoughts or comments**. Ask the participant if they have anything else they would like to share.
- **Next steps**. Will you be contacting them again?
- **Signpost to support** if necessary.

Structuring a Focus Group Guide

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1. Opening

- It can be useful to start a focus group with some **engagement questions or warm up exercises**, to help participants feel more comfortable, which then encourages a more open discussion. This can include brief introductions, simple ice breaker questions, or light reflections on familiar topics before moving into more in-depth discussion.
- **Set out any ground rules** (e.g. that you would like to hear everyone's opinions, and that participants should not speak over one another).

2. Main discussion

- Explore **key topics and questions** in depth.
- Using **stimulus materials can help to concentrate the group's attention on a particular topic**. Examples of this include the use of images, prompts, scenarios, mind maps, or voting activities. More interactive approaches can involve participants grouping materials, or ranking them based on criteria such as appeal or trust. Workshop style activities, such as designing materials, debating, or solving a problem can also support deeper engagement.

3. Closing

- **Summarise the key themes** discussed.
- **Final thoughts or comments**. Ask the participant if they have anything else they would like to share.
- **Next steps**. Will you be contacting them again?
- **Signpost to support** if necessary.

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Fieldwork Modes

Interview Modes

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There are a **range of different modes** for interviews and focus groups. When choosing which mode to conduct your research, you should **consider the benefits and limitations** of each approach. In some instances, offering a **combination of modes** can be the best option.

Mode	Benefits	Limitations
Face to Face	▪ Allows for **strong rapport building** ▪ Those who are **digitally excluded** can participate ▪ Enables observation of **non-verbal cues** ▪ If relevant to your research objectives, face to face fieldwork can allow for **direct observations of the home environment.**	▪ More **time consuming and resource intensive** ▪ If **recording or transcribing** interviews, this can be more difficult in person as you may require additional equipment such as a recording device ▪ **Safety considerations -** see slide 46 for more detail
Telephone	▪ **Easy to arrange, and no travel required** ▪ Easy **recording and transcription** ▪ Those who are **digitally excluded** can participate	▪ **No non-verbal cues** to support interpretation ▪ Harder to build **rapport** ▪ Can feel **less engaging**, and quite **impersonal**
Online	▪ **Easy to arrange and no travel required** ▪ **Easy recording and transcription** ▪ Can allow for **some observation of non-verbal cues (if video call)**	▪ Excludes those that do not have **digital skills or access to the internet** ▪ Potential **technical issues** ▪ Can be **harder to build rapport**

Focus Group Modes

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Mode	Benefits	Limitations
Face to Face	▪ Strong **group interaction and discussion** dynamics ▪ Enables **rapport building** between participants ▪ Allows observation of **non-verbal communication** between participants ▪ Facilitates the use of **more interactive** prompts or activities ▪ Those who are **digitally excluded** can participate	▪ **Logistically challenging** to organise- Selecting a date, time, and venue that is accessible for all ▪ **Safety considerations -** see slide 46 for more detail ▪ When **recording and transcribing** focus groups in person, it can be more **challenging to position a recording device that picks up all voices in the group clearly.**
Online	▪ **Easy to arrange, and no travel required** ▪ Can easily share **prompts or stimulus materials** ▪ **Managing turn taking** - this can be easier online, with the use of 'virtual hands'	▪ **Engagement may be lower** than in person groups ▪ Potential **technical issues** ▪ Excludes those that do not have **digital skills or access to the internet**

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Interviewing and Moderation Skills

Interviewer Skills

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Effective interviewing and focus group facilitation relies on skills that support clear, balanced, and focussed discussion.

Active Listening

- Active listening refers to listening to understand what someone **means**, **not just what they say**. It involves **showing you are listening and checking your understanding**. An example of how you might do this:

"So I'm hearing that you felt the installation process could have been improved by receiving better communications beforehand, is that correct?"

- Reflect back any **contradictions**:

"I noticed that earlier you said X, but now I'm getting the impression that you think Y"

Being quiet

- **Allow more silence** than you usually would in a conversation.
- It demonstrates that they '**have the floor**' and that you want to hear more.
- **They will need thinking time**, particularly if recalling details from an installation a while ago. It does not feel like silence to them if they are busy thinking.
- It can also create a little bit of tension, which they will probably neutralise by saying something.

Managing Expectations

- **Make it clear from the outset** what the interview or focus group is and what it is not. Explain that it is intended to explore experiences and perspectives, **not to resolve individual issues or act as a complaints procedure.**

Interviewer Skills

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Probing without judgement

- Use **neutral, open-ended probes** to further explore responses. For example, *"Can you tell me more about that?"*.
- Keep your **tone and body language** non-judgemental and consistent
- Acknowledge responses **without agreeing or disagreeing**

Handling emotional or critical feedback

- If you anticipate this, you can **acknowledge it at the start** (this should be built into the discussion guide introduction): "*there might be aspects of this topic that you have strong feelings about. That's fine - if you would like to take a break at any point, just let me know.*"
- **Acknowledge the feelings**, for example, by using phrases such as "I can see this was incredibly frustrating for you", or "that sounds really upsetting"
- Remember, **you are not there to collect feedback**, change their situation in any way, or stop any feeling happening. You are there are as a neutral party to gather the information needed for the research.

For more information, listen to this podcast on qualitative interviews

Tips for handling respondents who…

Talk 'too much' or go off topic:

- This is a common problem as participants **don't know the research context** and what is relevant.
- **Set expectations** from the start
- If they digress, give them some time so they feel heard. **Wait for a natural pause, if possible**, before steering them back.

Say very little:

- Try some **silence**- this may encourage them to say more.
- Use **prompts**: "I'd be really interested to hear some more detail if you'd be happy to give it".

Moderating focus groups

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- **Effective moderation is key** to a successful focus group. The moderator needs to **build rapport** amongst participants, be **encouraging** of group interactions, ensure participants **talk amongst themselves** when prompted to, and keep the **discussion on track.**
- Moderating styles can vary considerably, and range from passive and removed, to engaged and interactive. **The different dynamics of each focus group will require different levels of involvement from the moderator** as they manage different types of participant.
- **Larger focus groups may require more than one moderator. A note-taker may also be useful** to record observations, such as: participants' responses to questions, body language, analytical insights, and group dynamics. This will be particularly useful for face-to-face focus groups.
- **Online and face-to-face focus groups require different moderation approaches**. In online groups, it can be harder to read participant engagement and body language, while face-to-face groups allow moderators to read non-verbal cues and group dynamics.

For more information, listen to this podcast which gives an overview of focus groups, and goes into more detail about moderating skills and common pitfalls.

Managing turn taking

- **Set expectations from the start**. Let participants know they should take turns speaking, and that you would like to hear everyone's opinions.
- In cases where one participant is dominating the discussion, it is best to **gently intervene:** acknowledge their contribution, then **invite others to share their views.**
- **Invite quieter participants to contribute by name,** to bring them into the discussion.

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Recording, Transcribing and Managing Data

Recording

Recording interviews and focus groups **can help to ensure participants perspectives are captured accurately.** It also reduces the need for note taking, meaning you can focus on engaging with the conversation.

- Recording **can be audio only or include video**. This depends on what is most practical for the setting and participants, as well as the level of detail required.
- The **method of recording used will depend on the interview or focus group mode.**
- Sessions can be recorded using **built-in platform recording functions** (e.g. within Zoom or Teams), **digital audio recorders** or **mobile devices**.
- **All recordings must be stored and handled securely in line with data protection requirements**. This means saving recordings to a password-protected or encrypted device or approved secure storage platform. If recording on a mobile device, ensure the recording is transferred to secure storage promptly and deleted from the device afterwards.

Ensure participants are fully informed if the session will be recorded or transcribed, including how this data will be stored and used. **Participants must provide their consent before any recording or transcription takes place.** Please refer to the guidance document on data management for audio-visual materials for more information.

Transcribing

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Transcribing an interview or focus group puts the data into a format that can **more easily be analysed**.

- **Decide whether transcripts will be produced manually or using automated transcription software**. Many platforms such as Teams or Zoom have **built-in transcription functions**, or you may choose to use **dedicated transcription software**. Alternatively, a **professional transcription service**, such as White Transcription Service, can be used. They use either manual transcription, AI, or a hybrid to create highly accurate transcriptions.
- If doing a manual transcription, you can decide whether a **full transcription is necessary, or if notes and key quotes are sufficient.**
- **If using a professional transcription service, you can choose between verbatim transcription, and intelligent verbatim transcription.** The most appropriate approach will **depend on the aims of your research and level of detail required** for analysis.

Verbatim Transcription	Intelligent Verbatim Transcription
Captures speech **exactly as spoken** (including pauses, repetition, filler words, and unfinished sentences. This can be useful when analysing emotion, hesitation, or interaction.	Removes filler words, repetition, and minor grammatical errors to **improve readability while keeping the original meaning intact.**

- **Review transcripts carefully** for accuracy, particularly where there are multiple speakers or the audio quality is poor. It is best practice to use **consistent formatting throughout transcripts**, including speaker labels, timestamps, and paragraph spacing, to ensure they are easy to navigate. This is particularly useful if multiple researchers are using the data.
- **Remove or replace identifiable information**, such as names, locations, organisations, or other personal details. Consider whether certain quotes or contextual details could still make participants identifiable, even after personal details have been removed.

Use of AI Tools

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AI tools can support tasks such as transcription, summarising, coding, and organising qualitative data. AI tools should never be used on their own – you must fully review any outputs.

Potential Benefits

- Can **reduce the time taken** for multiple research tasks
- May **lower costs** compared to fully manual processes
- Can support researchers in **managing larger volumes of data** more efficiently
- Some tools can assist with identifying patterns, keywords, or themes within interviews or focus groups.

Considerations

- AI generated transcripts and analysis may contain **inaccuracies, omissions, or misinterpretations**
- AI tools may reflect **bias** or **struggle to accurately interpret context, tone, or sensitive discussions**
- **Human checking and quality assurance is essential** to review outputs and ensure accuracy

Where does AI fit within ethical and GDPR obligations?

- Ensure AI tools **comply with organisational policies and GDPR requirements** before use.
- Consider what **personal or sensitive information** is being uploaded, where it is stored, and who may have access to it.

- **Human oversight remains essential**. This is to ensure that data is interpreted responsibly, and confidentiality is maintained.

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Analysing Qualitative Data

Choosing your Analysis Approach

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Your choice of analysis approach will depend on the aims of the research and the level of depth or comparison required.

Thematic Analysis

Used to identify, analyse, and interpret patterns or themes within a dataset.

Best used when…

- A **flexible, or less structured** approach is needed
- Research is **exploratory** or focused on understanding meaning and experiences

Framework Analysis

A structured approach to qualitative analysis that organises data into a matrix to support systematic comparison.

Best used when…

- Data needs to be organised in a **transparent and accessible** way
- Working with **a larger number of interviews or focus groups**, or with multiple researchers analysing data together

Case-based Analysis

Used to explore individual households as complete cases, helping to understand experiences, journeys, and processes in context over time.

Best used when…

- **Context, sequence of events, and decision making** are important
- Comparing similarities and differences while **retaining individual detail**

Practical Steps: Thematic Analysis

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The first step to any analysis approach is familiarising yourself with the data. Review interview or focus group data, and note down initial observations, patterns, or interesting points.

Thematic analysis

1. Coding the data…

- Work through the data, **assigning codes to meaningful sections** of content.
- Codes should capture **key ideas, experiences, or concepts** relevant to the research.
- Coding can be **inductive** (led by the data), or based on **predefined topics.**

2. Developing themes…

- **Group together related codes** to identify broader patterns and themes.
- **Review and refine themes** to ensure they are distinct, meaningful, and supported by the data.

Choosing an Analysis Tool

Manual Approaches (e.g. Word, Excel, or on paper)

- Involves **manually highlighting key sections**, organising codes, and tracking theme development.
- Useful for a **more hands on** approach to engaging with the data.
- Can work well for **smaller number of interviews or focus groups**, but may become difficult for larger ones.

Qualitative Analysis Software (e.g. NVivo or Quirkos)

- Involves **uploading transcripts or notes**, and applying codes **digitally.**
- Organising and analysing coded data can be done more **efficiently.**
- Best suited for **more complex projects or a larger number of interviews or focus groups,** involving **multiple researchers**, as it allows for **more structured data management**.
- However, this software **does require a paid licence**, which is a point to consider when deciding on your approach.

Practical Steps: Framework and Case-based Analysis

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An **analysis framework is a grid or matrix**, usually in Excel. It allows you to sort qualitative data both thematically, and by case.

- The point of an analysis framework is to make analysis easy, **not just to transfer information into a different format.**
- Columns are **generally organised around themes or objectives**, rather than discussion guide questions.

Best Practice:

- **Use headings, subheadings, and bold text** to organise data.
- **Summarise succinctly**, and keep tone of voice / essence. Ensure your framework entry accurately reflects the resident's experiences.
- Include quotes that **bring out findings.**
- Add in a summary column, that can be used to provide **context or thoughts**.

An example section of an analysis framework is shown on the next slide

Case-based Analysis should follow these steps:

1. **Develop individual case summaries**

- Create a **summary, narrative, or timeline** for each case, identifying key experiences, barriers and outcomes within each journey.

2. **Analyse each case**

- Explore **themes, patterns, or key issues within each case** before comparing across cases.
- This may involve **thematic analysis**, or you could use an **analysis framework.**

3. **Interpret findings**

- Explore how experiences **differ across cases**, and identify common patterns or contrasting journeys.
- Use individual cases as **detailed examples** to support and contextualise wider findings.

Example Analysis Framework Section

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	Barriers to Successful Implementation		
	Prior communications - Including letters, phone calls, and meetings - Anything that could have been improved?	**Installation process** - Disruption to daily life - Any delays?	**Trust in contractors** - Reliability - Confidence in contractors completing work to a good standard
Interview 1	**Communication received** Received a letter a few weeks before work began but felt it lacked detail on timings and what to expect day-to- day. *"I had to call to find out the basics."* **Improvements** Wanted more information upfront, particularly around access requirements and how long work would take	Works took longer than expected. The original estimate was two days, but it ended up being five. Found having workers in the home disruptive, particularly around mealtimes. *"We were told two days, and it ended up being nearly a week. Nobody told us it was going to overrun — we just had to keep adapting."*	Generally positive about the contractors' attitude but had concerns about the finish quality on pipework. Felt they lacked specialist knowledge about the heat pump system. *"They were friendly enough, but I wasn't convinced they really knew the system inside out. I had to ask several times about how to use the controls."*
Interview 2	Had a pre-installation meeting which they found helpful, but felt communication dropped off once work was underway. Wanted more regular updates during the process. *"I just wish that level of communication had carried on once they actually started the work."*	**Disruption** Installation completed on schedule with minimal disruption overall. **Cleanliness** Dust and mess were left at the end of each day, which caused frustration despite the work itself running smoothly.	Expressed low confidence in the contractors from the outset due to a previous bad experience with a different scheme. Concerns were partially resolved after the job was completed satisfactorily *"I was sceptical going in as we'd had a bad experience before. They did a decent job in the end, but it took a while to feel confident"*

Linking Findings to Impact

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Qualitative findings can help explain not only ***what*** happened, but ***why*** outcomes were achieved.

Process Insights

- Process insights refer to **what happened during delivery:** how the programme was implemented and experienced.
- Process insights may explore **retrofit delivery, communication, and engagement.**
- They can help identify what **supported or hindered** successful implementation

Outcome Insights

- Outcome insights refer to **what changed as a result of the programme**: the difference it made.
- Outcome insights may explore **behaviour change, better quality of life, and improved energy efficiency.**
- They can help uncover the **perceived impact of measures** on participants.

- You can use these insights to explore why measures **did or did not work.**
- These insights are **vital in supporting learning, future delivery, and service improvements.**

Integrating Qualitative Insights with Building Monitoring and Quantitative Data

Combining your qualitative fundings with building monitoring and quantitative data can **provide a more comprehensive interpretation of retrofit performance.** Qualitative findings can be **used to provide more context and detail to your quantitative / survey findings and monitoring data**; for example, monitoring data can tell you how many measures were installed, while qualitative interviews can tell you how well the installations went from a resident perspective; or your survey might tell you x% of residents were dissatisfied, and follow up qualitative interviews can find out the reasons for this dissatisfaction.

Further Resources on Qualitative Analysis Approaches

If you would like to explore qualitative analysis in more detail, the resources below provide practical guidance and free training courses for different approaches.

Thematic Analysis- https://www.thematicanalysis.net/

This website was developed by the academics that developed thematic analysis and provides a comprehensive set of free resources to support you through the process.

Framework Analysis- https://delvetool.com/blog/frameworkanalysis

This open-access journal article provides a clear explanation of how the method works in practice, including how to build an analytic framework, systematically organise your data, and draw out findings across cases and themes.

Training Courses:

This e-learning course provides a detailed overview of qualitative data analysis. The course will introduce you to basic concepts of qualitative data analysis, as well as common theoretical approaches, techniques for coding, tools to organise the data, and what to consider when describing, interpreting, and reporting on findings: https://www.unsdglearn.org/courses/qualitative-data-analysis/

This training course covers thematic analysis in more detail, exploring how to turn your research questions into your initial set of qualitative codes, and then how to derive themes from your codes. It also covers creating your final research report: https://delvetool.com/course

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Reporting and Using Findings

Reporting and Using Findings

Once analysis is complete, findings can be reported and used to communicate key insights from the research. Your report should clearly present the main themes, and explain how the findings can inform understanding, decision making, or service improvement.

Writing up Findings Clearly and Responsibly

- **Clear and accessible reporting:** Present findings in a clear and accessible way, using straightforward language and structured themes to make insights easy to understand.
- **Accuracy and representation**: Ensure findings accurately and fairly reflect participants' views and experiences, including differing perspectives where relevant, rather than selectively presenting findings that support a particular narrative.
- **Avoid overstating findings:** Be clear about the scope and limitations of the research. Please see the next slide for more information.
- **Use resident quotes appropriately:** Use participant quotes to illustrate the key themes and bring residents' experiences into the reporting, while ensuring quotes are anonymised and not taken out of context or used in a misleading way.

Feeding Back to Residents

Where appropriate, findings should also be fed back to residents to **demonstrate how their contributions have informed understanding, decisions, or future action**. This may also encourage them to take part in any future research.

Informing Future Delivery

Findings from your research can be used to inform future retrofit delivery by identifying **what went well, and highlighting areas for improvement**. Residents' experiences and feedback can **help shape future approaches** to communication, delivery, and resident support.

Avoiding Overstatement in Qualitative Reporting

Qualitative research is designed to explore experiences, opinions, and motivations in depth. **It is not designed to be statistically representative of a wider population, and findings should never be presented as though they are.**

- You **should not quantify qualitative findings, even without explicitly claiming statistical significance**. Phrases such as "*a third of participants felt...*" or "*60% of residents said...*" imply a level of representativeness that qualitative research cannot support and should be avoided.
- Instead, use language that **reflects the exploratory nature** of the research. For example:
  - *"Some residents felt.."*
  - *"Several residents spoke about…"*
  - *"One participant noted…"*
- Being clear about the scope and limitations of the research is not a weakness. It is good practice, and **ensures findings are interpreted and used appropriately.**

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Ethics, GDPR and Safeguarding

Ethical Principles and GDPR

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Ethical Principles

- Participation in depth interviews or focus groups must be **voluntary and based on informed consent**.
- Participants should **clearly understand** what the interview/ or focus group is about, **how their responses will be used**, and that they are **free to take part or not**, without any negative consequences.
- Participants should understand that they can **withdraw from the research at any time without consequence**. If there are any limits to withdrawal (for example, when data is included in analysis) this should also be explained.
- Ensure that you **minimise any emotional distress, discomfort, or harm** that may occur from participation.
- If you would like more information on ethical principles, you can access the National Centre of Research Methods resource repository on ethics, design, and impact here.

GDPR

- You must ensure personal data is **collected, stored, and processed securely** and in line with GDPR requirements. Participants should be informed about what data will be collected, how it will be used, who will have access to it, and how long it will be stored.
- **Please review the guidance on audio and visual management** to inform your approach. You can access this training via this link.
- You should communicate this information to participants via a **privacy notice**. We recommend you use this template as the basis for your own privacy notice, adapting it as necessary.

Safeguarding

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Researcher Safety

Researcher safety is **particularly important to consider when doing face-to-face fieldwork**, where researchers may be working alone, travelling to unfamiliar locations, or entering participant's homes. Clear safety procedures should be in place prior to fieldwork commencing.

Risk assessments

- A risk assessment should be carried out before fieldwork begins, to identify any potential safety concerns and **put appropriate measures in place.** You can use the risk assessment linked here to guide you through this process.

Lone working, buddy systems and check in/out procedures

- If you go on fieldwork alone, you should have a 'buddy' at work, **who knows where you are planning to be and when.** You should message your 'buddy' when you are going into the interview or focus group and let them know once you have safely left the fieldwork location. Alternatively, use **a check in/out system, where you log your whereabouts and expected return time** with a central point of contact.

Managing challenging situations

- Trust your instinct. **If you feel unsafe or uncomfortable, whether due to a gut feeling, or because a participant is being rude, abusive or discriminatory, leave**. Say that you are feeling unwell or that something has come up at work. The interview does not matter.

Working with vulnerable participants

- **Some participants may be considered more vulnerable** due to factors such as age, disability, poor mental or physical health, language barriers, or financial insecurity.

Escalating a safeguarding concern

- If you suspect that a vulnerable participant is in danger of harm (such as abuse, neglect, or a risk to their own or others safety), you can **pass this information on to the appropriate authorities, such as your organisation's safeguarding lead, social services, or in an emergency, the police.**

- However, for adults who are not deemed vulnerable, **you must protect their anonymity and confidentiality**. You must seek consent to escalate any concerns, and if not provided you must respect their wishes and not break this confidentiality. You may signpost to relevant support groups, such as the Samaritans.

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