

Designing and using surveys

Surveys are useful for finding out people's opinions about an issue, or for gathering feedback about your group's activities. This page provides tips on getting the most out of surveys.

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Who will complete the survey?

Before you write your survey, you need to know who will be filling it in. This could be:

- ◆ Members of your group
- ◆ People who live in a particular area
- ◆ Users of a service
- ◆ Everyone attending an event/course/activity

Distributing the surveys to everyone is not always feasible, so you can take a sample of people instead. However, it is good to try and get a good cross section of your members, users, or local residents. You could do this in several ways, such as:

- ◆ Everyone at your Annual General Meeting
- ◆ Every tenth house in each local street
- ◆ Everyone who uses your services during April

Persuading people to complete your survey

It can be difficult to get people to fill in surveys, so it is worth thinking about a few strategies to persuade people. Having a survey that is short and easy to fill will make this a lot easier. You could also:

- ♦ Explain to people why you are carrying out the survey so that they understand the purpose
- ♦ Have a fixed time when you distribute the surveys and ask everyone to complete them and return them straight away (at an event, course or activity)
- ♦ Use an electronic survey so that people can complete it online, and send email reminders
- ♦ Enter all completed surveys into a prize draw

Your data will be more representative if you get a high response rate. For example, if there are 200 houses on a street, and you only get 5 responses to your survey, the results may not represent the views of many residents. If you get 100 responses, you can be more confident that the results represent the views of the street.

Writing the questions

- ♦ Keep your survey as short as possible. Only ask questions that you really need to know about.
- ♦ Use clear and simple language – avoid jargon, slang or technical terms.
- ♦ Put straightforward questions at the beginning of the questionnaire, and more sensitive or complex questions towards the end.
- ♦ Give options for “don’t know” or “not applicable” where relevant.

Closed questions and open questions

Closed questions allow a limited range of responses, usually by using tick boxes. Open questions give people a chance to express themselves in their own words. For example, “Do you like dogs?” is a closed question. The person filling in the survey (the “respondent”) can only really answer “Yes” or “No”. “What are your views on dogs?” is an open question. It allows the respondent to use their own words to give a more complex answer.

Closed questions are quick and easy to fill in for the person completing the survey. The answers are then quicker and easier to categorise and interpret for your group. For example, you can easily look at the surveys and know that 60% of people said they like dogs, and 40% said they don’t. The downside of closed questions is that they limit the information people can give you. For example, someone might like spaniels but not terriers, but they can only answer “Yes” or “No” to your question. This means you can end up with information that doesn’t always give the full picture.

Open questions allow people to answer in their own words. This means you can get more detailed and accurate information about their views and experiences. Open questions also allow you to gather quotes from people, which can be very powerful for campaigns or grant reports. The downside of open questions is that the answers can be harder for your group to interpret. For example, if you get lots of different comments about people’s views on dogs, it’s harder to simply categorise them into those who like dogs and those who don’t. The other downside of open questions is that they take longer for people to answer, so they may be less likely to do so.

Many surveys include a combination of closed and open questions. The closed questions collect the specific information you need, and are quick to fill in. The open questions collect quotes and more complex opinions from those who have time to give them.

Personal information and confidentiality

Gathering information about people's personal characteristics can help you to check whether you are reaching a range of different types of people, but you should only collect this information if you are clear why you need it and how you will use it. (See our sheet on *Equality and Diversity for small community groups* for more help with this).

It is easier to interpret responses if you ask personal questions such as age, income or ethnicity by offering grouped categories with tick boxes. For example:

| How old are you? | Please tick |
|------------------|-------------|
| Under 18 | |
| 18-25 | |
| 26-45 | |
| 46-65 | |
| Over 65 | |

Only ask for people's names and addresses if you really need them. Asking this may put people off completing the questionnaire. Any identifiable personal information must be stored securely, and only for as long as you need it. For more help see our sheet on *Data protection for community groups*.

Leading questions

Try not to ask questions in a way that will lead respondents to a particular answer. It will make your results less valid, because you are less likely to get people's true opinions. Here is an example of a leading question:

| Do you think the grass cutting service is an appalling waste of public money? | Please tick |
|---|-------------|
| Yes | |
| No | |

A better question would be:

| What do you think about the grass-cutting service? | Please tick as many as you like |
|--|---------------------------------|
| It is good value for money | |
| It is not good value for money | |
| It should be a high priority for the council's money | |
| It is not a high priority compared to other local services | |

Designing your survey

The layout and order of your survey will affect how many people take the trouble to complete it. Here are some tips to make a survey that is clear and easy to fill in.

- ♦ Start with the name of your group, and a clear but brief explanation of what the survey is for.
- ♦ Give clear instructions on how to complete it and how to return it to you. Say how long the survey will take to complete.
- ♦ If you use a paper survey, space out the questions – dense print can put people off.
- ♦ If you want an online survey, use a website such as Survey Monkey¹, which will lay out your survey for you. If you only need to get answers to a couple of questions, you could consider using a Facebook “poll”. See our sheet on *Facebook for community groups* for help with this.
- ♦ Remember to include the name and contact details of your organisation.
- ♦ Test your survey on a couple of people and ask them:
 - ◇ how easy it was to fill in;
 - ◇ if all the questions were clear;
 - ◇ how long it took them to complete;
 - ◇ if they understand the purpose of the survey.

Will everyone be able to understand the survey?

There may be people who need the survey in a different format, because, for example, they don't read English or have a visual impairment. Consider offering people a range of ways that they can fill in the questionnaire, such as:

- ♦ With a volunteer interviewer
- ♦ With an interpreter
- ♦ Written in another language
- ♦ Written in large print

¹ surveymonkey.com

Understanding the responses

The easiest way to collect together all the responses to closed questions is to use a website such as Survey Monkey. Even if you have used paper questionnaires, you can enter the responses into Survey Monkey and it will interpret answers for you. It will produce graphs and charts of your data, which will make it easy and quick to understand.

If you would prefer not to use a computer, you can create a tally chart on a sheet of paper. It could look something like this:

| Question 1. How old are you? | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--|----|-----|
| 0 – 16 yrs | | 12 | 23% |
| 17 – 25yrs | | 23 | 44% |
| 26 – 59yrs | | 10 | 19% |
| 60yrs and over | | 7 | 13% |

| Question 2. Which events did you attend in 2017? | | | |
|---|--|----|-----|
| Summer picnic | | 28 | 53% |
| Christmas party | | 31 | 59% |
| Drama workshops | | 12 | 23% |
| Film showings | | 23 | 44% |
| None | | 4 | 1% |

(To calculate a percentage, divide the number of people who gave a particular answer by the number of people who completed the survey altogether. For example, 52 people completed the survey above. 12 people were aged 0-16 years. 12 divided by 52 is 23. So 23% of respondents are aged 0-16.)

You may want to analyse your findings in a bit more detail. This can be done by using a large sheet of paper and 'cross tabulation'.

| Activity attended / Age | 0-16 yrs | 17 – 25 yrs | 26 – 59 yrs | Over 60 |
|--------------------------------|----------|-------------|-------------|---------|
| Summer picnic | | | | |
| Drama workshops | | | | |
| Film showings | | | | |
| None | | | | |

If you have used open questions you will need to read all the responses. You may find it helpful to categorise the comments, so that you can easily see if there are many people with the same view as each other. For example, if you asked "What improvements would you like to see in the waste recycling service?" you could count the number of responses that included different themes, such as reliability, frequency, types of waste, etc. You could then get a better understanding of which issues are important to most people.

More help and information

You may find it useful to look at our information sheets on:

- ♦ *Monitoring and evaluation*
- ♦ *Reporting to funders*
- ♦ *Involving people in your group*