



# PARLIAMENT 2020

VISIONING THE FUTURE PARLIAMENT

## FOCUS GROUP PROTOCOL GUIDE

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# CONTENTS

Introduction .....	1
Project Aims.....	2
Research Question.....	2
Participation.....	2
Elected Representatives .....	3
Parliamentary Officials .....	3
General Public .....	4
Focus Group Composition and Focus.....	4
Recruitment .....	5
Interview guide.....	6
Running a focus group .....	7
Analysing the Data .....	10
Thematic Analysis .....	11
Ethics .....	11
Confidentiality and anonymity.....	12
Appendices .....	13
Appendix A – Pro-forma Questions.....	13
Appendix B – Example Consent Form .....	15
Appendix C – Example Participant Information Sheet .....	16
Appendix D – Focus Group Checklist.....	17

# INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this guide is to provide information on the purpose and structure of the focus groups to be held as part of the Parliament 2020 project. The guide provides information on recruitment, structuring and managing a focus group and on how the data resulting from it will be analysed.

Focus groups are a facilitated discussion and work well when the topic can be well scoped. They differ from one-on-one and group interviews in that they capitalise on communication *between* participants to generate understandings (but not necessarily consensus) about the research topic being discussed. Focus groups have proven particularly effective for research that seeks to explore ideas, concepts and where there is a desire to create shared meanings about issues through discussing them with others.

The group dynamic is an important part of the process in focus groups; participants are encouraged to talk to each other about the (open-ended or semi-structured) issues raised in the group. They are able to explore their own concerns, using the language and syntax with which they are most familiar and comfortable; the everyday terms which people use to talk about the issues raised are important, highlighting understandings that are not always apparent in more formal responses to research questions.

The focus group format is sensitive to cultural variables, making it appropriate for this research which explores the approaches to new technologies across parliaments internationally. When focus groups work well, they can produce new understandings; however, there is obviously a risk that the group dynamics will intimidate some participants, which is why the role of facilitation is extremely important.

We produce here a brief description of the important aspects of focus group facilitation which will help to ensure that the discussions are productive and beneficial to all participants. This guide will help you to consider the following points when you are organising the focus groups:

- Who will participate
- What you intend to cover
- The level of formality (informal, semi-formal, formal)
- The duration
- The location

## Project Aims

The aim of the Parliament 2020 project is to produce a report thematically analysing the feedback from the deliberations held in a number of focus groups in each country to consider the ways in which a parliament of the future will harness new information and communication technologies (ICT). The report will also develop recommendations that can in-turn be fed back in to the participating parliamentary institutions. The project builds on earlier work by the Hansard Society, including the 'Parliament for the Future' project that engaged technology companies in a discussion around how to IT-enable parliament.

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The final report will present a vision for a digitally enabled parliament along with practical ideas and a road map for incremental change, focussing primarily on the processes and procedures of parliament, external and internal communication and public outreach.

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## Research Question

How do you see the parliament of the future working and how will ICT support this?

## PARTICIPATION

This section is very important for all focus group coordinators. In it we describe the different stakeholder groups that we want to include in the research and define the criteria by which participants in each focus group can be selected. This section also provides some useful tips on recruitment.

Focus groups do not need to be statistically representative but they should be selected using a considered sampling approach, in this instance we are using a 'purposive sampling' technique, whereby the participants will be selected based on prior knowledge of them, proximity and availability (accepting that only a small sample of the group will be involved in the focus group).

This project will hold three focus groups per parliament:

- Elected representatives
- Parliamentary officials
- General public

Selection criteria and specific issues relating to the three groups are discussed below.

## **Elected Representatives**

For parliamentarians, they need to represent not simply different political parties (although this is important), their selection should also reflect their backgrounds and the backgrounds of their constituents (if they are a constituency member) or personal backgrounds (for a list or appointed/unelected member), which might include drawing on parliamentarians who are representing:

- Wealthy versus poor areas
- Rural versus urban areas
- Geographically close to parliament versus more remote areas
- Marginal constituency versus large majority

For members elected from a party list or have been appointed, a further consideration might be their background and expertise prior to entering parliament, such as business, public sector, education, trade union or civil society.

The demographic of MPs is also important:

- Younger versus older MPs
- Time spent in parliament
- Seniority
- Gender

Our research suggests that elected representatives who were more recently elected have different approaches to online engagement (within Parliament and with constituents) to those with more established seats. It is important to consider this trend when recruiting participants to ensure that different approaches to new technologies are represented across the sample.

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One risk of this project is that the sample is self-selecting in terms of those with an interest in new technologies and the future of parliament are more likely to take part. Whilst there is little that can be done about this other than to acknowledge it, it is important to try and avoid narrowing the recruitment only to those who appear supportive or favourable.

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## **Parliamentary Officials**

Similar sampling approaches should be used to recruit Parliamentary officials and members of the public/stakeholders. Parliamentary officials should also cover a range of roles and seniorities to ensure that there is sufficient scope for obtaining a broad range of perspectives and for innovative ideas to emerge.

We suggest that the invitations cover those working in at least the following areas:

- Communications
- Library
- Outreach
- Parliamentary record (Hansard)
- Select committees
- Website

## General Public

The public focus group is perhaps the most problematic to define and to recruit. We have proposed a range of potential group demographics that could be appropriate for this research and it is possible that the focus group could be managed as an online consultation and discussion exercise, rather than as a face-to-face focus group. Potential groups include:

- Young people
- Older people
- Political and eDemocracy activists and thought-leaders
- Academics
- Design students

For the general public group, it should not be assumed that there is sufficient prior knowledge of parliament or parliamentary process, therefore, consideration needs to be given in the design as to how members of the group can be given some background information without it prejudicing the outcome.

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Consider the use of alternative methods to a traditional focus group – such as experiential techniques and group work. The UK focus group with young people used a concept known as Lego Serious Play<sup>1</sup>, where small groups were asked to build models, first for their thoughts on what was important for parliament and, second, what a parliament of the future would look like. It was through the ensuing discussion that we drew out themes that informed the research.

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Consider also some remuneration or reward for the public focus group, for example book tokens, as this motivates participation as well as acknowledging the time taken to participate.

## Focus Group Composition and Focus

It is useful for focus groups to be fairly homogenous when the aim is to draw out shared experiences; some diversity is useful if the aim is to generate discussion from a range of perspectives, although be careful to keep an eye on group dynamics in mixed groups.

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<sup>1</sup> [www.seriousplay.com](http://www.seriousplay.com)

The ideal group size is about ten people but there is no hard and fast rule; focus groups can work well with more or with slightly fewer. There is no optimal duration. A traditional focus group will probably require about one hour for this topic and we would suggest that anything more than two hours is excessive. If you are considering alternative structures for focus groups, particularly where the participants might not be well versed in the subject of Parliamentary process, we suggest investigating options such as creative play and including a more detailed briefing session ahead of the focus group starting (being careful not to prejudice the groups thinking on the subject). Such groups would be expected to last two to three hours.

It is best to hold focus groups in a comfortable and neutral space, and to provide refreshments (this is a comfort consideration but also can be an inducement to attend). Consider too that your participants will be more motivated to attend if the focus group is held in a convenient location at a reasonable time. For parliamentary focus groups, hold the meeting in parliament!

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For elected representatives, consider the optimum time to get this busy group together – for example, in the UK, organising the focus group directly after Prime Minister’s Questions makes good sense – as does providing lunch.

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## **Recruitment**

There are a number of methods that can be used for participant recruitment, some will be more appropriate than others for different groups. For the purposes of this research, two of the groups are internal to Parliament and therefore self-defining, for the general public segment of the research it is first necessary to identify your target group or groups.

We suggest that, for practical reasons, it is sensible to try and work with a group or organisation that you already have contact with.

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For our UK public focus group, we chose first year students from a local university. The choice was made for three reasons;

We had an existing contact in the Media Department at the University and, when approached, he was willing to co-facilitate a group;

The group was all first time voters (all were over 18 but none had been of voting age at the last general election); and

The group was representative of the wider public and were not embedded in political culture.

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To recruit the parliamentary officials, we suggest that it can be successful to approach some people directly and, in other areas, to ask for nominations from senior managers.



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We co-ordinated with a senior official at the UK Parliament who was able to ask for volunteers or delegates from other areas. Once we had received the initial list, we were then able to contact participants directly to ensure that they understood what was being asked of them and to confirm that they were happy to attend.

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Elected representatives can be identified based on the desirable demographics, although our own experience is that, given their schedule, you might need to invite a significant number even to meet the basic numbers for the focus group (obviously, this will differ between parliaments).

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We invited 500 members of the House of Lords and the same number of MPs. From this we received approximately 50 acceptances (5%). This achieved a turnout at the focus group of 20 (2%) – our expectation had been 10.



## INTERVIEW GUIDE

This section shows you how to form an appropriate set of questions for the focus group.

The key questions will focus on the following but should allow for local variations where appropriate:

- Current approaches by Parliament towards public engagement, new technologies, legislative scrutiny (obviously internal stakeholders will be able to tackle these issues more fully than the public)
- Recent developments in each domain: debates and dilemmas.
- Future visions (in each domain).

The intention is for focus groups to be semi-structured, so a list of pro-forma questions will guide rather than rigidly structure the focus group. The best method for asking questions is to make sure they are as open as possible and questions might not be asked directly (or at all) or in the order written (as this can affect the nature and quality of the conversation).

Four principles that should frame the development of questions are:

- Questions should be simple, clear and easy to understand.
- They should start with the most general questions and end with the most specific ones.

- The more general questions should focus on the most important topics; the later (specific) questions can focus on issues that are less important to the research – they are illustrative.
- Engage the group by starting with a warm-up round, this might be ‘suggest something that you consider to be important’. This approach helps engage the group and gives the facilitators some ideas on the direction the discussion could take.

The final guide will be limited to a maximum of ten to twelve questions; any more and there is a risk that the focus group will over-run, leading to a reduction in the quality of the data obtained.

Questions should be pre-tested with people who weren’t involved in the writing of them to ensure that they are not too loaded or leading and that they can assist with answering the research question(s) – that said, the base questions have been trialled in two live focus groups at this point and refined accordingly.

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Proposed base questions for the focus groups are shown in Appendix A. These can be used ‘as is’ or adapted to suit local conditions or the needs of a specific focus group.

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## **RUNNING A FOCUS GROUP**

**I** This section provides you with guidance on running the actual focus group.

A focus group discussion starts with an introduction from the facilitator about its purpose and process.

- Welcome all the participants and introduce yourself and any other team members in the room, explaining their roles.
- Explain the general purpose of the discussion and why the participants were chosen.
- Explain the presence and purpose of any audio or video recording equipment.
- Explain the structure of the focus group, the duration and outline any ground rules and discussion guidelines. These might include the importance of hearing everyone, speaking one at a time and that the moderator might interrupt to assure that all the topics can be fairly covered.
- Review any housekeeping information.
- Ensure that the group understands what will happen to the information – that it will be analysed and written up in a report. Make it clear that no individual will be identified in any output from the research and that whilst what is said might be quoted it will be done in a way to ensure that it is anonymous.

You can adapt the following as an introduction to the focus group to define the scope of the research:

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This research is being undertaken by the Hansard Society on behalf of the UK Parliament and [x].

Our aim is to find out what you think a parliament of the future might look like in terms of how it works, how information is distributed both internally and externally and, in particular, how parliament communicates with the public (and vice versa). Outside the scope of this research (and therefore this focus group) are the more fundamental constitutional questions and issues affecting the way parliament works.

This is one of [x] focus groups, the others are [other groups]. When we have finished the research, we will produce a report that describes what we have found in terms of the main themes.

We are recording this focus group and we will use this recording for our analysis. When we write up our findings we might use direct quotes from this focus group but we will not identify anyone taking part in this research and we will ensure that the quotes that we do use are not able to be attributed to an individual or to a role.

You should all have an information sheet that describes the research, if after today you have any questions about what we are doing, this information sheet contains our contact details and we welcome you to get in touch.

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This project uses a semi-structured focus group approach. This means that we provide a set of pro-forma questions and set the scene during the focus group but we are not being prescriptive about the structure or direction of the conversation (obviously, so long as it remains within the scope of the project). It is best to take an organic approach, encouraging conversation amongst participants and guiding by using the provided questions (or variations on them as appropriate).

Ice-breakers can be useful at the start as they allow people to get a feel for the group before the discussion starts and can include a short introduction round to ensure participants are familiar with who else is in their group.

A good approach is for the facilitator to use a strategy of 'structured eavesdropping'; the more participant-led the discussion, the better. Although it is likely that the facilitator will need to seed the conversation at the beginning and will also need to ensure that the (loose) structure of the focus group is followed and all questions covered in a reasonable time frame.

When people come together in a group settings they will adopt a variety of different roles (often simultaneously and changing as the group changes). This interaction between the

different participants and the roles that they adopt is vital to the group process so it is useful to be aware of some of these roles:

- Assistant moderators
- Complicators
- Devils advocates
- Distractors
- Dominators
- Early adopters
- Emotionalists
- Explicators
- Innovators
- Investigators
- Laggards
- Late adopters
- Leaders
- Questioners
- Simplifiers
- Submissives
- Supporters

In these different roles, participants interact through a wide range of actions, some are submissive to other members, others supportive, conciliatory or modifying and yet others can be confrontational or attempts to assert power.

- Ask each other questions
- Build on each others' ideas
- Change their opinions
- Draw each other out
- Fill in incompletions and gaps in knowledge
- Jog each others' memories
- Modify each others' comments
- Nudge each other out of ruts and habitual thinking
- Persuade each other
- React to each others' comments
- Spark new ideas
- Take opposing positions
- You didn't think to ask<sup>2</sup>

There are times when the facilitator should take a more interventionist approach (if the discussion gets heated or dries up, for example). The facilitator can also try to get the group

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<sup>2</sup> From: [mnav.com/cligd.htm](http://mnav.com/cligd.htm).

to discuss inconsistencies between participants and within their own thinking. Disagreements can lead to clarifications and new understandings if handled properly; often misunderstandings can be resolved by the participants themselves. Reflection and seeking clarification can be useful too as it might encourage deeper thinking on key issues.

Different techniques can be used. Participants can be asked to say how much they agree/disagree with a statement relating to a research question (e.g., 'New technologies have no part to play in Parliament'). Such 'closed' questions can get them to talk to each other rather than to the facilitator.

Once the facilitator feels that sufficient questions have been covered (or the allotted time is running out), there can be a cooling-off period, during which participants should be encouraged to think about what has been said and reflect on the experience or to add any other comments that not been heard earlier. Opportunities can be provided for them to fill in a questionnaire, email thoughts or speak to the facilitator individually (following a period of reflection) to ensure that they have said everything that was on their mind (even if they did not say it during the group discussion).

Basic demographic profiles need to be collected for all participants, including an email address so that they can be sent a copy of the research findings (should they wish to receive them).

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Appendix D provides a check-list of things to do when organising your focus group.

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## **ANALYSING THE DATA**

Focus group facilitators are not expected to analyse the data, this will be carried out by the project team at the Hansard Society to ensure consistency. This section provides information on how the data from the focus group needs to be managed and supplied to the project team and an overview of the methodology that we will use to analyse the data.

Each focus group discussion should be recorded and a non-participant observer should take notes during each session of the key themes as they emerge, remaining reflexive to the nuances and relative significance of these themes. Written transcripts are not needed if the focus group is in English and the audio quality is sufficient.

The recording (in a digital format) and English transcript if necessary needs to be made available to Hansard Society researchers for analysis. The emerging themes should provide the framework for the analysis, which should also consider the impact of group dynamics (e.g., 'deferring to others' or 'joking') and cultural contexts (e.g., 'controversies regarding use

of ICT' or 'distrust of politicians') on the nature of the discussion. It is generally considered good practice for transcripts and the analysis to be sent to participants for comments.

## **Thematic Analysis**

Thematic analysis is a technique whereby qualitative data is analysed to identify themes and patterns that emerge from the data (in this case, what was said in a focus group) and to describe what relationships, if any, exist between them. Themes emerge as words, sentences and concepts that are identified and 'marked-up'. Whilst individual items can appear random and fragmented, as more data is considered a depth and richness emerges that illuminates themes. Once a focus group has been analysed, the themes can then be separated from the original context and reviewed in light of both the research questions and other data that exists, from here they can be merged to develop over-arching key-thematic lines of enquiry to inform future data collection and, eventually, to identify the key themes to emerge from the research itself.

## **ETHICS**

Whilst this research is not governed by a particular human research ethics committee, the research will abide by the guidelines set out in the Research Ethics Policy of the London School of Economics, to which the Hansard Society has access. The Hansard Society assumes responsibility for the ethical conduct of the research.

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For focus groups outside of the UK, you must ensure that you adhere to any local regulations or human research ethical guidelines that are in place.

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Focus group participants will be provided with:

- An information sheet outlining the purpose of the research, describing the process of the focus group and what will be done with the data. This will also confirm their right to withdraw from the research at any time and not to answer questions should they wish.
- A consent form to confirm their agreement to take part in the research (email confirmation can be used for some groups).
- A basic demographic survey (including contact details), unless this has been collected separately.

These will be developed by the Hansard Society but may require customisation and variation for different focus group settings and countries. Ensure that any requirements that we have under the (UK) Data Protection Act 1998 (or local equivalent) are adhered to and that, if the research involves minors, any additional safeguards and caregiver consents have been put in place (we would suggest avoiding groups under the legal voting age for this research).

## CONFIDENTIALITY AND ANONYMITY

Research participants will not be identified by name and all efforts will be made to avoid identifying individuals wherever possible; A caveat is that sometimes it can be difficult to maintain anonymity for a public figure or for someone in a very specific role that is clearly identifiable to those who work in close proximity to them. Whilst all attempts will be made to protect the identity of participants there may be occasions where it is impossible to do so completely or where to do so invalidates what they are saying.

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For the final report, the location of the participants and the nature of the focus group will be used to identify a participant where it is appropriate (eg Australian MPs).

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# APPENDICES

## Appendix A – Pro-forma Questions

The following questions are indicative of what can be asked in the focus group, they are intended to provide some prompts but should be considered linear or prescriptive; it is better to allow the group to explore issues itself rather than simply going through the list so it is best used to guide the facilitator who would not expect to use all the question nor to strongly adhere to the order or format shown.

### Communication

1. Can you think of some ways in which Parliament communicates well with the public and some ways in which it communicates poorly?
2. How do Parliamentary process and procedures impact on your ability to communicate with the public (support or impede)?
3. What do you think could be done to improve the way that Parliament communicates with the public?

### Engagement

4. What do you think could be done to encourage greater public understanding of how Parliament works?
5. What impact do you think digital technologies (such as the internet and mobile phones) have on representative democracy and do you think there are ways in which their use could lead to increased participation by the public (or do you think that the affect will be neutral or negative)?

### Information

6. How are the information needs of members changing and how are they likely to change in the future?
7. How are the information needs of Parliamentary staff changing and how are they likely to change in the future?
8. What can parliament do to better support these changing needs?



## Resources & Culture

9. Email and newer social media tools such as blogs, Facebook and Twitter, have created expectations amongst some members of the public about the level of intimacy and speed of response from their elected representatives and the Parliamentary authorities. Do you think that Parliament can change its processes and procedures to reflect this or is this expectation unrealistic on the part of the public?
10. How receptive is parliament to change and the take-up of new technologies – do you feel that it embraces them openly, carefully considers and then adopts them or has a tendency to block and avoid them?
11. What do you think the staff and resource implications of increasing the use of digital technologies would be for Parliament?

## Appendix B – Example Consent Form

Your consent in writing is needed to confirm your involvement in this research. Signing this form means that you have agreed to be a part of the research but does not stop you from changing your mind at a later time. You can withdraw from the research at any time and doing so will not affect your public or community standing. To withdraw from the research please contact the Principal Researcher at the address shown on the Information Sheet.

Please tick box

- |    |  |                          |
|----|--|--------------------------|
| 1. | I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions. | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 2. | I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving reason.                 | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 3. | I agree to take part in the above study.   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 4. | I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being audio recorded   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 5. | I agree to the interview / focus group / consultation being video recorded   | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 6. | I agree to the use of anonymised quotes in publications  | <input type="checkbox"/> |

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Name

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Signature

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Date

Hansard Society  
40-43 Chancery Lane, London, WC2A 1JA  
[www.hansardsociety.org.uk](http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk)

## Appendix C – Example Participant Information Sheet

This research aims to find out what different groups of people think a Parliament of the future might look like and how new digital media might affect and influence the way that citizens engage and communicate with parliament and MPs. This research is being conducted by the Hansard Society on behalf of the UK Parliament.

Before agreeing to take part in this research it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it involves. Please read the following information carefully.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You can withdraw from the study at any time and can refrain from answering any question.

The information provided by you remains anonymous. This means that you will not be identified in the results.

All information you provide will be treated as confidential. This means that it will not be passed on to anyone else in any way that could identify you.

The information you provide will be analysed by us and what you say might be presented as a direct quotation in a report or academic paper but not in a way that could identify you.

The data collected for this project will be stored by us on a computer network accessible only with the use of a password or in a locked and secure cabinet. Any personal or demographic inform

### **Data Protection Act 1998**

Some personal data might be required in order to satisfy the research requirements (for example, we might need to contact you for further information and update to our project). Where personal information is collected it will be treated in strict confidence and your personal information will not be used in the results. Only aggregate analysis will be used for publication.

If you would like more information about the project you can write, telephone or email the principal researcher:

Dr Andy Williamson  
Director, eDemocracy Programme  
Hansard Society  
40-43 Chancery Lane, London, WC2A 1JA  
Telephone: +44 (0)20 7438 1224  
Email: A.Williamson@hansard.lse.ac.uk

## Appendix D – Focus Group Checklist

<b>Two weeks to one month before</b>	
Agree date and time	
Book the venue	
Selected participants	
Send out invitations	
<b>One week before</b>	
Order catering (if appropriate)	
Organised remuneration (if appropriate)	
Prepare information sheets and consent forms ready	
Prepare and test focus group question pro-forma	
Send a reminder to the participants	
<b>One day before</b>	
Facilitation team briefed	
Confirmed food and venue	
If anything has changed, let participants know	
Print information sheets and consent forms	
Print list of participants	
Print list of questions	
Check recording equipment and replace batteries	
<b>On the day</b>	
Arrive early	
Check the venue and arrange the room	
<b>After the focus group</b>	
Transfer digital recordings, video and photographs to computer/network	
Write-up hand-written notes	
Debrief with the facilitation team (and document anything that emerges)	
Send all data and notes to Hansard Society for analysis (note that digital audio/video files will need to be sent via CD/DVD or posted online and not sent by email due to their size)	