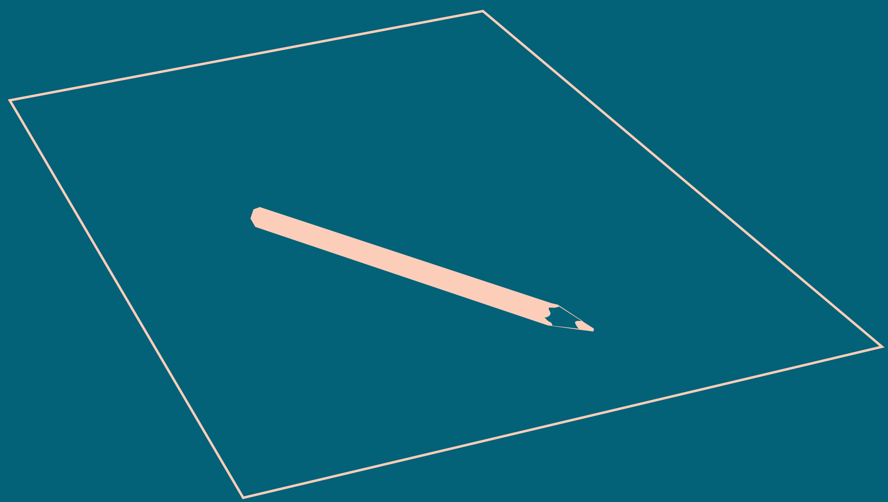
How to do local research



citizens advice

Blackpool Consumer Empowerment Partnership
March 2016

Introduction from Blackpool Consumer Empowerment Partnership

Throughout 2015-16 Blackpool CEP have developed and tried out a range of research resources and guides. It has been our aim to demystify research and get our staff and volunteers involved in producing case studies, running focus groups and mystery shopping. We have worked with Trading Standards to capture clients' feedback on the implementation of legislation in the private rented sector. We have also engaged local businesses to help us research the best methods of encouraging employees to save regularly and consider their long term financial futures. All-in-all it has been a busy and exciting year.

Being a CEP has allowed us to spend time developing our research skills and experience. We have been able to produce resources, mentor colleagues, attend meetings and give talks to highlight the importance of consumer work across Citizens Advice. We plan to continue with this work and we hope to be able to offer support to more local offices in the future.

This guide is a collection of guides that will help you choose research topics and give you an introduction to different research methods that you may want to use locally.

Contents

The research journey

If you want to complete a local research project this guide provides five key stages of decisions that you need to make before you get started. This guide has been designed to help you make the best use of your local resources.

Picking your issue

When picking your local issue, there are lots of sources of information to help. Some keys sources of information to look out for are:

- AIC codes and client information - these are a good way of seeing what issues clients are coming to Citizens Advice with, which issues are most common in your local area, and getting basic information about your clients.
- Local evidence forms (BEFs) - BEFs are an important source of evidence of issues affecting our clients. They be helpful to identify the impact of an issue.
- Staff and volunteer insight and expertise - people working with clients in your office may be able to give you great insight on frequent issues and their impact on the clients they are seeing. They know issues inside and out and so may be able to offer you suggestions on what needs to be changed and how to approach this
- Your knowledge of local changes and developments to policy or process - knowing what is coming up is useful for picking an issue. You may suspect that a change will impact clients and want to monitor its introduction so you can influence it going forward, or you may be able to spot a key moment for change.
- Recent national and external research - looking at what other people are doing is key. There maybe someone already focusing on a issue so you don't need to do it all yourself, or you may spot that they are missing part of a problem which you want to focus on.

Narrowing down the issue

Topic areas can be very large. For example, you might identify that there has been an increase in problems with mobile phones in your local area. However, as this is a large subject area, in order to make the most of your resources you will need to narrow down the problem and identify the key issues.

When doing this, it is useful to think about the following:

- If it's a **policy, a process, or both**?
- If it's a **national** or **local** issue - or is there an issue with how a national policy is being delivered locally?
- **Who** has any power to change it, or change part of it, and **what** will be persuasive to them?
- Is there a **current opportunity** to influence for change?
- Are you **best placed** to look at this issue? Do you have access to the decision makers to persuade them? Do you have the resource to tackle this issue or can you break it down so you look at part of the problem? Are there any **other ongoing national or local projects** about this issue that you could feed into?

Collecting the existing evidence

We are lucky to have an existing wealth of data, expertise and insight across the network which can be used to influence for positive change.

Think about the following:

- What information and data you already have in the local office? This could be BEFs, AICs, adviser expertise, case notes, legislation/ guidance and rules.
- What information already exists that you could use? This could be national and local data such as the census, local demographic data, other local data about the issue you are researching.
- Have you already tried to achieve change by using existing data? It is important to give the people who are in the position to change things the opportunity to do so. Sometimes all you need is AIC data, some expertise and a few good case studies to persuade for change.
- Do you need to do any further research, or do you just need to gather everything that exists already and plan how your are going to try and influence for change?

Designing and conducting your research

If you have decided that you need more evidence in order to demonstrate the need for change, there are some key decisions about how you do this. These decisions will affect what kind of research methodology you use and how you plan your research project.

- What are the **gaps in the existing evidence**?
- What are your **research questions**? What are the key things you need to find out about?
- Do you need to **understand the issue or the impact**? You might want to understand the full picture and how this might impact different people in different ways, or find out where there is a common experience. If this is the case, depth interviews, focus groups, could be useful research methods.
- Do you need to show the **scale of an issue**? You might want to show the numbers of people who are affected or the amount of people who are likely to be affected by an issue. If this is the case, a survey could be a good research method.
- Do you need **all of these**? If you need to find out about both the scale and the impact of an issue, the order you do this in is up to you. You could find out more through interviews then do a survey to find the extent of the issue. Or you could start with a survey and find out why your results are as they are through interviews.
- Is your chosen approach **ethical**? Could it be harmful to any research participants?
- Will the evidence you generate be **persuasive to the decision makers** who can improve the problem?

Using your evidence

When you have collected your evidence, you need to think about the best way to use it to achieve change. This could be through media work, or it could be through meetings with decision makers (or those who can influence decision makers).

Think about the following:

- Have you got **solutions** to the problem?
- How can you raise your evidence and solutions with the **relevant people**?
- Is there a particular time in the year when decision makers would be most interested in your evidence?
- Do you need to **build public awareness** and pressure to achieve change or could you potentially achieve it privately with the decision makers? Remember once something is public you lose this option so it may be best to start with a private approach.
- Is this suitable for a **local news piece**, or do you need to think about a **local campaign**? Think about the format you want to present your evidence in, depending on who it's for. For example, a busy MP would probably prefer to read a one page summary rather than a report.

Case Studies

What are case studies?

Case Studies are powerful tools that can demonstrate how people are affected by policies, problems and situations and to show the real impact of the work that we do.

They can offer journalists; policy-makers and politicians valuable insights into the effects of policies. They can also demonstrate the value of our work to funders and partners. They provide an illustrative overview of how a client's problem has been approached; how that problem affected them and those around them and how they were able to resolve or deal with that problem.

When is it appropriate to use case studies?

Case Studies are useful if the purpose is:

- To give our clients a voice
- For internal knowledge
- To accompany our research for a campaign
- To generate interest in research and campaigns work
- To influence policy-makers by showing real life impact
- To present to a commissioner as evidence of impact.
- To present to a funding provider as evidence of impact or to form part of a funding application.

Case Studies provide the quality and in-depth data that is often missing when we present dashboards and AIC data; they offer valuable insight into people's experiences that lie behind the statistics.

How we have used this research technique in Blackpool:

Using client case studies has helped us redesign our GP's Outreach Service and has provided evidence for commissioners within the CCG. This evidence has demonstrated how our advice service has improved clients mental health. By tracking three clients and producing in-depth case studies around their lifestyles and the advice we have provided over a long period of time (between 6 and 12 months) we have been able to produce evidence to demonstrate how advice has improved mental health and wellbeing. This evidence has helped meet our contractual obligations and proved the need for the GP's Outreach Advice Service in Blackpool.

How to use case studies

Case Studies can be used on their own or with other data for a more robust analysis.

Ensure you use a consistent structure and layout for your Case Studies. This will allow you to present information in a coherent way and will make them easier to write and read.

For research and campaigns it's important to ensure that the effect of the policy / problem is identified not just the effect of your intervention. Journalists; policy-makers and other target audiences will often ask 'so what?'; they need us to show them the effect that policies have on our clients – case studies can be a valuable source of these necessary insights.

To use case studies to demonstrate the impact of our service you can use the attached timeline a way of tracking a client's journey and demonstrating impact at each stage. It has been designed to be simple and can be used by everyone.

Top Tips for case studies

- For research and campaigns:
  - A BEF is a really good place to start.
  - Try to demonstrate the effect of the clients' problems as well as the reasons; this may trigger greater empathy but will also enable your audience to understand why the issue matters.
  - Think about what will be more persuasive to decision makers: using a case study to show how terrible the impact of a policy or process can be when it really goes wrong or whether you want to show how lots of people even in fairly straightforward situations struggle with a policy or process.
- For demonstrating the impact of our service:
  - Always base your Case Study on an issue that has significant impact on your target audience. What are the problems that your solution solves?
  - Communicate both the expected and achieved impact.
  - Don't be afraid of illustrating the barriers and any failures.
  - Describe any lessons learnt.

Focus groups

What are focus groups?

Focus groups are facilitated discussion groups, usually with 6-10 invited participants, which are used by researchers to gather information.

Each of the participants is chosen on relevant criteria like age; gender or experiences / circumstances often using 'screening' questionnaires. This allows the researcher to ensure the sample of people attending contains a good mix of people who are affected by a problem.

Prior to running the focus group, the researcher will usually create a discussion guide that the facilitator will use to ensure that the participants cover topics that are relevant to the research being conducted. There is no set time for the duration of a focus group but they often last around 90 minutes.

Besides the facilitator it can be good practice to also have other researchers or project team members involved who might act as observers; note takers or perform other tasks like administration and welcoming your participants. Before the session, ensure that you have thought about the logistics of running your group.

When is it appropriate to use a focus group?

Focus groups are not just used by market researchers for product development, they can also be a valuable social research tool to understand what people know about or how they are affected by certain policies.

How we have used focus groups in Blackpool:

As part of our engagement with employers we have conducted focus groups with HR managers and Directors to capture their views around supporting workers to join a savings scheme and make contributions to pensions. The focus groups started with a list of questions we wanted the employers to answer and have developed into involvement in the Blackpool Business Leaders Group (BBLG). At the last BBLG Breakfast meeting we delivered a presentation to over 30 Business leaders on our findings from the focus groups.

Focus groups may be used to explore various options or policies and generate new ideas in a project; they might also be a useful tool to compare or choose between various policy ideas or implementation models. The advantages of a group discussion are that you can gather a variety of views on a given subject relatively quickly; you can compare / contrast the views aired within the group and participants may stimulate contributions from one another.

Facilitators should be on hand to moderate focus group discussions and to ensure that all participants are engaged and are able to contribute. They need to be able to manage and steer the discussion without influencing the content or imposing their own ideas. The moderator can also introduce various exercises to the group such as case studies, role plays and information studies where participants look at previous research around the topic or policy area. This can be used to reveal deeper opinions and attitudes, to re-energise the group or to tackle difficult participants.

When is a focus group not suitable?

A focus group will not be suitable if the results can be better gathered by other means such as individual interviews. Be mindful that participants may feel unable to discuss sensitive subjects in front of others; for this reason it may be better to explore subjects like debt or domestic abuse, for example, one-to-one rather than in a group.

There is potential for focus groups to concentrate too much on what the group thinks at the expense of individual opinions and reactions. A focus group may not function well if individual members hide their views or their opinions or are swayed by a particularly dominant participant.

Top tips for focus groups

Do's

- Plan for the group and how and when you are going to cover the topics in your discussion guide.
- Get your sampling and recruitment right.
- Know your discussion guide.
- Ensure your participants feel able to contribute.
- Establish and stick to the ground rules.
- Make sure everyone speaks.
- Use an ice breaker to make participants comfortable in the setting.
- Use questions to stimulate discussions.
- Use eye contact and body language to manage the group.
- Tackle inappropriate conduct.

Don'ts

- Don't use focus groups if individual interviews would give better results or for particularly sensitive subjects.
- Don't go off topic – use the time you have with participants wisely.
- Don't lose track of time.
- Don't lose control of the group or let anyone dominate.
- Don't allow people to feel they can't contribute.
- Don't stifle the discussion with closed questions.
- Don't allow your own views to dominate the discussion.

Surveys

What are surveys?

A survey is way of gathering structured information or data from a large number of individuals using a standard set of questions. Surveys can be conducted either online, by telephone or by giving paper copies to participants, or by face to face interview, and each way has its advantages and disadvantages.

Surveys are a good way to get an overview of people's experiences, views, attitudes and opinions and can also be used as a way of identifying any topics that might want to be further explored in more detail through focus groups or depth interviews.

When is it appropriate to use surveys

You could conduct a survey when you want to know the proportions of people who have had a particular experience or who have a certain opinion. It is a good method to use if you want to find out facts and identify general trends about a topic.

Surveys are usually less resource intensive than qualitative methods, especially if you choose to conduct your survey online, or by telephone. The use of the internet and social media is an effective way of including a large number of people in research, as well as a way to target any groups which might be needed for a representative sample.

Despite this, there are limits to using the internet to disseminate a survey as it excludes certain groups of people, which might make your sample less representative than you wanted. Face to face surveys are more useful when the people you want to talk to are hard to reach online, or not online at all.

How we have used surveys in Blackpool:

This is a research technique that we have used in Blackpool on non-consumer issues we've worked on as well as part of our CEP funding. One very informative survey we carried out, outside our work as a CEP, was with PIP claimants. We surveyed all our clients who were required to attend a medical assessment appointment as part of their eligibility for PIP. We wanted to find out where the appointment was taking place, when and how easy it was for them to travel there. The results of this survey provided vital evidence for us to campaign for and successfully secure a PIP assessment centre in Blackpool.

A good example of the use of a survey is the Citizens Advice report on reducing bogus self-employment. We saw an increase in people coming to bureau not knowing if they were self-employed or employees. Due to this we surveyed around 500 clients to determine whether they were in genuine self-employment. This report estimates the amount of people in bogus self-employment across the country and also highlights the human impact of the issue.

When a survey is not suitable

Surveys are not the best research method to use if you want to explore an issue or an experience in great detail. This is because they need to be relatively short and to the point, in order to keep the respondent focused.

If you would like to know about the depth of people's experiences and views, qualitative methods may be more appropriate.

Surveys may not always be suitable for getting information on particularly nuanced topics as this information is unlikely to be fully captured just by a list of set questions. Including open-ended questions can capture opinions with more accuracy and complexity, although the responses will be harder to analyse than with pre-set responses.

How to use this method

1. Decide key information to be collected
2. Select your sample.
3. Design and test your survey.
4. Get the right number of people to complete the survey.
5. Analyse the data.
6. Write up findings.

You can find a detailed step by step guide to questionnaires on CABlink: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/cablink/research-methods-how-to-guides.

Top tips for questionnaires

Good preparation is key to a successful survey. To make sure you can use the data afterwards, it's useful to take time to think about exactly what you want to find out and why, as this will influence your key research questions and your sample.

Make sure you triple check your questionnaire for any technical errors (if it's online) or for any questions which could be misinterpreted.

Other guides/tools available

There are many different online survey providers which you can create your survey on. There are pro's and con's of using each different survey provider which you might want to consider. These sites have some standard questions which you can use. These questions will have been tried and tested so it is always good to check whether there is one that has already been used rather than making up your own.

Free surveys programmes:

Type form: www.typeform.com

- Type Form don't restrict the number of questions you can add or the amount of responses you can collect.
- Type Form offers basic template and formatting options to help create your survey and you can also download into Excel.
- You can also pay for an upgraded version of Type Form which includes more advanced tools.

Survey Monkey: www.surveymonkey.com

- The basic free package Survey Monkey offer is 10 questions and 100 responses which includes basic customisation and survey building help.
- You can't download the results into an Excel/SPSS spreadsheet but you can use their online facility for analysis.
- There are numerous price plans with different options on Survey Monkey. These vary from £26 per month to £65 per month and the different

packages give you more support, user management, customisation and testing options.

Google forms: www.google.co.uk/forms/about

- Google Forms don't restrict the number of questions you can add or the amount of responses you can collect.
- The options for basic templates and customisation are more limited.
- It's quite straightforward to analyse the results using Google Forms, or to export them into a Google Sheet or Excel document.
- The use of Google Forms is limited if you do not have a Google account.

This website offers some good examples of surveys: http://discover.ukdataservice.ac.uk/variables

Survey Monkey offer some good tips on how to create surveys, and things to avoid amongst much more: https://www.surveymonkey.net/mp/how-to-create-surveys/

You can find an example survey and an example of an analysis grid here: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/cablink/research-methods-how-to-guides.

Depth interviews

What are depth interviews

A depth interview is a loosely structured interview with a single participant. It is based on a standard set of questions, but also allows interviewers and interviewees the flexibility to develop interesting points and explore other relevant areas. It is likely to be a familiar approach to many frontline advisers at Citizens Advice, but is also often used by researchers.

Why use this method

Depth interviews allow researchers to explore and understand a problem or process in more detail. Participants can explain how they perceived an issue, the impact on them, how they responded and the reasons for their behaviour. As we know at Citizens Advice, giving clients the opportunity to fully explain their situation provides a much richer understanding of their issues, the causes, and any interaction between the two, putting us in a better position to think about solutions.

A good example of the use of depth interviews is the Citizens Advice report about non-traditional forms of working. We knew there had been an increase in non-standard employment contracts, which led to issues regarding holiday entitlement, maternity or sick pay for many people. Carrying out depth interviews with a broad sample of people on non-traditional contracts allowed them to explain how this works in practice and highlight any impacts this type of work had on their lives. This helped us to uncover the difficulties they face and let us think about ways the system could be changed to work better for them.

How we have used depth interviews in Blackpool:

As part of a Seasonal Workers research campaign we completed in depth surveys with seasonal workers. The aim was to gain an insight into how much financial help they received including incentives to complete the season and other schemes or information they received from their employer throughout the season and once the season ended. We identified the people we wanted to survey by standing on Blackpool Prom and asking people if they were seasonal workers. We needed the survey to be easy to complete and we needed willing volunteers to ask the questions.

When this method isn't suitable

Because they take time to do, depth interviews cannot be used in sufficient numbers to find out about the existence or extent of a problem. To first identify or assess the extent of an issue, you normally need to use data which captures responses from a much wider population. This might come from a large survey, or from the data regularly collected by Citizens Advice. Depth interviews are more resource intensive than other research methods, as the process of planning, organising, carrying out and analysing each interview takes a lot of time.

Using the same example as above, we used external data to get an overview of the scale of the problem, and then depth interviews to understand people's' experience of the problem. Depth interviews wouldn't have been appropriate if we wanted to say, for example, "20% of the population in

England are affected by non-standard employment contracts."

How to use this method

1. Decide key information to be collected
2. Select your sample.
3. Recruit participants.
4. Develop a discussion guide.
5. Carry out interviews.
6. Analyse data.

You can find a full printable step by step guide to depth interviews on CABlink: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/cablink/research-methods-how-to-guides.

Top tips for depth interviews

It is worth spending your time really thinking through your sample and your topic guide as these things can make a huge difference to how useful the interviews are for your research.

Direct quotes can have a powerful impact. Think about how you want to record interviews to make sure you can use these to illustrate your findings.

Try to write up your interview or input into your analysis grid as soon as possible after the interview to make sure you capture everything.

Other guides, tools or resources available

Free online guides:

- http://www2.pathfinder.org/site/DocServer/m_e_tool_series_indepth_interviews.pdf?docID=6301
- http://www2.open.ac.uk/students/skillsforstudy/conducting-an-interview.php

You can find other helpful templates and examples here: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/cablink/research-methods-how-to-guides.These include:

- Template consent form
- Template incentive receipt
- Template lone work safety policy. Or please see here for further information.
- Template topic guide
- Image of analysis grid - as facilities across the network vary, we can only provide an image of an example analysis grid.

Mystery shopping

What is Mystery Shopping

Mystery Shopping involves posing as a potential service-user or customer to get an insight into what services are provided and what it is like to access these. It is a unique method as the respondent is unaware of the evaluation at the time, which can lead to questions on ethics. Interactions can take place via phone, email, instant messenger, or in person. Some of the issues you need to think about when doing research will be more pronounced depending on the channels used.

Why use this method

This method is useful to find out facts rather than opinion. It is used to find out details about what services are provided when this can't easily be found in other ways. It is a good method to use if you want to measure customer experience and get an insight into the quality of a service offered. You can also use it to develop service user or customer journeys by finding out more about the experiences they would have.

A good example of using mystery shopping can be seen in the Citizens Advice report about the practicalities of childcare. Despite increased government support into childcare costs, we knew from bureau evidence that many parents still found childcare an issue which was stopping them from working. Due to this, we asked bureaux to help us research into local childcare provision by phoning their local childcare providers and probing into various areas, such as cost, Ofsted rating, waiting lists etc. This approach allowed us to gain an insight into the experiences parents might have whilst finding childcare across England as well as data on the types of childcare available.

How we have used mystery shopping in Blackpool:

In Blackpool we have used this technique to find out more about the experience of our clients when entering the private rented sector and using local lettings agencies. We focused our research on the changes in legislation in the sector and found out how many lettings agencies were adhering to the new legislation that came in in 2015. The research involved volunteers approaching lettings agencies with a view to renting a property. They gathered information from display adverts and the agency staff. Our findings have helped us work with local lettings agencies to highlight deposit schemes, make them aware of the information prospective tenants are entitled to and improve the experience for our clients.

When this method isn't suitable

You shouldn't use this method if there are other ways of getting the same information. Using the same example above, if we only wanted to know about the types of childcare available in an area, we could have got that information by phoning local childcare providers and explaining that you are collecting the information for research. However, we also wanted to find out about the experiences parents might have whilst finding childcare, which meant we could not get this information other than by posing as a parent.

This method is also not appropriate

if it would require you to become or appear as a serious potential customer or service user. This is because it would be unfair to take up the time of the service or lead them to invest further time when there was never a chance of them receiving our custom. By making enquiries very speculative this can be avoided. Think about the level of detriment to the service your mystery shop could have.

How to use this method

1. Decide key information to be collected.
2. Select your sample.
3. Decide how to carry out shop
4. Develop script and support materials.
5. Carry out mystery shop.
6. Analyse data.

You can find a detailed step by step guide to mystery shopping on CABlink: www.citizensadvice.org.uk/cablink/research-methods-how-to-guides.

Top tips for mystery shopping

Preparation is key - it is worth thinking about every situation linked to the service and the questions you are likely to be asked.

It is important to have a clear story thought out beforehand so you are able to appear as natural and convincing as possible.

Other guides/tools available

Here is a guide of how the FCA uses mystery shopping: www.fca.org.uk/your-fca/documents/fsa-mystery-shopping-guide

More information on deciding sample size

www.surveymonkey.com/mp/sample-size-calculator/

Here is an example mystery shop checklist:

www.tern.co.uk/cd-content/uploads/files/Free-Mystery-Shopping-Sample-Survey.pdf

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