

## Wellbeing Focus Group - A Guide for School Staff

**School self-evaluation (SSE) is a collaborative, reflective process of internal school review, focused on school improvement. Focus groups provide one method for school staff to gather information from a group of people about their experiences and opinions that can be used in this process. The information gathered can be used to identify areas of existing effective practice as well as areas for improvement.**

### **What is a focus group?**

A focus group is an information gathering tool where a selected group of 6-12 people have a focused discussion on a particular topic. This discussion is guided by a school staff member acting as facilitator who asks up to 12 questions. The discussion lasts for 40-80 minutes. A record keeper records issues and views raised. School policy regarding data protection should be adhered when recording discussions. Generally focus groups meet once only.

### **Why are they used?**

- To elicit ideas/opinions from a selected group of people and/or to supplement information gathered from other sources e.g. questionnaires
- To understand relevant issues from the viewpoint of various stakeholders (e.g. parents, school staff, pupils)
- To remain 'connected' with the various stakeholders ensuring their views are heard
- To yield rich qualitative information on a topic in a relatively short period of time
- To guide future actions

### **When to use a focus group?**

- To hear and explore the voice of staff, parent/guardians and children and young people in relation to the four key areas of wellbeing promotion
  - Culture and ethos
  - Curriculum -teaching and learning
  - Policy and planning
  - Relationships and Partnership
- To gather more detailed information which can be missed using questionnaires or other information gathering tools

### **Considerations when planning a focus group**

- Participants may either be identified and invited or volunteer to take part
- Participants should be representative of the target group
- The date and time of the focus group needs to be decided and participants or volunteers advised of the time commitment involved and the focus of discussion
- The power balance in the group should be considered e.g. interviewing management with staff members or different ages of students together may inhibit honest sharing of views
- The facilitator will need experience at facilitating groups and be familiar with the Department Wellbeing Policy Statement and Framework for practice
- The facilitator is responsible for establishing a safe context for focus group members through agreeing ground-rules for the group's process and ensuring these ground-rules are adhered to
- The facilitator needs to establish with the group what confidentiality means and its limits and state reporting obligations under Children First and Department of Education guidelines
- Participants in the focus group should to be comfortable with each other so that discussion flows

## Planning and Preparing Questions

1. Devise questions in advance, involving key staff and management.

Questions should be:

- Short and to the point
- Open ended or use a sentence completion format and worded to avoid closed yes/ no answers

2. Questions should focus on selected areas of wellbeing promotion highlighted from the questionnaires in need of more exploration. The four key areas are:

- Culture and ethos
- Curriculum (teaching and learning )
- Policy and planning
- Relationships and partnership

### Example

St. Mary's staff decided to address what is working well and areas that need attention in the area of Culture and Environment. An example of some questions asked in a parent focus group included:

- We will start with 'a round' and I will ask you all to complete the following sentence: *I feel welcome in the school when.....*
- After listening to people's views can you tell me other ways the school is welcoming to parents?
- What whole school activities do you participate in?
- Are there ways the school could be more welcoming to parents? Can you share any ideas?

## How to run the focus group?

The facilitator:

- Thanks everyone for participating
- Outlines the time that is needed (usually between 40 – 80 minutes)
- Reviews the purpose of bringing everyone together and the structure of the meeting
- Agrees ground rules in collaboration with participants. This process can involve for example, asking group members what ground rules they think should be included. It is important to ensure that the limits of confidentiality are outlined, emphasise the importance of talking one at a time, respecting others views and remind participants that all opinions are welcome and there may be diversity of views in the groups and that is to be welcomed
- Recording ground rules on a flip chart can provide a visual reminder that supports safe group process throughout the session
- Shares information on the role of the facilitator for example, to elicit views, ensure the smooth running of the sessions and report back findings to inform school based actions
- Asks the planned questions and expands if necessary on these questions to help the conversations flow
- It may be helpful to allow participants to think about and note their own ideas initially before discussing ideas in pairs and then in the larger group.
- Uses pauses and probes when needed, for example: 5 second pause and probes such as *"Would you explain further?"*, *"Would you give me an example?"*, *"I am not sure I understand can you explain further?"*

- Providing a template to record individual/pair/smaller group feedback may help members express their ideas in written form rather than requiring speaking out in a larger group
- Summarises what has been said, checking with participants for accuracy and understanding if needed
- Checks with the person recording the discussion from time to time that key points have been captured
- Ensures that everyone in the group has an opportunity to speak, that everyone's voice is being heard and that no one voice or view dominates the discussion. Asks if anyone has any general comments to make before concluding
- Thanks the group for their participation

### After the meeting

With the support of the Recorder check:

- What patterns emerge?
- What are the common themes?
- What new questions arise?
- What conclusions can you come to?
- What actions can be taken to further promote wellbeing

It is recommended that another staff member independently reviews the record made to prevent bias in interpretation.

The information can be used to inform a **School Improvement Plan** and to agree actions to bring about improvements in wellbeing by addressing the four key questions of School Self Evaluation, *how well are we doing? what are our strengths? what are our areas for improvement? how can we improve?*.