

GCVS  
Good Practice  
Guide



How to...

# create a great survey



*GCVS: helping your voluntary  
organisation grow*

# How to... create a great survey

## Intro

### Introduction

Producing a really good questionnaire and conducting a well thought out survey is crucial for enabling you to get the best possible information from your service users, particularly when time and funds are limited. This guide aims to help you do this, and is full of useful tips and advice.

## What is a survey?

### What is a survey?

A survey is a way of gathering information, views or opinions that you hope represent the views of a larger group of people or particular community.

The two main ways of going about this are sample surveys and census surveys. Sample surveys ask a limited number of people, from a given community or group, with the hope that the results will be reflective of results from a larger group.

In contrast, census surveys, just like The Census, survey every member of a particular group, community or population. Although this is good for accurate information about the group, it is often not practical for larger groups and can be very time consuming and costly. However, for smaller groups this is ideal.

## Why use a survey?

### Why use a survey?

A survey is often the best way of gathering a whole range of information including:

- Attitudes and reactions to various issues
- Opinions on a range of issues
- Feedback on your organisation for monitoring and evaluation purposes

It is well worth considering a survey when:

- You need a quick and efficient way of getting information
- You need to reach a large number of people
- You need statistically valid information about a large number or specific group of people
- The information you need isn't readily available via other sources



## The Pros and Cons of a Written Survey

| Pros  | Cons   |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Large numbers of people can give their input</li> <li>• Low cost</li> <li>• People can respond at their own convenience</li> <li>• Avoids interviewer bias</li> <li>• Provides a written record</li> <li>• Easier to list or tabulate responses</li> <li>• Wide range of respondents</li> <li>• No training required as with interviewing</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often has a very low response rate</li> <li>• Depends on the selected sample</li> <li>• May not truly represent the whole group</li> <li>• Respondent may skip questions</li> </ul> |

### Step 1: Prepare!

#### Preparing your survey

Be very clear about the purpose of your survey as this is essential in determining the questions you want to answer, who you will survey and how you will carry out the survey.

| Steps to follow:  | Some pointers:  |
|---|---|
| Decide what you need to know  | List all of the items that you need information on.   |
| Consider why you need this information.                                     | Examine your list and remove any item that is not directly related to what you need.  |
| Ask yourself whether a survey is the best way of obtaining the information? | If not, consider alternatives e.g. interviews, focus groups or even a quick telephone chat with several people.                               |
| Ask who to target your questions towards.                                   | Who can best answer your questions? Is it the general public? Service users? A particular neighbourhood or section of the community? Funders? |

Once you are clear on who could answer your questions you can then decide whether you want to carry out a sample or census survey.



## Sampling

Most surveys rely on sampling to some extent and there are various ways of working out how to select a sample.

All researchers are dependent on the goodwill and availability of participants, so it may well be difficult or impossible to achieve a true random sample. If this is the case, you may be forced to interview anyone from the total population who is available and willing at the time. These opportunity samples are generally acceptable as long as the make up of the sample is clearly stated and the limits are recognised. However, even in a small study, efforts should be made to select as representative sample as possible.

If you are hoping to get representative responses from two or more groups you will most likely need to consider the sample design. For example, say you are doing a survey on the availability of youth facilities within a given area and you want to get responses from young people, parents and local youth workers. You will need to come up with separate population counts for each of these groups and then select a sample from each. The samples should be large enough to represent the group it is drawn from, but the sample sizes should be proportional to the groups they represent. You might design a sample that turns out like this:

|            | Young People | Parents | Youth workers |
|------------|--------------|---------|---------------|
| Population | 650          | 200     | 500           |
| Sample     | 65           | 20      | 50            |



### Sampling Information Sources

Sampling is an incredibly large issue with lots of different information available on the subject. For more information check out the following sources:

Research Methods Knowledge Base  
[www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/sampling.php](http://www.socialresearchmethods.net/kb/sampling.php)

Wikipedia  
[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sampling\\_\(statistics\)](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sampling_(statistics))

University of Glasgow  
[www.stats.gla.ac.uk/steps/glossary/sampling.html](http://www.stats.gla.ac.uk/steps/glossary/sampling.html)



## Deciding on the survey method

You need to make some decisions about how to collect your survey data. Will it be written or oral? Face to face or by telephone? Will they complete it themselves or will you record their responses?

There are various methods to choose from:

- Postal self-complete questionnaire
- Self complete questionnaire in group setting
- Asking the questions face to face and recording the participant's response
- Asking the questions over the telephone and recording the participant's response
- By email or internet e.g. survey monkey

To make a decision on this, consider the following:

- Will potential participants feel more comfortable writing or speaking?
- Will it be efficient to leave surveys somewhere for people to pick it up voluntarily, or should you do something to ensure they each get one?
- If your survey is administered in person or over the telephone, will people feel happy or annoyed about being asked for their opinions?
- What is your budget?
- How much time do I have?

## Postal Surveys

Postal self-complete questionnaires are ideal where your time and budget are limited, as long as a written response is suitable for the people you are looking to gather information from.

### Pros

- Respondents can fill out the survey at their own convenience, whenever they have time
- It can be anonymous, which is much more comfortable for some respondents
- All respondents will read the same questions, eliminating any interviewer bias
- Respondents will have time to check their records before answering – if they need to verify information they will have the chance to be accurate

### Cons

- They're not very flexible and don't provide the opportunity to probe for answers as you can only read what the respondent has written
- There is no opportunity to look at facial expressions or body language. (If this is important it's best to use a face to face interview)
- Return rate tends to be low
- Respondents may leave some questions blank
- You can't control when participants return the completed questionnaire
- You might not be able to tell the difference between who simply didn't return the survey and those who you had the wrong address for



## Online surveys

Online surveys are becoming an increasingly popular method of carrying out surveys. Overall they tend to be very easy to use with, don't require any specialist software and can be administered via e-mail or on a website.

Another bonus is that they automatically collate the results, so you can view results live and, for basic analysis, needn't do any of the time consuming data inputting or collation of results.

Online surveys tend to work best with short and simple questionnaires aimed at a well-known and e-confident group.

If you are going to be carrying out several online surveys paying the initial start up costs can certainly be worth it.



### Survey Information Sources

Survey monkey  
[www.surveymonkey.com](http://www.surveymonkey.com)

Smart Survey  
[www.smart-survey.co.uk](http://www.smart-survey.co.uk)

## Step 2: Create your survey!

### Creating your survey!

#### Question wording

There is a wide variety of question types that can be included in surveys. Bear in mind that the more structured a question is the easier it is to analyse. Here are some of the more commonly used question types:

**Verbal or open questions** are useful for gathering views and where the expected response is a word, phrase or extended comment.

e.g. What is the biggest challenge facing your organisation at the moment?

**Quantity questions** are similar to open questions in seeking an open response. But the answer will give the amount of something (exact or approximate)

e.g. How many people on average each week make use of your community café?

**Forced choice questions** allow you to promote a specific 'yes' or 'no' answer.

e.g. Does your organisation engage volunteers?

Yes

No

**List questions** offer a list of items, any number of which may be selected.

e.g.

Which of the following GCVS services has your organisation accessed in the past 12 months? (please tick all that apply)

Training

Infobase reports

Payroll

Capacity Building



## Question wording

### Question wording

**Multiple choice questions** allow only one response to be selected from a given set of categories.

e.g. How long has your organisation operated within Glasgow?

- Less than 1 year
- 1 – 5 yrs
- 5 – 10 yrs
- Over 10 yrs

**Ranking questions** ask the respondent to place something in order.

e.g. Please rank the following training needs in terms of their importance to your organisation: (1 = most important and 4 = least important)

- Health & Safety .....
- IT .....
- Customer Care .....
- Staff Management .....

**Scale questions** ask respondents to rate items on a response scale already provided.

e.g. To what extent do you agree that long term funding is an important issue for the voluntary sector?

- Strongly agree
- Agree
- Neither agree or disagree
- Disagree
- Strongly disagree

**A table or grid** can be used to record answers to two or more questions at the same time, often combined with scale questions, for example:

To what extent do you agree with each of the following statements?

|   | <b>Strongly agree</b> | <b>Agree</b>          | <b>Neither</b>        | <b>Disagree</b>       | <b>Strongly disagree</b> |
|---|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------|
| Equalities remains an issue in the workplace            | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>    |
| All workplace buildings should be fully accessible      | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>    |
| Open plan offices encourage communication between teams | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/> | <input type="radio"/>    |

### Question wording tip:



**Write each question on individual pieces of card. That way, you can move the cards into order later.**



### Some thoughts on question wording

Wording your questions carefully is crucial in ensuring you gather the information you are looking for.

You should keep language as straightforward as possible and avoid using any words or terms that respondents may not understand, such as technical language, local terms and abbreviations.

To avoid a potentially negative effect on your results, check and recheck all of your questions for the following factors:

- **Ambiguous, imprecise or terms that make an assumption.** A word that has a common meaning to you may mean something different to other people.
- Questions requiring **memory or knowledge** should be avoided as often memories of an event or experience can change. Take care not to ask for information that the person may not know or may not have readily to hand.
- **Double questions** or 2 in 1 questions such as 'have you heard of GCVS and know what services we provide?' should be avoided as an answer such as "yes" may only apply to one part of the question. This can lead to difficulties in analysing the results.
- It can be difficult to spot a **leading question**, but the use of emotive language or the way a question is worded can lead the respondents to answer questions in a particular way. For example, the question 'How do you feel about the accusation that voluntary sector organisations are not run professionally?' is likely to produce a defensive or angry response from sector staff.
- **Presuming questions** are often accidentally included when someone creating a survey holds strong views about a subject and overlooks the fact that everyone may not feel the same way.
- **Hypothetical questions** tend to provide useless responses. For example, if you had no family responsibilities and plenty money, how would you spend your time? A respondent may think to themselves "but I do have family responsibilities and very little money, I can't imagine anything different". Or their notion of the future may differ from one day to the next.
- It is best to remove any potentially **offensive questions** and those covering **sensitive issues**. If in any doubt, remove the question or seek advice from others. It is probably best to locate sensitive questions near the end of the questionnaire.





## Survey Layout

Layout and appearance will impact upon the overall response to your survey. A professional looking, clearly laid out and understandable questionnaire will be seen as much more interesting and worthwhile.

When you are satisfied that all the questions are of the right type and well-worded, start sorting them into order. It is usually advisable to place easy questions near the beginning. Use a logical order and place similar questions together.

Next, write out any instructions for the questionnaire so that respondents are clear about how to answer the questions. Instructions must be clearly presented. Try using a different font and displaying them in a prominent position.

You should also now decide whether you will need a right-hand margin for coding and analysis.

It is important at this stage to avoid cramming too much into one page, even though you might want to keep the number of pages to a minimum. It is preferable to have white spaces on the page than a cluttered, off-putting page.

Once you've finalised your survey, you need to write a covering letter. This letter should clearly explain what information you are looking for, why you're looking for it, who should complete the survey and what will be happen with the results. It's important to provide a contact name and details in case the respondent requires clarification on any issues. The survey should also clearly indicate when the questionnaire is to be returned.

## Accessibility

Ensuring that your survey is accessible will also determine the layout of your questionnaire. Overall the same principles of good clear print guidelines can be applied. RNIB provide a valuable guideline on this.



### Accessibility Information Sources

RNIB Clear Print Guidelines  
[www.rnib.org.uk/gooddesign](http://www.rnib.org.uk/gooddesign)

Further information can be accessed at:

Scottish Accessible Information Forum  
[www.saifscotland.org.uk](http://www.saifscotland.org.uk)



### Piloting the survey

Piloting your survey helps to iron out any mistakes and is very important, even if you are pushed for time.

Questions you might want to also ask pilot participants include:

- How long did it take to complete?
- Were the instructions clear?
- Were any of the questions unclear or ambiguous?
- Did you feel uncomfortable answering any of the questions?
- In your opinion, has any major issue been missed out?
- Was the questionnaire layout clear?
- Any other comments?

From the pilot responses you can then fix any problems ahead of the main distribution.

Ideally, it should be sent to people who are similar to your selected sample. However, if that is not possible, ask friends, family or colleagues for help.

The pilot also provides you with the opportunity to try out your methods of analysis. Even with five or six completed questionnaires, you will be able to see whether any problems are likely to arise when you analyse the main returns.

Make any adjustments to the questionnaire in the light of pilot respondent's comments and your preliminary analysis. Consider timing: if it took your pilot participants too long to complete, you might need to remove some questions.

### Distribution and return of questionnaires

Decide at an early stage how the questionnaires are to be distributed - by post, internal mail, in person? If you decide on a postal survey, include a stamped addressed envelope if you can.

Unless you are administering the questionnaire personally, always include a covering letter and a self-addressed envelope. Always mention if you have received official approval to carry out the study.

**Direct mail:** This is the most common approach (whether by post or email), despite having a high percentage of non-responders. If you receive a response rate of 20% you're doing well, although this can be higher if the participants have an interest in the issues or organisation.

**Interviews and phone survey:** Although more time-consuming and costly, this method does generate a higher response rate and is particularly useful for respondents who have difficulty reading or using printed materials, or for surveys which require more in-depth answers.



## Non-response

Decide what you are going to do about non-responses before starting the main distribution. Following an initial good response, with returns then slowing down, inevitably, not all questionnaires will be returned by the specified date. Don't be disheartened by this as you can follow up non-respondents by sending a second letter and questionnaire. If you are going to do this you can't promise anonymity as you'll need to know who has and hasn't responded.

Anonymity means that there is no way of linking responses with individuals. So if you have promised this, don't be tempted to insert sneaky little symbols that tell you who has replied.

## Analysis of data

Before gathering the completed surveys, start considering how to figure out and interpret the results. This may be as simple as tabulating the results (i.e. adding them up and displaying the results in a table). However, analysis can be more complicated, particularly if you want to carry out statistical analysis or qualitative analysis on open-ended questions.

| Steps to follow:   | Some pointers:   |
|--|--|
| Begin to record data as soon as completed questionnaires are returned.                     | You have no time to wait for stragglers.   |
| Look for similarities, grouping and items of particular significance. Identify categories. | First thought categories will be a start in the process of collating findings.   |
| Enter responses as returns are received.   | Prepare summary sheets (paper or electronic), eg Excel spread sheet.   |
| Experiment with different ways of presenting findings.                                     | Tables, bar charts, pie charts, other graphs.  |
| Try out different methods of presentation for responses to different question types.       | Select whichever best illustrates the points you are making.   |
| Start to interpret the data  | It's not usually enough to describe data. Try to consider what it means.   |
| Do not get involved in complicated statistics unless you know what you are doing.          | It is perfectly possible to produce a good report without extensive statistical knowledge if your questionnaire is well thought out. |



### Statistical analysis and SPSS

Various statistical analyses can be carried out in MS Excel & MS Access. If you're keen to try out more complex analysis then SPSS software is ideal. SPSS has a variety of questionnaire and survey add-ons that can be purchased and is worth considering if you're planning to carry out large surveys on a regular basis.

### Commissioning Research

If you don't feel you have the skills, or the time to carry out a survey yourself you may want to consider commissioning an external organisation to conduct the research for you. Check out the following resources to find out more about this.



#### Research Information Sources

Social Research Association:  
[www.the-sra.org.uk](http://www.the-sra.org.uk)

Infobase  
[www.infobaseglasgow.org](http://www.infobaseglasgow.org)

### Data protection

Some of the data you collect from individuals through your survey might be 'personal data' e.g. contact name and email address, and therefore are covered by the Data Protection Act 1998.

The basic rules worth considering are:

- Always explain who you are (and who your organisation is) in each piece of communication
- Always tell people what you are going to use their information for
- Always give the option for people to withdraw their contact details
- Don't pass on information to a third party without the organisation's consent



#### Data Protection Information Sources

*Data Protection for Voluntary Organisations* (2nd Ed. 2002), Paul Ticher  
Directory of Social Change, London.

The Scottish Information Commissioner  
[www.itspublicknowledge.info/home/ScottishInformationCommissioner.asp](http://www.itspublicknowledge.info/home/ScottishInformationCommissioner.asp)

Scottish Executive Freedom of Information Unit  
[www.scotland.gov.uk/about/foi](http://www.scotland.gov.uk/about/foi)



## Negotiating access and ethics

### Steps to follow:

Be honest about the purpose of the survey and what's involved

Remember that people who agree to help are doing you a favour

Do not distribute a questionnaire before checking whether approval is required. Negotiating access is an important stage if you don't readily have access to who you want to speak to, eg children.

If you have any doubts about the ethics of your survey, check this out and discuss with other colleagues or seek specialist advice on this.

### Some pointers:

If you say the survey will take 10 mins to complete, people will lose faith if it lasts an hour.

Make sure you get in contact when you say you will. Letters of thanks should always be sent regardless of how busy you are.

Never assume 'it will be all right'.

## Getting people involved

You may want to consider getting your service users involved in the development and implementation of your survey. Participatory action research has emerged in recent years as a recognised method of seeking development and change within communities and groups and is a really useful way to engage with your service users and local communities.

Communities Scotland's guide on community engagement is useful for finding out more about this and other methods.



### Community Engagement Sources

Scottish Centre for Regeneration "How to guides"  
[www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk](http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk)



### Research Funding Sources

Scottish Community Development Centre  
[www.scdc.org.uk/scarf/](http://www.scdc.org.uk/scarf/)



### About Infobase

*Infobase is Glasgow's information resource about community and voluntary organisations.*

Early in 2004, Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector secured funding from Social Justice Resources for Glasgow in order to develop a core information resource for the community and voluntary sector in the city.

This sort of exercise had never been undertaken before. Accurate and relevant information about the activities of the sector had never been gathered in a systematic, citywide basis.

Up until then, it had been extremely difficult (if not impossible) for sector staff, volunteers, statutory agencies or the general public to access even basic information about community and voluntary groups in Glasgow.

With the arrival of Infobase, all that changed.

**Fast, relevant and accurate information about the community and voluntary sector is now only a click of a mouse away.**

Infobase has three main uses:

**1. Easily accessible available information over the Internet.**

Via the website, Infobase can provide anyone who is interested with up to date contact details and general information about Glasgow's community and voluntary organisations - location, services provided, opening times, etc.

**2. More detailed information about the voluntary and community sector across the city.**

This enables the collation and analysis of reliable information for future planning, both within the sector itself and by public agencies.

**3. A recognised starting point for anyone wishing to research the voluntary and community sector in Glasgow.**

Infobase provides a recognised standard for data collection and encourages high-quality and relevant research within the voluntary and community sector.

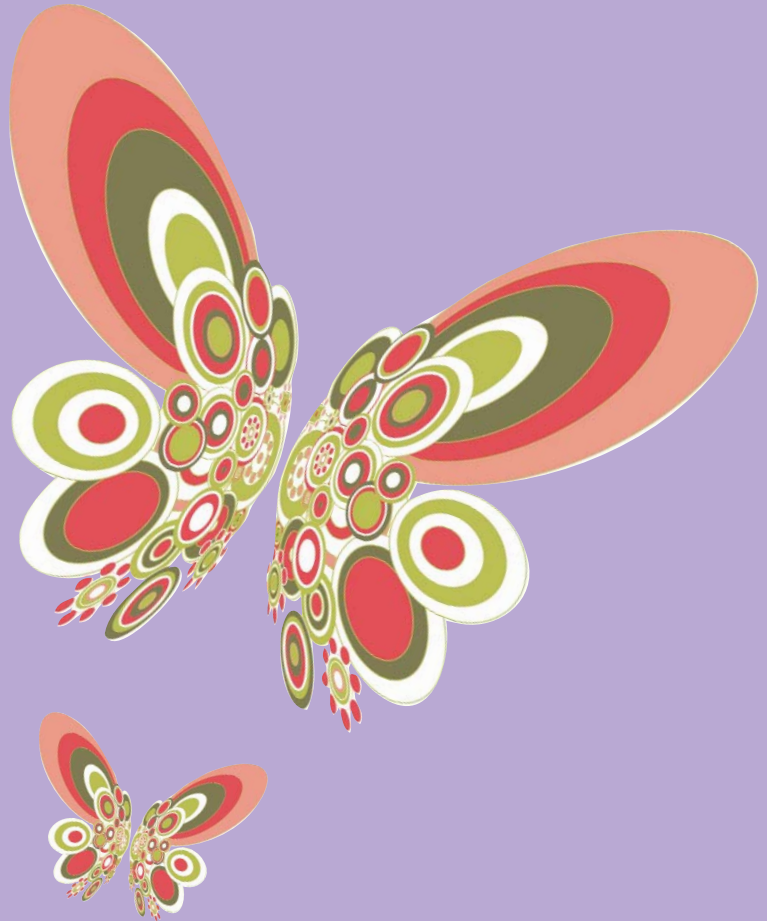




**Check out Infobase at  
[www.infobaseglasgow.org](http://www.infobaseglasgow.org)**



GCVS: helping your voluntary  
organisation grow



## GCVS Good Practice Guides

GCVS has produced a range of good practice guides to support voluntary organisations in their growth.

If you would like to talk to a member of staff about any of the issues raised in these publications, call 0141 332 2444.

Glasgow Council for the Voluntary Sector,  
11 Queen's Crescent,  
Glasgow, G11 7UE  
Tel: 0141 332 2444  
[www.gcvss.org.uk](http://www.gcvss.org.uk)



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