# Learning from the public: Using qualitative research methodologies in consultations

Methodological overview, implications, and recommendations for policymakers

Dr Poornika Ananth

This brief is intended as a resource for policymakers to help them understand how to use qualitative research methodologies in the written public consultation process.

Qualitative data are vivid, rich, and nuanced, and are particularly beneficial when complex processes and relationships between constructs need to be understood or examined, when individuals' lived experiences, interpretations, and social contexts need to be captured, and when knowledge is incomplete, underdeveloped, or flawed.

This brief provides guidance on how to collect and analyse qualitative data from the public in ways that account for the standard constraints of public consultation processes and enable the development of an actionable set of policy insights.

# Methods of inquiry in public consultations

Governmental institutions increasingly use written consultations with members of the public as part of the governance process. During a consultation, the 'government asks for and receives citizens' feedback on policymaking by gathering the views of either individual citizens or various collective actors, such as interest groups, companies, and other public authorities.'[1] Conducting a successful consultation, as with any other form of inquiry and dialogue, depends not only on managing the process as effectively as possible but also on choosing the most appropriate methods of inquiry. This may necessitate reliance on both quantitative and qualitative methodologies.

Research examining methodological choices in public consultations highlight some key challenges policymakers face when using qualitative methodologies, particularly compared to quantitative methodologies. Quantitative methodologies use objective numerical data which can be easier to elicit and process in large volumes. In contrast, qualitative data is subjective, often abstract and diverse. It can therefore be perceived to be less valuable for producing actionable insights and can also be experienced as being time-consuming to collect and analyse and overwhelming to manage.[2] This can result in a tendency to avoid collecting qualitative data, to avoid analysing or using the findings of qualitative data, or to use qualitative inputs only after they have been transformed into quantitative data (e.g., by using word counts). These tendencies are prevalent across different spheres of inquiry including research, policy and practice but can be exacerbated in the context of public consultations given the wide reach and tight turnaround times (e.g., 12 weeks each for conducting and analysing public consultations in the UK).[3]
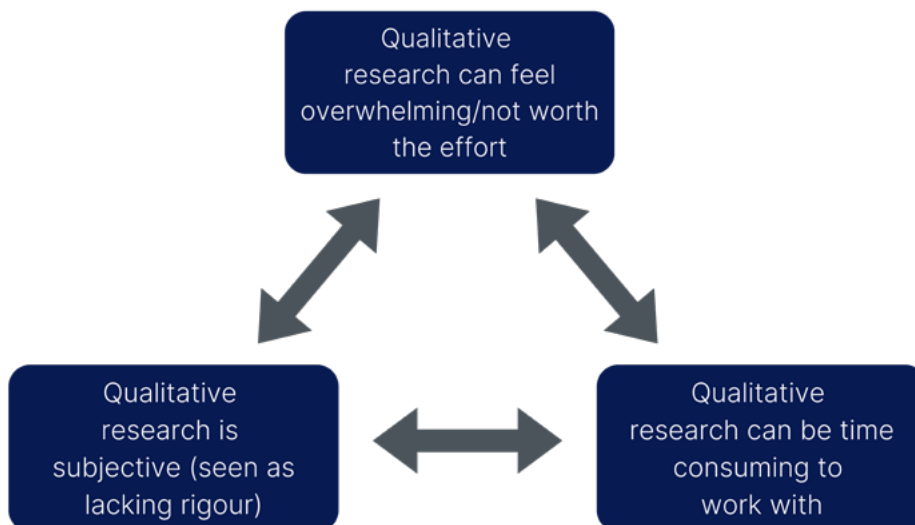
This ultimately means that policymakers may end up forgoing the unique benefits of qualitative methods during public consultations. The following sections highlight the value of qualitative methods, data and insights and provide a set of recommendations for how policymakers may realise the potential of qualitative methodologies during different parts of the consultation process.

1   Rasmussen, A. (2015). Participation in written government consultations in Denmark and the UK: System and actor-level effects. *Government and Opposition*, 50(2), pp. 271-299.
2   Natow, R.S. (2022). Policy actors' perceptions of qualitative research in policymaking: the case of higher education rulemaking in the United States. *Evidence & Policy*, 18(1), pp. 109-126.
3   UK Cabinet Office (2018). Consultation principles: guidance. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/consultation-principles-guidance

# The value of qualitative methodologies

Qualitative research refers to a collection of research methods that emphasise the processes and meanings that occur naturally. Commonly used qualitative research methods include interviews, observations, case studies, ethnographies etc. Qualitative methods rely mainly – although not exclusively – on textual data (e.g., interviews, transcriptions of naturally occurring speech, archival data, field notes from observations, etc.), although there have been recent trends towards using other forms of data such as visual methods.[4]

Qualitative data tend to be open-ended in nature, but they are also vivid, rich and nuanced. They are therefore particularly well suited when complex processes and relationships between constructs need to be understood or examined, when individuals' lived experiences, interpretations, and social contexts need to be captured, and when knowledge of an area is incomplete, underdeveloped, or flawed.[5,6] A common shorthand for evaluating the appropriateness of qualitative methods for shedding light on a topic is to consider whether the questioner seeks to understand 'how' and 'why' something happens or whether they seek to know 'how much' something matters.

Qualitative research can feel overwhelming/not worth the effort

Qualitative research is subjective (seen as lacking rigour)

Qualitative research can be time consuming to work with

---

4   Rynes, S. and Gephart, R.P. (2004). From the editors: Qualitative research and the Academy of Management Journal. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 47(4), pp. 454-462.

5   Graebner, M.E., Martin, J.A. and Roundy, P.T. (2012). *Qualitative data: Cooking without a recipe.* Strategic Organization, 10(3), pp. 276-284.

6   Ananth, P. and Harvey, S. (2023). Ideas in the space between: Stockpiling and processes for managing ideas in developing a creative portfolio. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 68(2), pp. 465-507

The example from academic research presented below illustrates the unique value of qualitative research for understanding human experiences and social phenomena.

**Illustrative example from academic research: Glaser, B.G. and Strauss, A.L. (1964) The social loss of dying patients. *AJN The American Journal of Nursing*, 64(6), pp. 119-121.**

The study by Glaser and Strauss (1964), a seminal qualitative research study, explores how healthcare professionals perceive and interact with patients nearing the end of life. Drawing from interviews and observations of health-care professionals and their patients the researchers argue that the social value of a dying patient — based on their perceived future contributions to society — often affects the care and attention they receive from medical staff. Younger or more 'socially valuable' patients (e.g., parents to young children) might receive more attention and efforts to prolong their lives, while elderly or terminally ill patients, perceived as having limited future social contributions, may receive less proactive care.

This study illustrates the value of qualitative research by:

1. **Exploring subjective experiences**: The study uses qualitative methods to examine healthcare professionals' subjective perceptions and actions toward dying patients. This approach allows researchers to gain insights into how individual attitudes and societal values shape care decisions.

2. **Capturing novel phenomena**: Qualitative research effectively captures complex social interactions, such as the subtle ways medical staff may prioritise care based on perceived social worth. This dynamic would be difficult to hypothesise, quantify, or capture through closed-ended questions that are formulated upfront, but it is critical to understanding biases in end-of-life care.

3. **Providing depth and context**: By focusing on detailed case studies and interviews, the study reveals the underlying reasons behind care disparities, offering a depth of understanding that purely quantitative approaches could miss.

This example highlights how in contrast to quantitative data which can indicate the extent or frequency of certain events, occurrences, or views, qualitative data sheds light both on phenomena that are difficult to capture numerically as well as phenomena that can be captured numerically by explaining the *why* and *how* behind those numbers, offering a more nuanced understanding that can lead to more effective decision-making. Such insights can be invaluable in public consultations because they provide depth and context to the opinions, concerns, and experiences of stakeholders.

The sections below draw from pragmatic qualitative research practice to outline a set of recommendations for collecting and analysing qualitative data effectively during the public consultation process.

# Recommendations for collecting qualitative data during consultations

Given the time constraints of consultations, policymakers must strike a balance between collecting rich, nuanced qualitative data while also ensuring that the request for details does not deter participants or overwhelm policymakers. The following pragmatic recommendations, which draw from academic research practice, provide policymakers with a set of actionable steps that they can take when designing consultation documents.[7,8]

1.  **Opening with 'true' open-ended questions**: To maximise their ability to elicit the diverse perspectives of their respondents, policymakers should open consultations with a few 'true' open-ended questions that can elicit details of respondents' experiences and opinions. These questions are truly open-ended because they are about a topic as a whole and not about aspects of the topic that the questioner has deemed important. They can thus allow informants to highlight aspects of a topic that they consider important, allowing policymakers to ensure that they are focused on the right themes and problems.

2.  **Selective inclusion of qualitative follow-up questions**: To balance between gathering nuanced details about individual perspectives and the need to ensure the engagement of participants and reduce 'consultation fatigue,' policymakers should selectively include qualitative follow-up questions to quantitative questions. These questions should not be the default after every quantitative survey question but rather used only when qualitative nuance is required.

3.  **Focus on interrelationships and connections**: In order to maximise the value of qualitative data, qualitative questions should be focused on those aspects of a topic that are complex or connected and where it is important to capture interrelationships between concepts or phenomena that may not be captured through quantitative answers.

4.  **Elicit concrete details**: Policymakers should not merely ask abstract or hypothetical questions that elicit similarly abstract or hypothetical answers but also ask questions that can elicit more concrete and practical responses such as requests for examples and even photos or images that can illustrate and bring to life abstract concepts. This will make it easier to find focal points for the analysis.

The illustration below shows how these principles can be applied to transform the questions asked in an existing public consultation document.

7    Lee, T.W. (1999). *Using qualitative methods in organizational research.* Sage.

8    Qu, S.Q. and Dumay, J. (2011). The qualitative research interview. *Qualitative research in accounting & management*, 8(3), pp. 238-264.

**Qualitative data collection illustration using an existing public consultation: An accelerated planning system. Consultation by the Department of Levelling up, Housing, and Communities. 6 March 2024[9]**

The consultation selected here uses a combination of quantitative and qualitative questions and is used to demonstrate how similar questions can be redesigned using qualitative research principles to harness the value that qualitative methodologies can offer.

**Sample of existing questions from the public consultation:**

Question 1. Do you agree with the proposal for an Accelerated Planning Service?
Yes / No / Don't know

Question 3. Do you consider that the Accelerated Planning Service could be extended to:
a. major infrastructure development
Yes / No / Don't know
b. major residential development
Yes/ No / Don't know
c. any other development
Yes / No / Don't know. If yes, please specify

If yes to any of the above, what do you consider would be an appropriate accelerated time limit?

Question 8. Do you have views about how statutory consultees can best support the Accelerated Planning Service? Please explain.

**Sample of revised questions using qualitative research principles:**

Question 1. What would you look for in an accelerated planning system? (open-ended introductory question invites diverse perspectives and limits bias)

Question 3. If relevant, could you give us an example of a time when you were involved with a major residential development or an infrastructure development project? How if at all do you think the process would have been impacted or changed by extending the Accelerated Planning Service to such a project? (example question elicits concrete, practical responses)

Question 8. From your perspective how can statutory consultees best support the Accelerated Planning Service? Please provide specific evidence or examples from your experience that can further illuminate our understanding. (reduces 'no' as an option, invites further detail)

---

9   UK Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2024). An accelerated planning system.
    https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/an-accelerated-planning-system-consultation/an-accelerated-planning-system

# Recommendations for analysing qualitative data during consultations

Qualitative data analysis can be generally understood as a process of data reduction, moving from a large quantity of text to a set of concepts and relationships that can increase our understanding of a phenomenon. To develop an actionable set of insights from qualitative data, policymakers must analyse qualitative data effectively, striking a balance between capturing individual nuances with the need to develop a robust and sufficiently generalisable set of findings. The following pragmatic recommendations, which draw from academic practice, will provide policymakers with a set of actionable steps that they can take when analysing qualitative responses to consultations.[10,11]

1. **Use systematic qualitative coding methods**: Qualitative coding is a process of systematically categorising excerpts from qualitative data in order to find themes and patterns. Employing systematic coding techniques will allow policymakers to reduce, manage, and make sense of qualitative data. Different coding methods are better suited to different goals. The box below provides an overview of common data analysis methods and the insights that could be developed by using key principles from those methods when analysing data collected from responses to public consultations.

2. **Utilise qualitative software tools**: Using qualitative coding software tools (e.g., NVivo, ATLAS.ti) can help policymakers manage and organise large volumes of qualitative data, ensuring that data can be analysed in a structured and transparent manner. These tools facilitate coding and categorising of data and allow users to generate simple visual representations such as word clouds, charts and models to identify trends or relationships, which in turn can be further developed and used to present findings more succinctly to audiences. The tools support more efficient management and organisation of data but cannot fully automate the process of coding and analysing qualitative data.

3. **Selective coding of data**: Selective coding is a crucial step that involves choosing a core category or set of categories that emerge through initial rounds of coding as the focus of further development and analysis and connecting other categories around it. This would allow the analyst to dedicate their attention to the most productive and informative avenues in their data and potentially even focus on fewer, more meaningful sets of respondents and their responses. It is important, however, that the analyst is transparent about all coding decisions including selective coding decisions when reporting the findings of the analysis.

10  Solmundson, M. (2019). *Public Consultation Data Analysis: A Review of Qualitative Data Analysis Methods in Planning and Engagement.*

11  Charmaz, K. (2015). *Grounded theory. Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods*, 3, pp. 53-84.

4. **Triangulate data for robust insights**: Qualitative data triangulation is a research strategy that uses multiple data sources, methods or perspectives. This can be achieved in the context of public consultations by drawing on multiple qualitative sources, such as combining written responses with photos or images, following up with selected participants for interviews or observations, and using archival data from secondary sources in combination with the primary data collected from respondents. Triangulating data can reveal contradictions, gaps, or alignments that a single method (written responses) might not be able to capture and can help to improve the credibility, validity, and reliability of the findings.

## Examples of data analysis methods and insights policymakers can gain from them.

**The theme of housing and communities is used for illustrative purposes when discussing certain methods.**

**Analytical methodologies that transform qualitative data into quantitative data**

1. Examining data to quantify the presence of certain words or concepts (content analysis), e.g., policymakers can count how frequently issues are mentioned.

2. Identifying broader themes within qualitative data to understand key issues (thematic analysis), e.g., policymakers can extract common themes and more meaningful categories and then quantify these categories.

**Analytical methodologies that preserve and derive insights from qualitative data**

3. Generating an understanding of a broader process or phenomenon based on data collected (grounded theory). It involves coding, categorising, and probing relationships between constructs, e.g., policymakers could explain the nature of interactions in a community affected by climate change.

4. Exploring how individuals construct and communicate their experiences (narrative analysis), e.g., policymakers could understand personal stories about the impact of housing policies on long-term residents, providing deeper insight into the human impact of these policies.

5. Studying how language is used and how it shapes social realities (discourse analysis), e.g., policymakers could analyse how different stakeholder groups frame the debate on affordable housing and how that in turn affects their views.

# The author

**Dr Poornika Ananth**
Assistant Professor in Entrepreneurship and Innovation, School of
Management, University of Bath
par42@bath.ac.uk

# Acknowledgements

# Connect with us

**UNIVERSITY OF BATH**

**@ Email us**
ipr@bath.ac.uk

**Find us online**
www.bath.ac.uk/ipr

**Read our blog**
blogs.bath.ac.uk/iprblog

**Follow us on X**
@UniofBathIPR

**Follow us on LinkedIn**
linkedin.com/school/bath-ac-uk-ipr

**Join our mailing list**
https://bit.ly/2Ra9LOJ

**IPR** Institute for Policy Research