# Understanding your community through data

Collecting demographic data is an essential step for organisations to understand their communities better, tailor their services, and demonstrate impact to funders. This briefing paper outlines the importance of demographic data, how to collect it effectively and responsibly, and offers practical guidance for small, volunteer-led groups. By following these tips, organisations can ensure their work remains inclusive, impactful, and aligned with community needs.

## What is Demographic Data?

Demographic data is information about the people who engage with your organisation or benefit from your work. It includes details such as age, gender, ethnicity, disability, and socioeconomic background. It can also include other aspects like language, religion, or sexual orientation.

## Why is Demographic Data Important?

For community groups, understanding who you serve is essential—not just as a one-time effort but as an ongoing journey of discovery. It helps you:

* **Understand Needs**: By exploring who engages with your organisation and how, you can uncover both expressed and unexpressed needs, ensuring your services stay relevant and effective for everyone.
* **Demonstrate Impact**: Funders, like Stratford Town Trust, value evidence that your work reaches a range of communities and actively addresses inequalities in nuanced ways.
* **Plan Better**: Trends and patterns in your community can inform adjustments, ensuring your activities evolve alongside the shifting dynamics of the people you support.
* **Foster Inclusion:** Looking beyond numbers to understand experiences can help you identify underrepresented groups and guide meaningful outreach efforts.

**Example**: A local youth group noticed their events predominantly attracted boys. While some initial feedback suggested girls weren't as interested in their current offerings, further conversations revealed barriers such as timing, location, and perceptions of safety. By pairing demographic data with these insights, the group co-designed activities with girls, reshaped their approach, and successfully built a more inclusive programme.

## How to Track Demographic Data

Small, volunteer-led organisations can track demographic data without it becoming a burden. Here are some tips:

* **Use Simple Forms:** A short, anonymous form handed out at events or included with sign-ups can be effective.
* **Focus on What Matters:** Only ask for data relevant to your work. For example, if you’re running a project for older people, age might be more important than employment status.
* **Keep It Anonymous:** Avoid collecting names alongside demographic data to protect people’s privacy.
* **Free Tools:** Use tools like Google Forms or paper surveys to collect and store information.

**Example:** A small food bank used a tick-box form to understand the age ranges and household sizes of its visitors. This helped them tailor their food parcels better and show funders the breadth of people they support.

**Keeping Data Safe**

Handling demographic data responsibly builds trust. Here’s how to keep it secure:

* **Use Password Protection:** If data is stored digitally, ensure files are password-protected or stored on secure platforms.
* **Limit Access:** Only people who need to see the data should have access.
* **Follow GDPR Guidelines:** Avoid holding data longer than necessary and explain why you’re collecting it.

**Example:** A local heritage group ensured their survey data was stored in a locked file cabinet and deleted electronic records after a year.

## Dealing with Sensitive Data

Some demographic questions might feel personal. Here’s how to manage this sensitively:

* **Be Transparent:** Explain why you’re asking and how the data will be used.
* **Make it Optional:** Let people skip questions if they’re uncomfortable.
* **Offer Self-Description:** Include options like “Prefer not to say” or “Self-describe” for gender or other categories.

**Example:** A community arts group added a “Prefer not to say” option to their ethnicity question, ensuring attendees felt no pressure to disclose personal information.

## How to Ask for Demographic Data

When requesting demographic data, it’s important to:

* **Use Plain Language:** Avoid jargon and keep questions simple.
* **Show Value:** Explain how the data helps your work, e.g., “This information helps us improve our services and reach more people.”
* **Ensure Comfort:** Collect data in a way that feels private, like online forms or sealed paper surveys.

**Example Script:** “We’re collecting some optional information to help us understand who we’re reaching and improve our services. You don’t have to answer if you’d rather not.”

## Other Organisations and Bodies for Support

Organisations can connect with the following bodies to receive guidance and support for collecting and using demographic data:

* **Local Councils:** Many councils offer resources or training on data collection and GDPR compliance.
* **Charity Support Organisations:** Groups like the National Council for Voluntary Organisations (NCVO) or Warwickshire CAVA provide toolkits, workshops, and one-on-one advice.
* **Equality and Inclusion Bodies:** Organisations like Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) or local diversity networks can provide guidance on inclusive practices.
* **Funders:** Funders such as Stratford Town Trust or other grant-making bodies often provide resources or workshops to help grantees meet their reporting requirements.
* **Community Foundations:** Regional community foundations may offer expertise in data collection or connect you with other groups for shared learning.
* **Tech and Data Platforms:** Platforms like DataKind UK or Pro Bono Digital may assist small organisations with tools or advice for handling data responsibly.

## Other Tips

* **Review Regularly:** Check your data periodically to identify trends or gaps.
* **Share Insights:** Use the data to celebrate your group’s reach and impact in reports or with funders.
* **Ask for Support:** Stratford Town Trust can advise on collecting and using demographic data effectively.

**Final Thoughts**

Collecting demographic data doesn’t need to be complicated. Done well, it can help you better serve your community, secure funding, and ensure your work is as inclusive as possible. Start small, be transparent, and focus on building trust with those you support.