

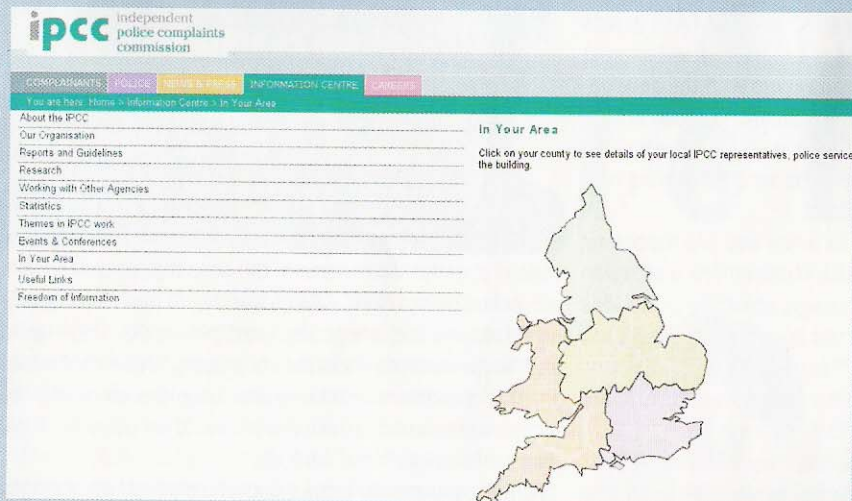
Behind the two-way mirror: a focus group in action

It sounds like a scene from a cop film: a group of five, carefully chosen members of the public ambles into the interview lab, a steel shutter rolls down the window, and the door closes.

In the next room, the client, the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), sits in dim light with agency Webcredible, which is running the session, and listens via a computer.

The IPCC, which looks into complaints made against the police, is in the early stages of redeveloping its site and today's focus group aims to determine how the target audience will use it.

The panel of men and women, aged 30-50, have been selected from the agency's database of 1,000 people who replied to an ad offering them the chance to earn £20-£40 per hour. Ideas from the group will be used alongside one-on-one usability testing.



ipcc.gov.uk: used panel of five people out of 1,000 who replied to an ad to earn £20 to £40

Moderator Tim Fidgeon, Webcredible's head of usability, gets the ball rolling by asking the group what they'd expect to see on the site. Only one member of the group has seen it and the others don't know much about the organisation.

Three people do most of the talking while two younger men only speak when asked.

A vocal, articulate man in

his late-50s asks for proof of the organisation's authenticity. "You need to know they have the authority to do something and they have the teeth to take action," he says. "And it would be good to get an indication of what they have done before."

A middle-aged woman asks what happens when a complaint is made and mentions the option of

phone contact. She wants the complaint process to be easy without endless forms.

Another says it's important to get an automated reply immediately, with a reference number and information on what will happen next.

Some of the discussion topics only come up once, but it is soon clear which are the most important issues as they come up repeatedly.

Colour is brought up a few times: would it look like the site was an independent organisation investigating the police if blue was used?

Clear, concise information and language is important, along with an explanation of the complaints process. It is suggested there could be an area for minor complaints, alongside information on reporting serious issues.

Overall, the hour session is interesting and important points are raised, although sometimes it strays into other areas, such as whether public funding on a site like this can be justified?

Andrea Dashfield, IPCC's e-communications manager, says: "Focus groups give us more of an overview than user testing, which is area-specific. It's a good way to bring up people's expectations of the web site, so that when they visit the site they immediately think 'yes, this is the right place to be'."