



Preparing for consumer participation

To have the greatest chance of successful implementation, consumer participation activities should be thoroughly planned and prepared.

Preparing for consumer participation will generally include a number of phases: understanding the context; engaging stakeholders; building capacity; assessing the extent and nature of existing consumer participation within the organisation; and consulting with stakeholders including consumers, workers, management and the Board.

These steps are key foundational activities which lead on to the formation and implementation of a written consumer participation plan (see Information Sheet #7: Writing a consumer participation plan). However, note that these phases of preparation and planning (followed by implementation and evaluation) are not mutually exclusive and may overlap or be repeated in a planning cycle.

This framework has been adapted from a CP planning guide for health services.¹ Refer to the original guide (available online) for tips and resources.

1. Understand the context

Determine where your CP plan (policy and strategies) will fit within the organisation's overall policy, planning and development work.



Beware of CP being isolated from the core business of the organisation. Embed CP throughout the organisation's policies, as well as in a dedicated CP policy or strategy.

CP is a significant element of the HAS Standards, and should be embedded in organisational quality cycles. Consult your service's quality and planning framework to help understand how the CP plan might be implemented.

During this phase, preliminary conversations will also be needed with key executive staff (including the CEO) and Board members. These conversations should aim to:

- Give you a sense of the degree of participation potentially available to consumers within your organisation;
- Consider what resources (time, financial and other) may be available to support CP activities within the organisation;
- Identify who in the organisation has the authority to 'sign off' on a consumer participation plan or strategy;

- Identify any other political or strategic factors (internal or external to the organisation) that may have a significant impact on planning and implementation of consumer participation strategies.

On the basis of these considerations, develop a project plan and budget. Allocate a timeline and resources to subsequent stages of preparation, planning and implementation.

2. Engage stakeholders

Involve consumers, carers and organisations representing consumers, as well as staff and board members. A group of consumers to provide advice on the development of your consumer participation plan is a good place to start. This group might be expanded to include staff at a later date. Let them know in advance the length of the project and develop with them terms of reference including their degree of participation in the development of the plan.

3. Build capacity

Participation capacity is your ability to 'do' participation and to understand what participation can achieve. Building capacity enables wise decisions to be made in your CP plan about how participation will be used strategically to improve the quality of housing and homelessness services provided. Building capacity is part of developing your CP plan and can also be an objective of the plan.

To build capacity:

- Develop an understanding of what participation means;
- Consider the benefits and challenges associated with participation, and the requirements for authentic and effective participation;²
- Become familiar with a range of participation strategies, their advantages and disadvantages;
- Identify what participation already occurs in your service.

Use the information sheets included in this Kit to inform staff and consumers or to brief discussion groups. Build further capacity within your organisation with the development of a training strategy.³ Share learnings with other housing and homelessness services through network meetings or other forums. See what participation is achieving in other areas at Our Community's website.⁴

4. Assess existing consumer participation

Focus your thinking with an understanding of the strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of your organisation around consumer participation.

A preliminary step is to identify what participation means for your organisation through discussion with consumers, staff and Board members. You could distribute and discuss a definition of participation and use this as a starting point. Provide consumers of your services with the opportunity to decide on the term they want to be used when referring to them.

Based on the definitions you have developed, undertake an assessment of consumer participation in your organisation. Involve your consumers in this project. Review the signposts of good practice for the HAS Standards, and the HASS self-evaluation developed by the Peer Education Support Program (PESP) of the Housing Advocacy Service - for information on PESP see: http://www.chp.org.au/has_pesps.html. Make a record of the information collected so you can use this to monitor and report on the plan and to report on trends in participation in the future.

Your self-assessment will guide the development of objectives within your CP plan by identifying areas of strength and potential areas for improvement.

5. Consult stakeholders

Find out what your consumers need in terms of participation. Listen to people from diverse groups within your consumer population including people with disabilities; people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds; gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people; indigenous Australians; and young people. If you have a consumer advisory group, they will also be a key source of information for identifying need.



Peer-to-peer consultation is a powerful way to gather information on need and preferences. Consider training consumers to ask other consumers about their participation needs. Consider involving Peer Educators from the Homelessness Advocacy Service in consultation processes.

Speak to consumers and carers who have used your service for the first time and to those who use your service often and over a longer term. You might use the PowerPoint Presentation (or slides from it) included in this Kit to guide the process. Give examples of participation to

help people understand. Talk about the ways people already participate in different areas and programs of

your service as well as ways they might like to.

Workers, management and the Board or Committee of Management should also be consulted about what approaches they feel will be feasible and effective. Listen to staff about their needs and concerns in relation to CP processes.



Endnotes

1. *How to develop a community participation plan*. Published in 2006 by the Regional and Rural Health and Aged Care Services Division, Victorian Government Department of Human Services, Melbourne. Viewed October 2007 at: <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/consumer>
2. A list of common 'participation enablers' can be found in Appendix 1 of *How to develop a community participation plan* at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/consumer>. For challenges, see 'Managing challenges' in *Improving health services through consumer participation* viewed October 2007 at <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au/clearinghouse>
3. See the Banyule Nillumbik Primary Care Alliance (BNPCA) *Consumer Participation Resource & Training Kit for Service Providers* (2003) at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/publications/banyule.htm>
4. <http://www.ourcommunity.com.au>