



Overcoming barriers to participation

There are a range of barriers to authentic and effective participation. Some of these relate to consumer diversity; for example, organisations may face challenges in facilitating the participation of consumers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Others relate to the culture and resource limitations of organisations. This section suggests ways to tackle some of these barriers.

Consumer diversity

Cultural background

Providing any service in a manner that is responsive to the needs and requirements of people from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds can be a challenge. The federal government has produced a useful document, a 'Charter of Public Service in a Culturally Diverse Society' (Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs 1998). This sets out a comprehensive framework for best practice in culturally responsive service delivery. It details principles and gives practical strategies for achieving them.¹

Key considerations include:

- Ensuring that information on participation opportunities is available to consumers in multiple languages;
- Ensuring that interpreting services are available to support consumer feedback wherever necessary;
- Ensuring that participation processes are culturally sensitive.

Building relationships with ethno-specific organisations or with ethno-specific workers in mainstream organisations can often be a key source of information and advice, and can lead to the development and implementation of longer-term strategies.

In Victoria, Prioletti Consultants assist services to work with and consult people from diverse cultural backgrounds – for more information, refer to Resources section of this Kit.

Youth

Brophy Family and Youth Services (based in south-west Victoria) conducted a project in 2005 that explored models for strengthening and guiding young people's participation in decision-making.² The young people who were consulted identified tokenism (i.e. lack of impact or follow-through) as one of the main barriers to their willingness to participate:

"The thing that would make it worthwhile would be if there's a legitimate suggestion made, it was actually followed through, there was feedback, and why not – pros and cons – and if the pros outweighed the cons, and they keep going with it, then why not, what's the point . . . ? Yes definitely, you've got to follow through."

Three key lessons from the study, in regard to engaging the participation of young people, were:

- Most young people recognised and spoke positively about the value of decision-making in consultation with their worker, and such opportunities should be encouraged.
- It is important to devise multiple strategies of engagement to ensure a broad spectrum of participation, however these strategies may not be significantly different to those used for older consumers.
- Adequate resources (time and money) as well as careful planning are required for participation to be valuable for the program/organisation and the young people themselves.

Disability

Many consumers of housing and homelessness services have one or more forms of disability. Physical, intellectual or psychiatric disabilities, or simply poor health, can be significant barriers to participation, especially when combined with poverty and poor access to transport.

Organisations need to ensure that consumer participation opportunities are accessible to consumers with a wide range of physical and intellectual abilities. Ensure that venues for meetings or focus groups are accessible to those with limited mobility; provide transport or reimburse transport costs as necessary. Be aware of literacy limitations and ensure that verbal as well as written channels are used to provide information and gather feedback.

Consumers with disabilities may require focused individual support to maximise their ability to participate in structures such as committees, advisory groups, Boards of Management or policy review processes. In Victoria, DASSI's Active Participation Service is a key resource providing individual support to people with disabilities to actively participate in decision making and/or advisory roles. For more information, refer to the Resources section of the Kit.

Service culture

Consumers consulted in preparation of this Kit strongly stated that organisational culture was a key element in facilitating consumer participation. An “us

and them” culture with staff expressing fearful or judgmental attitudes towards consumers is a barrier to participation; on the other hand, a welcoming and respectful culture encourages participation. When



Relationships between staff and consumers are important to consumer involvement. One consumer commented: “An example of effective contact is a Team leader—when she hears of a death, sickness or birth—she sends a card to the tenants. She lets the people know that she cares.”

asked what enables participation, consumers commented:

“Tell housing workers not to look down on us.”

“Welcome consumers as equals.”

“Sit around the table, at the same level, talking.”

“...go into a social event and listen. Meet the people you are dealing with on a one to one basis. In this situation people are relaxed... They don't feel threatened”.

Changing organisational culture takes time. Learning and growth may often follow the implementation of change, as the organisation comes to terms with and integrates new processes and policies. It is also important to:

- Provide staff at all levels of the organisation with clear, timely information about consumer participation, including the organisation's expectations of staff in this area. Where significant changes are occurring, training should be provided.
- Provide opportunities for staff participation and for staff to express their ideas and concerns about consumer participation and any changes occurring. Ensure the feedback loop is complete and that staff know their concerns have been heard.

Resource requirements

Implementing authentic and effective consumer participation strategies require significant resources. Smaller organisations are especially aware of financial constraints in this area. While consumer participation activities must ultimately fit within the scope of available resources, there may be ways to expand the pool of resources available:

- Pool and share resources across geographical locations and/or service types. Participate in quality networks or regional networks to share ideas and strategies. Form a partnership with other agencies to develop and implement a joint CP strategy, for example a joint Consumer Advisory Group.
- Use existing resources. For example, in some regions of Victoria, public housing tenants are already engaged in the Office of Housing's Tenant Participation Framework. All tenants are encouraged to participate in local tenant groups that elect a representative onto a regional tenant council which is represented at the State Tenant Council. Tenants can influence policy and service delivery and engage in discussion with decision makers up to the responsible Minister. There may be the potential for housing/homelessness organisations to consult these tenant representatives in the process of developing strategies with their own consumers. However, issues of the resourcing of these representatives to respond to agencies would need to be considered.
- Consider forms of consumer participation that have the potential to add resources to the organisation, for example engage consumers as volunteers or trainees.
- Seek additional funding. Prepare a budget based on the costs of engaging consumers in participation and negotiate with DHS around this. Join with other organisations to lobby for adequate resourcing for consumer participation. Approach philanthropic organisations for funding to assist implementation of CP strategies.

Endnotes

1. Viewed November 2007 at <http://www.immi.gov.au/about/charters/culturally-diverse/index.htm>
2. The full report viewed November 2007 at [http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/saap2/\\$file/brophy_family_report.pdf](http://www.facsia.gov.au/internet/facsinternet.nsf/vIA/saap2/$file/brophy_family_report.pdf)