



# Regular consumer meetings

## Description

Consumer meetings are held on a regular basis to invite consumers to provide ideas for service improvements, and to gain feedback. Issues can be raised, action discussed and responsibility assigned. Attendance is open to any of a defined group of consumers (e.g. residents of a residential service) and all are encouraged to attend. Using the nominal group method priorities can be clarified.

## How it works

Regular consumer meetings are often used in residential services and day centres where consumers are present at the site.

Regular meetings should be held at a time and place that is convenient to consumers as well as workers. Refreshments, transport and childcare should always be available.

The purpose and parameters of each meeting need to be clear. Meetings run best with a structured agenda and some report back on previous actions / ideas. Meetings can run between one and two hours.

House meetings are usually facilitated by a worker. However, regular meetings of consumers could also be facilitated by consumer advocates or by consumers themselves. These meetings could look to assist consumers on their own terms about their own issues, and or about service-related issues. Workers could enter into partnerships with these groups as advisers.

### Nominal group method

The nominal group method is a small group process that encourages the participation of less assertive consumers and allows issues to be placed in order of priority.

This method can be used at the start of a meeting and people could go on to talk about the priority items in detail. It can also be used by organisations to assess the relative weighting consumers give to various options.

The purpose of the meeting and its process are explained to consumers. Participants are asked to record their ideas; this can be done using a brainstorm. Ideas are sorted into categories dealing with similar topics. The topic areas are then listed with specific ideas grouped under each.

Consumers are then allowed three votes and can allocate these to the three topics they believe are the most important. The votes are then counted and the

topics placed in order of priority.

The process can be completed relatively quickly and the rules for running the groups are much the same as for focus groups. Butchers paper headed with each of the topic areas can be used to list the specific needs. The voting can be made easier with coloured sticky paper dots.

## Degree of participation

Information seeking, can be consultative.

## Timeframe

Short term.

## Resource level required

Low.

Meetings require a facilitator / chair and a note taker. A suitable venue is required. The environment needs to be safe and inviting. Refreshments should be provided and a time for socialising allowed. Child-care and transport costs may be reimbursed.

The nominal group method requires butchers paper and perhaps sticky dots, in addition to a facilitator who knows about the method.

## Strengths

Organisations and consumers are familiar with the 'house / consumer meeting' and this familiarity makes it easier to implement than other mechanisms.

Consumers enjoy opportunities to get together and share experiences and suggest solutions to problems they have experienced. They like to get information and to be listened to, and the regular meeting is a good venue for this.

Regular meetings are useful in a congregate setting as they can build relationships among participants over time. If well facilitated, regular meetings can model respectful interaction and conflict resolution processes.


The main advantage of the nominal group process is that it is relatively democratic in involving the less assertive consumers and producing an outcome that reflects the opinions of the whole group. This is useful for consumer involvement in identifying priority issues and allocating scarce resources.


## Weaknesses

Regular meetings have a poor reputation within some housing and homelessness services, and amongst some consumers. Where turnover of consumers is high, meetings may tend to be dominated by airing of negative opinions about services and facilities (e.g. residents of a crisis accommodation centre may focus on wanting bigger televisions or different food). If the organisation is unable to provide any tangible outcome from discussions at meetings, the process may be frustrating for both consumers and staff.

The main disadvantage with the nominal group method is that in itself, it allows for only minimal exploration of the issues that emerge as the most important. Later voters might be influenced by the developing dot distribution and may manipulate the process by allocating all their dots to a particular issue because of this knowledge.

## Examples



 An organisation in the UK engaged consumers through a mix of regular meetings and a consumer representative. The representative, elected by consumers, shadowed the team leader of a 40 bed hostel in central London and was given access to information on the resources available and how priorities were decided on. They then reported back to the other consumers on the implications and outcomes of recommendations from the regular meetings.




 In Boston USA, St Francis House is a professionally-run day shelter that offers services to 150-170 'guests' per day. The Guest Advisory Council was the idea of employees at the shelter who asked, "How do we know what our guests need here?" and decided the best way to answer was to ask them.

The Council is an open weekly forum in which guests can voice any issue they might have. The group is facilitated by staff although guests are encouraged to take charge as much as possible.

*"At first there were a lot of complaints about staff, the food and clothing distribution. But as the shelter responded in tangible ways to guest concerns, the Council now looks beyond individual situations and into issues affecting them as a community".*

## Tips

-  Consumer meetings are often used as an integral part of participation strategies that involve consumer representatives and advocates.
-  Meetings need to be held at a time and place that is convenient to consumers.

-  To make consumer meetings more consultative and meaningful, consider asking consumers to set the meeting time and venue; agenda regular feedback on actions from previous meetings; and encourage and support consumers to chair meetings and to be involved in actions arising from them.
-  Explore other group methods and consider integrating aspects into these meetings.
-  News boards in common areas can be used to let people know of the issues raised and the outcomes of house meetings. This will show new residents how the process works (and demonstrate tangible outcomes from it).

## For more information...

- <http://www.participateinhealth.org.au/clearinghouse/#I>. "IMPROVING HEALTH SERVICES THROUGH CONSUMER PARTICIPATION: A RESOURCE GUIDE FOR ORGANISATIONS". p.46. Viewed November 2007.