

Consumer advisory groups



Description

Usually up to 15 members, consumer advisory groups and consultative committees provide advice across a range of the organisation's activities and strategic direction. Their input is based on expertise or experience about the issue at hand. There are two types of committees: those that involve consultation with consumer representative agencies, and those that seek the participation of consumers. Advisory groups are usually restricted to a particular project, although this is not always the case.

How it works

Consumer committees meet regularly over a set period of time. The agenda may be set by the organisation, the consumers or both. The committee can be facilitated by staff and/or consumers. Members may be appointed or elected, usually for limited terms.

A successful consumer advisory group or consultative committee is one where participants and the organisation are clear as to the scope of participation, and how the advice that is offered will be used in broader decision-making processes. This process is aided by written terms of reference that spell out the purpose of the committee, the nature of the advice sought, how long the committee will meet and what will happen to the advice given.

Consumer consultative committees and advisory groups also need to ensure they consult regularly with the broader community of consumers.

Degree of participation

Consultation.

Timeframe

Medium to long term.

Resource level required

High.

Advisory committee members should receive orientation and ongoing support and skills development. Organisations also need to provide financial reimbursement to consumers willing to participate.

"Consumers are the experts when it comes to their needs and desires and their expertise needs to be valued."

(Glasser 1998)

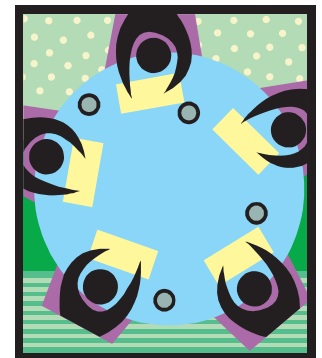
Staff training and education is necessary to overcome

professional resistance. The most effective training will have consumers involved. Joint leadership between consumers and staff in education and training will also demonstrate the development of a partnership between the two groups (Fisk et al in press).

Administrators need to: ensure real response and tangible outcomes to consumer input, suggestions and complaints; avoid tokenism; and allocate adequate staff time for consumer engagement, recruitment and follow up.

Strengths

A consumer consultative committee or advisory group creates a ready resource of advice for organisations. The advice gained will represent both consumers' experiences as well as an understanding of the boundaries to service and organisational capacities.



Involving a number of consumers may assist the agency to gain a balanced range of consumer perspectives.

Participants gain skills and knowledge through their involvement in the group over time.

Weaknesses

Creating a consumer advisory committee signals a shift of power and resources to consumers of services. This may feel problematic to staff. It is one thing for staff to support empowerment as an abstract goal but quite another to shift power to clients, away from themselves (Cohen 1994).

Consumers on advisory groups may have very high expectations of their role and their potential to influence decisions. More than advising, consumers may want to be involved in making decisions before the organisation's management is ready and before they have sufficient skills and knowledge. This can be managed with clear terms of reference that include conflict resolution procedures. Organisations may find themselves having to review terms of reference and to negotiate power-sharing arrangements.

While the input of consumers is valuable in all areas, organisations need to integrate this with other input and constraints. This is sometimes an area of conflict with consumers. The development of a mixed

Advisory Group—of consumers, agencies and professionals—to advise the strategic direction of the organisation may be an option.

Example



In addition to providing legal services, the Melbourne-based PILCH Homeless Persons Legal Clinic (HPLC) seeks to identify the range of legal issues facing homeless people, to identify gaps in the delivery of services and conduct advocacy regarding relevant law reform and social policy issues.

The Clinic consults with a Consumer Advisory Group (CAG) made up of people who have experienced homelessness or who are currently homeless. This group provides guidance and advice to the Clinic primarily on its advocacy and less on its operation. Prior to the establishment of the CAG in 2006, the Manager of the HPLC met with consumers—who had consulted with homeless people to develop a submission for the organisation—with the view of forming a permanent advisory group. Terms of reference were drafted with the assistance of these consumers.

Twelve members of the group were recruited through caseworkers at the different agencies from which HPLC operates. They had responded to a draft Expression of Interest developed by the Manager. Six members of the core group remain involved in 2007. The HPLC has also recruited new members to the CAG.

Advisory group members are paid \$20 per hour with a minimum of \$30 per meeting and this was determined as a result of feedback from consumers about the importance of incentives and recognition. They also receive lunch and Met cards (for transport).

The group's monthly meetings are facilitated by the Manager. At present, the chair is rotated through the members of the CAG, minutes of meetings are taken and actions noted. Monthly meetings help to connect the members and create a positive dynamic between them. Members have received training in facilitation and will receive public speaking, negotiation and other training on an ongoing basis.

Members of the CAG have had opportunities to meet with the Board of PILCH (the auspice body); they have made formal presentations to the Board and have met informally at functions attended by both groups.

The group was funded initially with a small grant from the Law Foundation. The Helen Macpherson Smith Trust has very generously agreed to fund

the CAG for a further two years, until the end of 2008.

Tips

- ☞ Consider confidentiality issues – it may be necessary for consultative committee members to sign confidentiality agreements.
- ☞ Consumer representation in decision making is important, but the need to avoid participation being or appearing to be tokenistic outweighs any others. The terms of reference of the group must be clear about the authority the committee has, the boundaries of its influence within the organisation, and contain clear, negotiated role expectations for participants.

For more information...

- HPLC information viewed December 2007 at: http://www.pilch.org.au/html/s02_article/default.asp?nav_top_id=60&nav_cat_id=172&dsb=711
- Information on Bayside Health consumer participation program viewed December 2007 at: <http://www.alfred.org.au/Page.aspx?ID=45>