

Consumer Participation Policy

PURPOSE

The purpose of this policy is to provide a framework to strengthen and guide the development of appropriate consumer participation processes and strategies of Brophy Family and Youth Services (BFYS) in order to maximise consumer involvement with the agency in the interests of responsive, effective service delivery and best possible outcomes.

This policy outlines BFYS commitment to consumer participation processes and strategies.

2. DEFINITION OF BROPHY CONSUMERS

BFYS' consumers include individuals, families and communities who receive a service, assistance or support through BFYS. BFYS consumers could include people who are homeless, or "at risk" of homelessness, young people, carers, victims of crime, and vulnerable families. BFYS acknowledges that the definition of consumers can be broadened to include program based volunteers, committees of management, advisory groups, service specific focus groups and fundraising groups but the key focus of this policy relates to the people who we directly deliver a service to. The broader consumers or stakeholders including staff have the capacity and opportunity to participate through a number of other mechanisms.

3. BENEFITS OF CONSUMER PARTICIPATION

BFYS recognises the value and benefits that flow from consumer participation. These benefits include:

- Research shows that consumer involvement is strongly associated with stronger outcomes in the operation of and service delivery of community services.
- Consumer participation increases the level of satisfaction by consumers with services.
- Consumer participation builds environments where individuals are more likely to take responsibility for their wellbeing.
- Consumer participation helps make service-planning decisions that reflect the needs and wishes of the community.
- Consumer participation increases the sense of ownership of services.
- Direct participation is more efficient and effective as a means of providing understanding about local needs and issues than indirect or secondary sources.
- Consumer participation improves service quality, particularly in regard to access and service responsiveness.
- Consumer participation assists in marketing the service.
- Consumer participation helps to attract people who are interested in working with and supporting the services.
- Consumer participation injects innovation and creativity into service planning and delivery.
- Consumer participation increases the level of social capital in the community.

(BNPCA Consumer Participation Resource & Training Kit For Service Providers, 2003, p13)

PRINCIPLES

BFYS is committed to a social view of wellbeing and the development of an integrated service system

The following principles underpin the approach to consumer participation:

- Participation means partnership and accepting difference.
- Full and active participation will not occur overnight and is a developmental process.
- All people have the right to participate in debate and decision making about decisions that affect their daily lives and their own care.
- Consumer participation processes and strategies are part of the core business of BFYS, not optional extras.
- Consumers are diverse, so BFYS is committed to policies and processes that are inclusive and that recognise difference.
- To ensure genuine equitable participation, strategies need to be developed to give people who are disadvantaged or marginalised and have been generally excluded from decision making for most of their lives, for example indigenous youth and homeless youth, the encouragement, resources, advocacy and support to participate.
- BFYS seeks to know and understand its community by building and maintaining comprehensive knowledge about the local community.
- BFYS actively seeks consumer and community views to inform planning and decision-making about services and activities.
- BFYS recognises information is essential to participation; so our service will provide accessible information to our consumers about processes and services.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK FOR CONSUMER PARTICIPATION

BFYS' model of participation is based on consumer participation being defined as a process of involving the consumers in decision-making about their wellbeing and their lives in general. In the context of BFYS, this can include active involvement in planning of activities and services that encompass the health, welfare, education, training and employment sectors. The term participation usually implies sharing, not only of information and opinion, but also decision-making power. Real participation means joint problem solving, joint decision-making and joint responsibility. (National Resource Centre for Consumer Participation in Health, Fact sheet No 1. An Introduction to Consumer Participation p.1)

BFYS aims to service the communities in the five local government areas that constitute the Southwest of Victoria. These LGA are Warrnambool City, Moyne, Glenelg, Southern Grampians and Corangamite.

The average weekly disposable income in regional Victoria is \$100 less than for people living in metropolitan areas (ABS 1999). A report by the Jesuit Social Services (1999) ranks each of the five LGA in the southwest as being classified within the lowest 20% of disadvantaged communities across Victoria, with Warrnambool being the most disadvantaged.

As the region covers a large geographical area, social and physical isolation is an issue for individuals and communities living in the rural parts of the region.

BFYS recognises that the communities it aims to service are not homogenous and that there are different forms and levels of participation. Any model of participation needs to incorporate a variety of strategies and processes with particular attention being given to traditionally excluded and marginalised groups. Brager & Specht (1973) have developed a ladder of participation that ranges from no participation to minimal levels where consumers receive information through to joint planning, and ultimately to consumer or community control.

The Ladder of Participation

Degree	Participants' action	Illustrative mode
High	Have control	Organisation asks consumers to identify the problem and to make all the key decisions on goals and means. Willing to help consumers at each step to accomplish goals.
	Have delegated	Organisation identifies and presents a problem to the consumer, defines the limits and asks consumers to make a series of decisions, which can be embodied in a plan it can accept.
	Plan jointly	Organisations present a tentative plan subject to change and open to change from those affected. Expects to change plan at least slightly and perhaps more subsequently.
	Advise	Organisation presents a plan and invites questions. Prepared to modify plan only if absolutely necessary.
	Are consulted	Organisation tries to promote a plan. Seeks to develop support to facilitate acceptance or give sufficient sanction to plan so administrative compliance can be expected.
Low	Receive information	Organisation makes a plan and announces it. Consumers are convened for information purpose. Compliance is expected.
	None	Consumers not involved.

Department of Public Health, Flinders University, and the South Australian Community Health Research Unit (2000), op.cit p.3

BFYS' model of participation will use a combination of information collection and active participation strategies as it is recognised that it is important to match methods or strategies with purpose. Different consumer groups and different purposes require different ways of receiving comments from and involving people. This will also enable consumers to participate in a way that they feel able to. For example, if an organisation is simply seeking information then focus groups, community forums and public meetings are appropriate. The following table shows the relationship between specific levels of participation and the role of consumers and the community.

Level of Participation	Role of consumers, carers and community	Example of participatory activities
Community control / Delegated power	Communities control and run services. Service asks consumers, carers and communities to make decisions about particular aspects of services.	Consumers, carers and communities are provided with resources to develop strategies and programs to address specific issues.
Partnership	Consumers, carers and communities are asked to participate as partners in decision- making. For this activity to occur, consumers, carers and communities should be provided with all the information provided to other	Consumers, carers and communities are involved in all activities from the beginning. Consumers, carers and community members participate in decision making and advisory groups

stakeholders required to participate in decision-making.

Consumers, carers and community members participate in workshops where all stakeholders come together to work through issues and participate in decision making.

Consultation	Consumers, carers and community members are involved in a consultation process where they provide information and comments on documents and strategies. Consumers, carers and community members may participate in decision-making processes.	Combination of information seeking/sharing activities (see below), plus consumers, carers and communities asked to comment on documents and strategies.
Information seeking/sharing	Consumers, carers and communities are asked to provide services with information and/or services provide consumers, carers and communities with information. Service decides what to do with the information.	Focus group Consumer advisory groups Consumer representatives on committees Development of links with consumer group to share information Community forums
No input	Consumers are not engaged.	

Department of Human Services, Primary Care Partnerships, Information Resource: *Consumer, Carer and Community Participation in Service Planning*, April 2001

Specific model outline

The intent of the BFYS model of participation is to develop the capacity of consumers to participate strongly in all facets of governance, service planning and service delivery within BFYS. As the model evolves, consumers will be supported to participate in:

- Strategic planning
- Service planning
- Service delivery
- Service evaluation and quality improvement and
- Staff recruitment

The proposed structure for this participation is initially focussed at a:

- Program Level and followed by
- Organisational Level

as seen in the attached Action Plan developed by the BFYS Consumer Participation Working Group.

6. EVALUATION

The BFYS Consumer Participation Working Group will review the Policy and Action Plan on a regular basis through working group meetings. Recommendations and/or information is forwarded on through the

appropriate channels as set out in the "Guidelines for distribution and use of BFYS Consumer Feedback".
(as developed by the Working Group Jan 2005)

An annual review of the action plan will be conducted to monitor implementation of the policy and to ensure it is updated and relevant. An evaluation framework will be developed based on program logic, to monitor lessons learnt and to ensure strategies and process are altered in light of these lessons. The annual review will also consider what changes, if any, need to be made to policy, processes and strategies.

Part 2. Consumer Participation Action Plan

PURPOSE

The action plan has been developed to outline the processes and strategies that will be used to implement its policy direction on consumer participation.

KEY RESULT AREAS

1.Strengthening organisational capacity

This area is concerned with ensuring that BFYS is in a position to adequately support and resource consumer participation across all its operations. Actions in this area will focus on strengthening existing and developing new participation processes ensuring key staff are in the position to support these resources.

2.Building consumer capacity

Actions in this area will focus on building the capacity of consumers to be involved in meaningful participation. A key feature will include engagement of those who traditionally have difficulty in gaining access to services and are excluded from participation for example indigenous people and marginalised young people. BFYS will seek to provide additional resources including training, stipend provision and conferences to build their strengths.

3.Consumer Participation across Programs

Actions in this area will seek to develop ways in which consumer participation can be increased and the level of participation enhanced. Participation in key program components namely service delivery and evaluation will be developed.

4. Consumer Participation across the Organisation

This area is concerned with the formalising of organisational structures and processes that will provide a continuous and consistent approach to consumer involvement. Participation in key organisation activities such as governance, service planning, service delivery and quality improvement will be fostered.

Developed 2004/2005

Ratified by SMT

Review date