

# Steps in the Engagement Process

Engagement is an ongoing task and assumes the 'key' stakeholders will be involved in a project or policy process from its inception right through to implementation and subsequent review. This is likely to entail that different consumers will be engaged at different times and as a result it is likely that the consumer opinions and views you collect and collate will change over time. Consequently it is useful to have good record keeping practices so that you can easily demonstrate how consumer input has been used and built upon over time.

'Key' stakeholders refers to people who will be most affected by the project or policy. For example, a change in the hours of operation of a health centre will most affect those currently using the centre and this includes individuals and organisations such as nursing homes or community transport service(s). The premise of engagement is that these individuals and organisations will be involved in the decision making process relating to the hours of operation of the centre.

## 1. Be clear about the task

Consider why it is important that consumers, carers and or community be engaged and their views and opinions sought in relation to the policy or project you are working on. The goals set at the beginning will inform the planning of engagement process and the selection of engagement techniques. These goals may evolve as the engagement process progresses, but without a clear upfront understanding it will be difficult to keep the engagement process focused.

Be clear about what aspects are open to change and which ones are set. For example, you may want to find out how the clients feel about the current application for housing process and how they think this process can be improved. It is important to be clear that there will always be some form of application process as this assist in identifying the level of need and urgency. However, there may be scope for improving the type of application process used, the kind of questions asked, as well as what type of information is provided to explain the application and selection process to those seeking housing and clients input into this process would be extremely valuable.

Questions that may help you clarify the engagement task:

- What is the nature of the task? Is it a review of an existing policy or service? Is it a new policy or project? Is it about implementation?
- Are there aspects of the task that are predetermined? For example, is there legislation that governs what can or cannot be done, is the budget set, is action limited due to limitation in resourcing.
- What in particular are we looking to find out? For example, are we wanting to find out if a particular service is addressing the needs of clients, are we wanting to find out if there are other ways clients would like a particular service delivered, are we trying to find out why a particular service is not being used as much as we had anticipated, are we trying to find how a particular group of people experience our services ... etc.

Formulating the questions will be easier once the task has been clarified and defined.

## 2. Be clear about the purpose of engagement

Consumer, carer and community engagement is a long term commitment and involves a spectrum of approaches and methods. At DHHS, we broadly differentiate between five basic engagement approaches, as presented at Table 1. Fundamentally they show the different degrees of power sharing arrangements for the different engagement approaches. Each if the approaches are valid however, the key is when and how it occurs during the engagement process. For example, there is a need to inform the community of a change in the hours of operation, but it is important to consult and work with consumers and communities in partnership when determining what the appropriate hours of operation are.

Engaging consumers, carers and community members requires a genuine commitment to listening, to analysing with transparency, to reporting on what citizens have to say and to using the input to shape and inform the outcomes. It is not about consulting them after a decision has been made.

It is important to remember there is no one right way to engage. It is important that consumers, carers and community members feel their input is valued and that they understand how their contribution can influence the final decision as well as have an understanding of the constraints and limits. As part of any engagement it is vital that participants know whether they are contributing to the development of possible solutions, helping to choose between a set of options, providing their opinions for a research process or simply making minor changes around the edges of a pre-defined approach.

Questions that may help you clarify the purpose of engagement:

- What is the rationale for doing engagement?
- What aspects can be influenced or changed?
- What outcomes are being sought?

## 3. Identify the audience

### 4. Select the engagement technique(s)

Choosing a technique or a combination of techniques for engaging is a critical step in the engagement planning process. It is important that you know what you are asking from the stakeholders when you decide to use a specific engagement tool. You should only choose engagement techniques that are suited to the purpose and this will depend on:

- the scope, context and outcomes sought
- who you seek to engage, and the social and political context
- budget, timeline and resources allocated
- skills of team and availability of the members.

Furthermore, you may need to use a mix of engagement techniques during the lifespan of the project, depending on the outcomes and the type of engagement sought.

Don't select an engagement technique on the basis of its popularity, novelty or similar reasons.

Questions that may help you select the appropriate engagement technique:

- Given the timeframe, budget and resources which engagement technique(s) might work best?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of this technique/ these techniques?
- Will the audience be comfortable with this technique?
- Will I reach my target group with this technique?
- Will it help me achieve the outcomes?

## 5. Develop an engagement plan

This should not be a complex or long document. If the task is a complex one break it up into discrete but linked parts in accordance with the different engagement activities making a short, sharp and clear plan for each of the different engagement activities. The aim of the plan is to give a brief overview of:

- the aims of the project or task
- the engagement activity (i.e. to inform, to consult, to build a partnership)
- who the main audience is
- the propose of engagement, for example maybe best to do this in terms of questions needing to be answered
- what engagement technique(s) will be used
- the timeframe
- how the information will be used if comments are being sought
- how feedback will be provided in particular about reporting on progress.

The plan should be shared with all those participating and working on the task: staff consumers, community members, stakeholders etc.

Other aspects that can be covered in the engagement plan are:

- the organisational context for the task. For example, has a recent review recommended this project/task be undertaken, is project/task a requirement under an accreditation scheme, is the project/task flowing from a recent Ministerial decision
- the governance arrangements, for example, making it clear where the ultimate decision making rests
- the key challenges and risks.

**Table 1: Engagement Range**

	<b>The aim of engagement</b>	<b>The commitment being made</b>	<b>Examples</b>
Inform	To provide balanced and objective information about the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	We will keep you informed	Fact Sheet Web Site Open house
Consult	To work with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	We will work with the you to ensure concerns and aspirations are reflected in the alternatives developed and we will provide feedback on how input influenced the decision	Public comment Focus group Survey Public meeting
Partnership	To work with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	We will look to you for advice and innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible	Workshop Deliberative polling
Delegation	To give the public control for making decisions within specific guidelines	We will authorise you to make decisions in relation to specific situations, which we will then implement.	Citizen advisory committee Consensus building Participatory decision making
Control	To place final decision making in the hands of the public	We will implement what you decide	Citizen Jury Ballot Delegated decision making