

Involving Consumers in Your Health Service or Unit's COVID-19 Response

The need to involve consumers in strategic and operational decisions in healthcare has never been more important. In an unprecedented situation such as COVID-19, consumers are an essential source of advice and guidance in your work. This sheet is designed to support you to work with consumers and carers to co-design strategies and operational plans that respond to COVID-19 in a consumer-centred way.

KEY POINTS

- **It's essential that consumers are involved in key strategic and operational COVID-19 decisions and communication.** If you are involving clinicians in the planning and decision-making, then also involve consumers with lived experience.
- **The right consumers can be found quickly and easily** through established consumer networks; contact your local HHS engagement staff and Health Consumers Queensland to find out more.
- **Consumers will help ensure that you are making the right decisions** that will impact on many people, families and communities.
- **Your engagement doesn't have to be perfect, but it's important that you try.**

The triggers: When to involve consumers

Consumers and carer representatives need to be involved in strategic decisions or in the development of communications that:

- **Will directly affect them**
- **Are targeted at them**

This could include access to healthcare for groups of people with similar conditions or social characteristics. For example, involve consumers and carers in the following groups when decisions affecting, or communications are targeting these groups.

- living in residential aged care
- who live in remote Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander communities
- culturally and linguistically diverse populations
- living with an increased risk of COVID-19, such as older people or people living with multiple chronic conditions.

MYTH: I can't involve consumers in difficult decisions, because they will get too upset, or won't understand

Making difficult decisions is exactly when you need to include consumers. Working through an ethically challenging situation with the consumers who will be affected by the decision will show you what is important and give you some viable options you may not have considered. Consumers can also guide how you communicate the decisions to the public.

Who to involve?

Consider who the decision has the greatest impact on. If the decision is around outpatient care, look at the key conditions treated in outpatients. What are the key demographics affected by those conditions?

How do I find consumers quickly?

In regular circumstances, partnerships with consumers is long-term relationship-building work. However, **in an urgent situation it is appropriate to look directly to established groups to source suitable consumers.**

- **Contact your organisation's consumer engagement team or staff member.**
- **Look to established consumer groups within your organisation.** Some of those consumers may be suitable, and already have a relationship with your organisation.
- **Is there a COVID-19 consumer group already established in your organisation?**

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- **Contact established community groups or condition-specific organisations.** Kidney Health Australia and Ethnic Communities Council of Australia are examples. Umbrella organisations that have oversight of numerous smaller organisations can be especially good points of contact.
- You may already partner with consumers on a group or steering committee. Ask them to join you.

MYTH: I am overwhelmed by work right now, I just don't have time to involve consumers as well.

Involving consumers in your COVID-19 work will help lighten your load by giving you the assurance that you are making the right decisions. Your efforts will have more impact by being "road tested" by the right people before going out into the public. Many consumers are highly skilled, and all are very passionate about contributing quickly and meaningfully to this rapidly changing situation.

Modes of collaboration

Given the rapid responses required in the current situation, consumers don't need to be involved face-to-face. Consider options such as video calls, emails or phone. Ask your consumer engagement team or the consumers themselves what methods they recommend.

Keep the conversation going

Make sure you keep the consumers you are working with informed. This can be as simple and quick as 3 dot points at the beginning of your next email to outline what has happened since you last communicated.

Key principles for creating strong partnerships

Following these basic principles will ensure your partnership with consumers is authentic and productive.

Partnership: working together to shape service delivery to better meet consumer and community needs.

Respect and dignity: consumers will know more than you about their personal situation, and that of their community. Be open to that, and value that contribution.

Inclusive: if people are affected by a decision they deserve to be included in that decision. Include as many voices as possible, especially those with high social or health needs, or those who are seldom heard.

Improvement: Use the consumers' contribution to make the COVID-19 response as good as it can be.

MYTH: I have never done this before! How am I supposed to learn this with everything else going on?

Your consumer partnerships do not need to be perfect; the most important thing is that you try. Consumers are keen to make a contribution to the COVID-19 situation as they are living this along with you. Consumers want to help you. It can help to simply think of it as the kind of conversation you might have when trying to negotiate a difficult situation in any other aspect of your life.

Remuneration

Ensure that consumers are paid for their contribution. See Health Consumers Queensland's guidelines for information. <https://tinyurl.com/HCQremuneration>

Your consumer partnerships are likely to involve a series of short communications. If this is the case:

- Estimate that time at the end of the month, and make one payment to cover the total, or
- Ask consumers to keep a tally of their time and send you their hours at the end of the month.
- Talk to consumers about these options before you start so it's clear what you will cover.

Further assistance

Health Consumers Queensland has produced resources to help with consumer partnerships, including *A Guide for Health Staff Partnering with Consumers*, and *The Consumer and Community Engagement Framework*. You can download these at <http://www.hcq.org.au/our-work/framework/>