Handout 4: Conducting Consultations

What is a Consultation?

Consultation is the process of actively seeking the views of existing and potential consumers. It is also about providing an opportunity for consumers, their families and carers to provide feedback on the way services are delivered.

The term “consultation” is the language used for:

- Providing information
- Seeking participants views and feedback
- Way of generating new ideas
- Opportunity for participants to influence final decisions
- To a population or target group, PRIOR to final decisions being taken.

Why Consult?

The process of consulting achieves a range of important objectives including:

- Informing the service about current consumer’s needs
- Providing feedback on existing service delivery and ways of enhancing these
- Developing a positive relationship with consumers and other services within which solutions to issues can be negotiated
- Identifying community concerns and priorities for new services or programs
- Providing information about changes and potential changes
- Facilitating the planning of services
- Conducting research to determine community needs/expectations and aspirations.

Embarking on a consultative process is often perceived as being a difficult and cumbersome exercise, but increasingly government agencies providing funding to services are requiring active participation by the consumer group.

Participation by consumers of the service are then provided with an opportunity to “shape” the type of services they require, and how they are delivered.

It is therefore an opportunity for the service provider to enhance the service outcomes for consumers.

Principles to Guide a Consultative Process

Prior to organising a consultation, it is important to be clear about:

- Who should be consulted
- How (methodology could include invitation to a central and appropriate venue, or a “phone-in, or at the place where people meet)
• Who is responsible for organising the consultation
• What needs to be organised
• Duration of consultation
• Feedback on the process - Transparent communication channels increase participants confidence
• Cost of consultation (venues, interpreters, refreshments)
• Place of consultation, bearing in mind accessibility for people with disabilities, transport access
• Time of consultation - this will be dependent on target group.

How to Conduct Consultations

In order to maximise consumer participation, any of the methods or combination of methods can be used:

• Meetings which have been promoted and are held in an advertised venue
• Tapping into existing specific networks that work with population groups with additional needs For example CALD, ATSI, disability, age specific groups
• Seeking to consult with formal and informal groups
• Talking to direct and indirect government service providers, e.g. Community Health Centres
• Talking to Religious leaders/Community Leaders.

Consultation Tools

• Questionnaires/ surveys
• Submissions
• ‘Phone-ins’
• Face-to-face interviews
• Group interviews
• Public meetings.

Strategies to Maximise Consumer Participation

• Have potential constraints been identified (religious observance or cultural events)?
• Is the venue for the consultation accessible to consumers with a disability?
• Has the need for interpreters, signers been identified?
• Have interpreters and /or signers been booked?
• Has the need for transport been identified and arranged?
• Is the intended meeting times suitable?
• Are seating arrangements flexible?
• Can participation be further encouraged through personal contact?
• Have community and/or religious leaders being contacted?
• Ensure that there is prior knowledge of the consultation & endorsement of it at a senior level
• Use staff with expertise & skills in consulting
• Devolution of responsibility for decision-making to ensure greater responsiveness & flexibility.