Handout 7: Community Consultations

What is a Community Consultation?

A consultation is a process where the views of the community are actively sought. It is an opportunity for the community to talk about their needs, how these needs impact on their lives and the solutions they feel are appropriate.

The Advantages of Consultations

A community consultation should achieve a range of objectives that will assist the community you are working towards self-empowerment. These include:

- Informing you and your co-workers about current community needs, problems, expectations, and hopes
- Providing feedback on existing programs and services that you provide so you can improve on current performance and delivery standards
- Developing a positive relationship with the community and other stakeholders so that creative and positive solutions to community problems can be found
- Identifying concerns and priorities for new services, programs, policies and political activities
- To assist in future service planning.

Limitations of Consultations

1. Well organised but not necessarily representative groups can dominate the proceedings
2. Time consuming
3. May not reinforce what the family worker feels are the needs or solutions to those needs (this isn’t really a limitation it may just feel like one)
4. Potential for conflict as different groups with different needs and interest come together.

The Focus of a Community Consultation

An effective consultation should focus upon:

- The needs of the community
- Evaluating policies and programs which effect people in the community
- Planning for new services
- Ensuring that the service is accessible for minority groups within the community
- Ensuring the service is culturally appropriate
- Ensuring the service is respectful of different value systems within the community.
Methods of Consulting

To maximise community participation any of the following methods or combination of methods can be used in a consultation:

- Public meetings which have been promoted and widely advertised
- Small discussion groups
- Consulting with formal or informal groups
- Tapping into existing networks within the community such as playgroups, church groups, Parents and Citizens groups, sporting clubs
- With some communities you must be aware of cultural protocols such as speaking to Community Elders
- Speaking to other family workers and other community service workers who work in other parts of the community where the families you are consulting live
- Questionnaires, surveys, submissions, case studies
- Phone-ins
- Community social days such as especially organised BBQs.

Communication is the Key to a Successful Consultation

The key ingredient for a successful consultation is effective communication.

Make sure your processes are easy to follow and meaningful to the participants. At all times the consultant must be sensitive to language issues, religion issues, gender issues, historical issues, and other sensitivities within the community.

Considerations When Planning a Consultation

- Have you identified potential constraints such as historical issues or conflicts within the community?
- Is the venue suitable for a meeting? Is it comfortable? Accessible for people with disabilities? Accessible for elderly community members?
- Has the need for transport to the venue been identified and arranged?
- What are the seating arrangements? Are they flexible?
- Can participation be encouraged through personal contact?
- Have community elders been contacted?
- Have you organised a process for the meeting?
- Have you pre-planned your questions and information?
- Has the consultation been widely and meaningfully promoted?
- Have you considered ways to manage destructive or difficult community members?
- Have you organised childcare?
- Do you have clear and achievable timeframe?
- Do you have skilled and knowledgeable people to assist in facilitating the consultations?
- Advertise the consultation in plain English
- Any written material for the consultation must be in plain English
- Ensure that you agenda is transparent
- Provide participants with clear information about the purpose, its outcomes and the ways they can give you feedback on the consultation
- Ensure that mechanisms are in place to safeguard the confidentiality and privacy of community members
- Have you considered the impact of gender, ethnicity and socio-economic issues upon the consultation?
- Have you considered how all families in the area can be included in the consultation not just the more powerful or vocal groups of families?
- Have you considered how the thoughts of less powerful community members can be sought e.g. teenagers, elderly, people with disabilities.