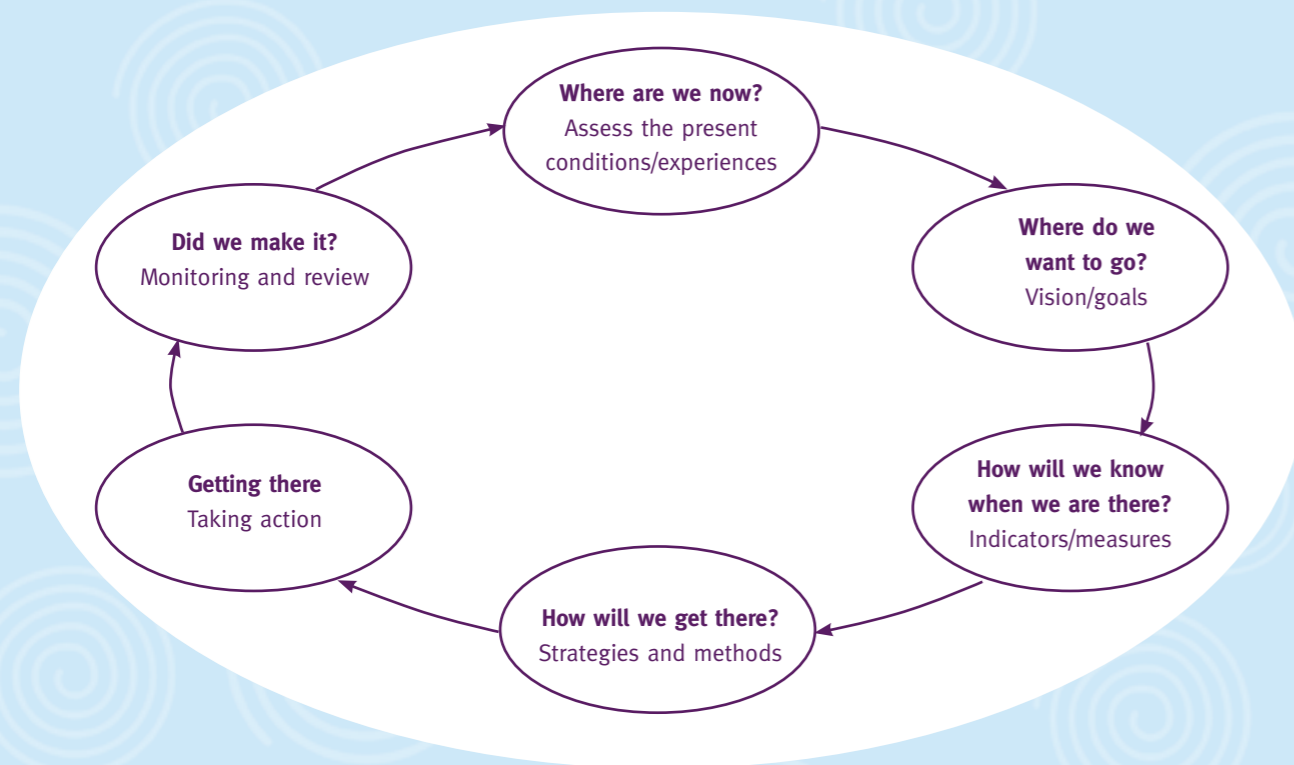


## Engaging communities at the local level

Engaging communities through participation at the local level involves:

- facilitating access by consumers to accurate, appropriate information ranging from treatment options to services and opportunities to participate in health service planning and delivery. This can be achieved via a range of means including brochures, leaflets, handbooks, guides, posters, newsletters, web sites and advertisements in local newspapers
- seeking feedback from consumers and communities in relation to issues that affect them through mechanisms such as surveys, focus groups, interviews, workshops and public meetings
- ongoing dialogue and information sharing between consumers and Queensland Health staff through District Health Council activities
- developing partnerships with consumers as a basis for working collaboratively to arrive at joint solutions to particular issues
- the active support of senior managers who will champion consumer and community participation and drive the development of an integrated, district-wide approach.

## Planning to engage communities in health through participation



## Further resources to support consumer and community participation:

- Consumer and Community Participation Toolkit for Queensland Health Staff
- Training Manual – Customer Focus for Queensland Health Staff

# Queensland Health Position Statement

## Consumer and Community Participation *to promote community engagement in health*



Consumer participation is integral to improving the quality and accountability of health services. A consumer perspective brings an added dimension to what constitutes quality care and helps to ensure that services are responsive to the needs of those who use them. There is also increasing recognition of the potential for consumers to positively influence their own health outcomes by being actively involved in decisions about their health.

Consumer participation is about enhancing relationships in which consumers, communities, District Health Councils and service providers work together to improve the quality and safety of health services and achieve better outcomes for consumers. It is not a one-off event or project. It is an investment in ongoing change in the way health services are planned, delivered and evaluated. It involves creating an organisation that supports consumer participation across all levels of service planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation.

Consumer and community participation in health service planning and delivery is part of the way in which Queensland Health engages with Queenslanders. It augments formal processes and policies supporting community engagement that are already in place. The intention of this document is to provide a clear guide to consumer and community participation at district and local service delivery level. The application of the principles, strategies and processes contained in the document will facilitate a more consistent and informed approach to consumer and community participation and ensure that it becomes part of the organisational culture and practice of Queensland Health.

(Dr) Robert Stable  
Director-General  
January 2003

## Who are consumers?

Consumers are people who use, or are potential users, of health services including their family and carers. Consumers may participate as individuals, groups, organisations of consumers, consumer representatives or communities.

## What is consumer participation?

Consumer participation is the process of involving health consumers in decisions about:

- their own health care
- local health services
- district-level planning.

## What is community engagement?

Community engagement refers to arrangements for citizens and communities to participate in the processes used to make good policy and to deliver on programs and services<sup>1</sup>.

## How can consumers and communities participate?

Participation in individual health care recognises that consumers can take an active role in decision-making by making informed choices about treatment options and sharing responsibility for management of their health.

Participation by consumers in local health service and district-level planning ranges from one-way information sharing, to two-way consultation and active participation in decision-making processes.

Social and economic circumstances may constrain participation by some consumers and particular strategies are required to facilitate participation by these groups.

## Principles:

### 1. **Building relationships between consumers and health service providers based on trust, respect and the sharing of power and knowledge is an essential foundation for engaging consumers and communities.**

Consumer participation in health involves a shift in the traditional roles of consumers and providers where knowledge and power are vested in the provider and the consumer is a passive recipient. Establishing better relationships between consumers and providers involves understanding each other's perspectives, developing a shared understanding of the issues and joint involvement in decision-making. To be effective, these relationships need to be based on trust and mutual respect.

Developing trust involves:

- open communication
- a willingness to share views, doubts and anxieties
- honesty and fairness
- being reliable in carrying out tasks and following up as agreed
- consistency of actions.

Mutual respect involves:

- taking time to listen and understand the experiences of others
- accepting that the views of others are worthy of consideration
- acting on an understanding of the experiences of others.

### 2. **Working partnerships between consumers and providers in which the contribution of each is valued provides a catalyst for organisational change towards ongoing engagement with communities.**

Working partnerships<sup>2</sup> describe an active relationship in which partners work together for their mutual advantage. It involves recognising the knowledge and expertise that each party brings to the partnership. By working together on a range of activities and in a variety of roles, partners become more aware of each other's perspectives and develop trust and confidence in their ability to arrive at joint solutions. Working in partnership can create a synergy that precipitates wider system-level change and helps to create an organisational culture that supports community engagement.

To be effective, working partnerships require:

- commitment by the partners to the process of working together
- time to develop trust, confidence and the capacity to work together
- resources to facilitate implementation of changes
- knowledge and skills in community engagement.

Providers should explore opportunities to develop working partnerships with consumers in individual health care, health service planning and in the broader health system.

### 3. **An integrated approach to community engagement involves selecting methods and tools appropriate to the desired outcomes and ensuring that the process forms part of the cycle for organisational improvement.**

Planning to engage communities requires a systematic approach supported by all levels of the organisation and involving the full spectrum of Queensland Health activities. This includes strategic planning, policy development, service planning, and service delivery, review, monitoring and evaluation. Clarification of the purpose and desired outcomes will help to ensure that the strategies adopted are appropriate, inclusive of the diversity of consumers and organisational activities, and lead to long-lasting change.

### 4. **Inclusiveness means ensuring that engagement initiatives and health services reflect the diversity of consumers.**

Consumer involvement in health must recognise the diverse social, cultural, economic, linguistic, physical and geographical characteristics of consumers. These characteristics may exclude some consumers from participating through commonly used strategies. New and innovative approaches must be developed and evaluated to ensure that the diversity of consumers - particularly those from marginalised groups - have the opportunity to participate. Ways must be found to ensure these approaches become part of ongoing system-wide change that provides services appropriate and sensitive to consumer needs.

### 5. **Removing the barriers to consumer involvement is necessary in order to facilitate practical implementation of community engagement strategies.**

Within the existing health system there are barriers to involving consumers in health. Some of the barriers relate to practical considerations including time and cost restraints that effectively exclude participation by some consumers. Others relate to an unequal distribution of power and resources that can undermine confidence and the capacity to participate. Working relationships between consumers and providers also require effective communication and high standards of courtesy and respect. Service providers need to be aware of the factors that can constrain engagement with communities and take action to address them by reviewing and changing current policies and practices where necessary.

## The way forward

- *strategies to promote community engagement through consumer and community participation*

The following strategies have been identified to help ensure that engaging communities through consumer and community participation becomes part of the organisational culture and practice of Queensland Health. Implementation of these strategies together with application of the principles will help to ensure a more consistent and informed approach.

## Strategies

### 1. **Providing education and training for Queensland Health staff**

This will involve education and training which reflects a broad focus beyond the acquisition of knowledge and skills. It involves building the capacity for reflection on practice in an organisational environment that supports continuous improvement in the quality of health care.

### 2. **Developing a range of resources and tools**

Resources and tools will be developed to ensure a consistent approach to good practice in engaging communities through consumer and community participation across all levels of Queensland Health's service planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation.

### 3. **Supporting innovative practice**

Opportunities for innovative practice in community engagement through consumer and community participation will be created and supported. This includes showcasing instances of good practice and sharing knowledge of these examples across health districts and communities.

### 4. **Building the capacity of District Health Councils**

The capacity of District Health Councils to engage with communities will be enhanced through skill development and the provision of information resources.

### 5. **Review and evaluation**

Specific programs and projects involving consumer and community participation will be monitored and evaluated to enhance learning and ensure accountability for community engagement in line with the principles outlined.

<sup>1</sup>Department of the Premier and Cabinet, Community Engagement Division Directions Statement, 2001

<sup>2</sup>Draper, M. (1997) Involving consumers in improving hospital care: lessons from Australian hospitals, AGPS, Canberra