Sensitive and appropriate engagement with consumers experiencing vulnerability

Summary report

16 September 2021

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Introduction

Introduction and purpose

Engagement directly with consumers experiencing vulnerability and those who represent and/or work with them, is essential for understanding and promoting the interests of this diverse and dynamic consumer group. Consumer engagement can bridge the gap between organisations and the community and bring value and legitimacy to decision making processes and outcomes.

This document presents key considerations, checklists and principles that will support the design of engagement processes that consider and include consumers experiencing vulnerability.

The information in this summary document is drawn from the *Sensitive and appropriate engagement with consumers experiencing vulnerability* report (Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report) that was produced by the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne and released by the commission in February 2021. The full report is available on our website.

Document structure

Section one provides background to the Essential Services Commission's work on consumer vulnerability, including definitions of consumer vulnerability and universal and inclusive engagement.

Section two presents ten principles to support universal and inclusive engagement.

Section three presents guidance on engaging with consumers experiencing vulnerability, including four considerations when planning, designing and running inclusive engagement. This section includes lists of key considerations to ensure your engagement is sensitive and appropriate. References are provided to the relevant pages in the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report.

Background

Getting to fair strategy

The Essential Services Commission's Getting to fair strategy, released in August 2021, aims to break down the barriers consumers can face when accessing and engaging with essential services. The strategy is a three-year roadmap for the Commission to improve the experience of consumers facing vulnerability by supporting our regulated and administered sectors to provide more responsive, inclusive and accessible services.

The aim of the strategy is to create fairer, more equitable access for all Victorians, regardless of which of our regulated sectors they use.

Sensitive and appropriate engagement report

The Getting to fair strategy was developed based on an eighteen-month program of research, engagement and capability building. As part of this program, the Melbourne Social Equity Institute at the University of Melbourne was commissioned to develop guidance and principles for action for sensitive and appropriate engagement with consumers experiencing vulnerability in 2020. The _Sensitive and appropriate engagement with consumers experiencing vulnerability_ report (Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report) reviews existing resources and proposes ten principles for effective, sensitive and appropriate engagement with consumers experiencing vulnerability by essential services regulators through a 'universal' and 'inclusive' approach.

While the information in the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report was produced to support regulators to engage, the content is relevant to the engagement undertaken by our regulated sectors.

This document is a summary of the key elements of the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report. To view the full report and the 'Getting to fair' strategy please visit our website.

Definitions

Consumer vulnerability

The definition of consumer vulnerability from 'Getting to fair' focuses on barriers, rather than the characteristics of the individual, as the biggest contributing factor that reduces inclusion, access and engagement. By focusing on barriers, we aim to minimise the onus on consumers and highlight the role regulators and businesses play in supporting consumers.

> "A person experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, vulnerability is someone who experiences barriers to accessing or engaging in the essential services we regulate or administer. As a result of those barriers, that person experiences economic and/or social exclusion or harm. Barriers include event-based circumstances, systemic factors, and market-based factors."

The barriers that we highlight in the definition are:

Event-based circumstances such as illness, job loss, financial stress, family violence, death of a loved one, ageing and disability, natural disaster, global pandemic.

Systemic factors such as unaffordable and poor-quality housing, insufficient work and employment insecurity, siloed services, digital living and the emergence of a digital divide, regional limitations, low and inadequate rates of income support, racism and colonisation.

Market based circumstances such as inadequate or overly complex documentation, pricing strategies, marketing practices, and targeted services that exclude some customers.

For more information about the definition of vulnerability please see the Getting to Fair Decision paper on our website.

Universal and inclusive engagement

Universal engagement processes are designed from the beginning with all potential consumers in mind.

Inclusive engagement is designed with enough flexibility to ensure perspectives, needs and requirements of individuals or groups can be incorporated or addressed.

Universal and inclusive engagement is open to everyone in the Victorian community and can be adapted to the perspectives and requirements of consumers in any circumstances, including circumstances of vulnerability.

The purpose of designing universal and inclusive engagement is to ensure sensitive and appropriate engagement for all consumers, including those experiencing vulnerability.

For more information about universal and inclusive engagement see the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report on our website.

Principles for universal consumer engagement

The Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report proposes a set of 10 principles to guide effective, sensitive and appropriate engagement with consumers experiencing vulnerability through a 'universal' and 'inclusive' approach. These 'universal engagement principles' are based on the analysis of guidance previously published by regulators, government and public bodies, researchers and non-profit organisations.

1. Be inclusive

Adapt your standard engagement processes to include all consumers. Do not create separate or 'add on' processes for some individuals or groups. Develop a range of engagement techniques that are suitable for the diverse characteristics and needs of consumers.

2. Collaborate and co-design with consumers

Develop engagement strategies, plans and techniques in consultation, partnership or co-design with consumers. This builds trust and buy-in, and is more likely to lead to diverse and representative participation in engagement. As 'experts by experience', consumers can also play a valuable role in facilitating or supporting engagement activities.

3. Treat engagement as an ongoing process based on relationships

Engagement will be effective and appropriate where it is supported by strong relationships with consumers, consumer groups and advocates. Relationships and networks can help identify consumer issues, recruit the right consumers, and design appropriate and accessible engagement processes. Developing honest and trust-based relationships requires time and resources.

4. Have a clear purpose

Understand — and clearly explain — why you want to engage with consumers. Consider matters including the required level of engagement with consumers, the information or other input you require, the desired outcomes, and who you should engage with.

5. Reflect community diversity

Make sure engagement participants represent the diversity of the community and the consumer body. This will ensure you hear representative and reliable perspectives. Develop a sophisticated understanding of the consumer community, its interests and needs. Acknowledge and value difference, and remember that one person cannot speak for all members of their community.

6. Invest in engagement

Effective universal engagement is only possible with the investment of time and resources. This includes resources to facilitate consumers' participation (such as travel costs, childcare and remuneration for time spent) and adequate resources to design engagement activities that are appealing, appropriate and accessible for a broad range of consumers.

7. Be transparent and offer genuine involvement

Give all consumers who are involved in engagement equal access to decision-makers and a genuine opportunity to influence outcomes. Recognise and acknowledge the expertise of consumers and ensure that all engagement processes are accessible and appropriate for consumers. Be honest and transparent about the influence that consumers will and do have over decisions and processes. Discuss your expectations and the expectations of participants. Publicly report on the influence of consumer input on final outcomes, and provide this information in multiple formats, styles, and languages.

8. Show respect for individuals, their knowledge and expertise

Ensure that all interactions with consumers are founded on respect for their contributions, expertise, circumstances, and needs. Use respectful language, offer multiple and diverse opportunities to participate, seek and respond to feedback, acknowledge and deal with disagreements or mistakes, and challenge biases.

9. Use methods that are universal and flexible

Design engagement with a wide diversity of consumers in mind. Build considerations like accessibility, cultural awareness, cultural safety, adequate resourcing, and comfort and flexibility of timing and approach into every engagement process. Ask potential and actual participants what they need and ensure you have the resources and flexibility to provide it.

10. Reflect, adapt, improve

Invite, and act on, feedback from consumers involved in engagement processes. Establish clear processes for participants to ask questions and give feedback during engagement processes, and respond and adapt where necessary. Conduct formal evaluation processes (following the same principles as engagement processes) to assess whether the stated aims and principles of the engagement were met.

> For more information on the principles for designing sensitive, appropriate engagement with consumers experiencing vulnerability see pages 72-81 of the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report

Guidance on engaging with consumers experiencing vulnerability

The Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report identifies four considerations when planning, designing and running inclusive engagement:

- Developing an organisational culture of inclusive, diverse and representative engagement
- Understanding why consumer engagement is needed and what approach to take
- Identifying and reaching consumers for engagement
- Designing and conducting inclusive engagement activities.

This section summarises the key considerations when engaging with consumers experiencing vulnerability. For more information see section 4 of the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report.

Developing an organisational culture of inclusive, diverse and representative engagement

Developing an organisational culture of inclusive, diverse and representative engagement can be done by establishing inclusive and universal engagement as part of mainstream practice and allocating resources and staff to build capacity, develop and implement strategies and collaborate across sectors. Stakeholder and consumer engagement strategies should be adapted to be inclusive and universal, rather than 'adding on' separate processes for some groups. Embedding inclusive and universal engagement requires resources to:

- develop formal consumer engagement strategies and approaches
- conduct research
- train staff
- establish dedicated teams to coordinate efforts and share knowledge and expertise across the organisation
- engage experts
- conduct inclusive and universal engagement activities (such as meetings, roundtables, interviews, focus groups, and written and online consultations).

For more information on developing an organisational culture of inclusive, diverse and representative engagement see pages 39-41 of the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report.

Understanding why consumer engagement is needed and what approach to take

Understanding why consumer engagement is needed and what approach to take can be supported by mapping the consumer interest and determining the required level of input, consultation and collaboration with consumers. The following elements are important to build an understanding of why consumer engagement is needed and what approach to take.

Having a clear purpose and plan for consumer engagement can help identify and reach the right people and design inclusive, universal activities.

- Consider the need for, and purpose of, consumer engagement at an early stage in any project.
- Frameworks or tools like the Ofcom Consumer Panel toolkit can help organisations:

    - think about the implications and processes for consumers
    - decide what input they need from consumers, including consumers experiencing vulnerability or other groups.

- Organisations should consider the appropriate form of consumer engagement, for example:

    - whether they will ask consumers to give feedback on a draft policy or decision
    - whether consumers will have input at earlier stages
    - whether consumers will be partners in defining the problem and devising a solution.

- Tools like the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) public participation spectrum can help organsiations design engagement and select tools according to the level of input and influence they want consumers to have over the final outcome, such as:

    - Informing: giving consumers information to help them understand the problem, alternatives and/or solutions.
    - Consulting: getting feedback from consumers on analysis, alternatives and/or solutions.
    - Involving: working with consumers throughout the process to ensure their concerns and aspirations are understood and considered.
    - Collaborating: partnering with consumers on each element of the decision, including developing alternatives and/or solutions.
    - Empowering: putting final decision-making power in consumers' hands.

Identifying and reaching consumers for engagement.

Identifying and reaching consumers for engagement includes considering the value of engagement with individual consumers (direct engagement), alongside 'indirect' engagement with consumer advocacy bodies and others who work with consumers, and identifying and reaching the full range of participants.

Organsiations should understand who they need to engage with, and how to identify and reach all relevant participants. This can be done by indirect and direct engagement.

Indirect consumer engagement

Indirect consumer engagement encompasses engagement with organisations or individuals who work with or on behalf of consumers (including consumers experiencing vulnerability), such as consumer advocates and Community Legal Centres. This form of engagement is *about* the experiences and needs of consumers but it does not hear directly from consumers.

Organisations commonly engage with organisations that work with consumers or advocate for them. This *indirect* engagement is conducted in a variety of ways, including roundtables, working groups, advisory committees, data and information sharing, or receiving written submissions.

Indirect engagement can give the 'big picture' view of consumer issues, provide comprehensive, cross-sector data on consumer issues, and present a coherent consumer voice.

Indirect engagement is unlikely to give organisations the full picture. It offers a 'filtered' version of the consumer perspective and is unlikely to be representative of the views of all consumers (including, for example, people who are excluded from the market altogether and those who cannot access advocacy or support services).

It does not give consumers the opportunity to have a voice and participate directly in public processes.

Direct engagement

Direct consumer engagement involves engagement with individual consumers or citizens. Individuals may participate only on their own behalf (in terms of their own experience) or may participate as advocates or experts on behalf of themselves and others in similar circumstances, such as people with disabilities or older people.

Organisations should also engage directly with individual consumers and groups of consumers. Direct engagement can also take multiple forms, including consumer committees or panels, advisory boards, roundtables, written submissions, focus groups, interviews, and vox pops.

Direct engagement gives organsiations access to information that is not held by consumer organisations, demonstrates respect for individuals' experiences and perspectives, and can enable organisations to ensure they hear from a diverse and representative sample of consumers. Consumer research can be a valuable complement to direct consumer engagement, especially where it provides insights into population-level issues and consumer behaviour.

Organisations must ensure that direct engagement involves a diversity of consumers, including consumers experiencing vulnerability. This means organisations must:

- know who the relevant consumers are and how diverse they are
- have a clear plan for finding and connecting with consumers.

Stakeholder mapping, researching the community, and drawing on existing networks and relationships within the community can help organisations to identify and connect with the full range of potential participants.

The Better Together Project Stakeholder Assessment Tool and Twyfords Appreciative Inquiry Stakeholder Analysis offer a structured way to map potential stakeholders, including individual consumers.

Organisations should build relationships with specific groups of consumers and involve community groups when planning engagement. Some government bodies have developed guidelines for engaging appropriately and respectfully with some groups, such as people with disabilities and Victorian Traditional Owners.

- Walking the talk: a framework for effective engagement for people with disability, families and people who support them (Disability Services Queensland)
- Traditional Owner and Aboriginal Community Engagement Framework (Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning)

Organisations should remember that one individual cannot represent the views of an entire population group.

- Representative and advocacy organisations run by and for consumers may advocate for the views of multiple members, although their contributions will not replace direct engagement.
- Organisations should also recognise diversity within consumer groups and take an intersectional approach in doing so. For example, engagement with older people should include

older people with disabilities, older people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds, older Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and older LGBTI people.

Ensuring that direct engagement is diverse and representative

Organisations must recognise diversity on a range of dimensions, including diversity of experience, life stage and way of thinking, as well as diversity of background in terms of consumers' participation in the market and relationships with particular providers. It also means engaging with those least likely to participate in the market, usually the most vulnerable who could benefit the most.

To ensure engagement is diverse and representative:

- Know who the relevant consumers are, how diverse they are, and therefore who can legitimately speak for them
- Have a clear plan for reaching consumers, and what to do if they are hard to reach
- Remember that the consumers most likely to participate in engagement or have the loudest voice are not necessarily representative of all consumers.

Actions for identifying consumers for engagement

- Research the consumer community and identify which consumers have not contributed to past projects.
- Explore how people who are isolated due to geography, environment, culture, support need or lack of access to information could be supported to engage.
- Talk to local government and non-government organisations, like neighbourhood and community houses, about the demographic features of the local community and issues of concern to the community.
- Collaborate with organisations that are connected to the community you want to reach.
- Use existing networks and contact individuals through advocacy or community organisations you are already connected with (including those already involved in engagement processes).
- Talk to staff in other agencies who have previously engaged with the groups of interest.
- Develop trust-based relationships with community leaders.
- Allow time and resources to build relationships and confidence with the whole community, including people who might participate in current or future engagement processes.

For more information on identifying and reaching consumers for engagement see pages 48-55 of the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report.

Designing and conducting inclusive engagement activities.

Designing and conducting inclusive engagement activities means that organisations should tailor consumer engagement activities to the people and communities involved.

Organisations need both resources and time to run inclusive engagement activities. The following list of key considerations have been designed to support consideration of the following themes:

- Preparing for consumer engagement
- Designing inclusive, accessible, and appropriate activities
- Using, reporting and evaluating consumer contributions.

Preparing for consumer engagement

As organisations prepare for consumer engagement there are a number of actions to consider that will support the delivery of engagement that is universal and inclusive. This section presents key considerations as organisations begin to prepare for consumer engagement, focusing on:

Determining how to engage
Scope and purpose of engagement
Enabling participation
Accessible communication
Cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and cultural safety

Key considerations: how to engage

- Ask individuals and groups how they would like to be engaged with.

- Do your research about participants' potential needs and devise a plan to meet those needs before you approach them for their input.

- Some community groups and organisations have published guidance about 'how to engage' with them.

- Use language that reflects how the community sees themselves.

Key considerations: scope and purpose of engagement

- Clearly define the scope and purpose of engagement, and develop clear, easy-to-understand explanations.

- Make sure the terms of engagement are appropriate to the audience (for example, translate technical matters into plain language).

Key considerations: enabling participation

- Ask participants whether they have access to the resources (financial and otherwise) they need to participate.

- Offer low- or no-cost opportunities to participate (for example, telephone consultations or activities in participants' local area).

- Offer to cover participants' travel costs and other costs of participation, such as childcare or disability support. Ask participants if and how they would like to be reimbursed.

- Develop a remuneration policy to help decide if and when participants should be paid for their time and expertise; discuss remuneration with participants early in the process.

Key considerations: accessible communication

- Ensure all written communication is clear and accessible.

- Publish all information in all community languages and multiple accessible formats, including plain language, large print, Easy English and easy-read, audio and video. Consult existing guidance on making information accessible and engage experts where needed (for example, to develop Easy English versions).

- Test communication materials with different audiences to make sure they are appropriate and accessible.

- Advertise through multiple channels including community networks, local media, local radio, ethnic media and social media.

- Ensure all person-to-person communication is clear and accessible.

- Ask participants about their communication needs up-front.

- Arrange language interpreters or other necessary services.

- Be aware of cultural norms and protocols that may require you to communicate through nominated individuals or intermediaries.

- Create clear and accessible communication channels between participants and staff, and among staff within the organisation.

Key considerations: cultural awareness, cultural sensitivity and cultural safety

- Understand and address cultural considerations in partnership with local communities.

- Invest time and resources into building ongoing, mutually beneficial relationships and rapport with Elders, Traditional Owners and community leaders in a collaborative and culturally safe manner.

- Engage Elders and other community leaders in planning, development and delivery of engagement processes and activities.

- Consider whether the proposed engagement tools and methodology are culturally appropriate.

- Ensure that all processes are informed by 'culturally-safe and healing-informed practice frameworks'.

- Understand and respect governance and decision-making structures within communities, groups and families.

- Prioritise culture and respect for Aboriginal knowledge and expertise, and develop cultural competence and a culturally safe environment.

- Acknowledge and tell the truth about our history and the struggle for rights and self-determination of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples since colonisation.

- Reflect on the impact of your own culture (for instance, the power and privilege associated with membership of the dominant culture).

- Be mindful that there may be cultural sensitivities around certain topics and discuss these with Elders and community leaders prior to engagement, and ensure activities are culturally appropriate.

- Follow cultural protocols (and seeking advice where you are unsure), including beginning all meetings with an Acknowledgment of the Traditional Owners and asking Elders from the local Aboriginal community to conduct a Welcome to Country to begin ceremonies and major events.

- Seek permission before photographing or filming participants.

- Use plain language.

- Make sure you are genuinely understood by all participants if language interpreters are not present.

- Use images and other materials that reflect the diversity of the community and participants.

- 'Think diversity': do not assume that all people from the same cultural or linguistic background share the same characteristics or perspectives, and include a diverse range of people from each group.

- For example, engagement with older persons should involve engagement with LGBTI older persons, older persons from a range of cultural and linguistic backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander older persons, and engagement with people with disabilities should involve people with different disabilities, people from urban and rural areas, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds.

For more guidance on engaging with Victorian First Nations communities, see the concept draft of the _Good Practice Guide for Engagement Between Government and Traditional Owners_.

Designing inclusive, accessible and appropriate activities

This section provides a list of key considerations when designing inclusive engagement activities, including:

- Offering multiple and diverse opportunities to participate in engagement
- Ensuring appropriate and accessible venues
- Ensuring accessibility for people with disabilities
- Ensuring activities are accessible
- Ensuring facilitation is appropriate and accessible
- Ensuring engagement is sensitive and appropriate

Key considerations: multiple and diverse opportunities to participate

- Use a range of tailored engagement tools (such as interviews, focus groups, vox pops, and digital engagement) and consider creative techniques. Guides like Capire Consulting Group's Inclusive Community Engagement Matrix offer advice on selecting engagement tools.

- Use multiple engagement platforms including in-person and digital. Recognise that not all people have access to digital participation, and provide extra support for those who do want to participate in this way (for example, live IT assistance and tutorials).

- Help participants to prepare for engagement activities with clear information about what will happen and what is expected of them. Make sure participants can contact someone to ask questions and give feedback prior to the day.

Key considerations: appropriate and accessible venues

- Choose locations and venues that are comfortable, familiar and accessible to the participants. This will often mean running different activities in different locations.

- Choose venues that are familiar and local to participants, and normally used by them. Where possible, go where people are rather than expecting them to travel to you.

- Choose venues that are warm, welcoming and comfortable (for example, ensure there is appropriate lighting, heating/cooling and seating). This might differ depending on the group, meaning activities might need to take place across multiple locations.

- Choose venues that are accessible to a wide range of people (for example, older people, wheelchair users, people with vision impairment, people who are Deaf, people who are hard of hearing, and people with a hearing impairment).

- Avoid venues that have a negative history or association (for example, former institutions).

- Choose venues with good access to public transport and parking.

- Make sure the path of travel from the road and carpark is clearly signed and accessible.

- Consider the layout of seating, use of lecterns and stages, and other things that might be intimidating or reinforce power differences between facilitators and participants.

Key considerations: accessibility for people with disabilities

- Build accessibility for people with disabilities into all aspects of engagement.

- Provide written information in multiple accessible formats (including plain language, large print, Easy English, Braille, audio, video, PDF and RTF). Make sure the content is clear, brief and set in its wider context.

- Provide all formats simultaneously. This will require multiple weeks of lead time to engage experts to prepare different forms and finalise different versions.

- Make webpages compliant with the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines.

- Ask individuals about their communication preferences and accessibility requirements, including support requirements, when you first make contact.

- Ask all participants to list their accessibility requirements at the RSVP point for activities and events. Provide multiple options for responding to invitations, for example, email, telephone and in-person.

- Where a person identifies accessibility requirements, contact them as soon as possible to discuss and confirm how their requirements will be met. Make bookings (such as Auslan interpreter or speech to text captioning bookings) at least two weeks in advance.

- Describe accessibility measures in invitations to events and activities. This should include detailed information about the address of the venue; transport and way-finding (include maps and photographs if appropriate); measures that will or can be made available (including Auslan interpreting, an audio loop, and live captioning); and what activities are planned and the agenda for the event.

- Encourage and support the attendance of personal assistants or support workers (or informal supporters) where these are requested. Check whether participants require funding to pay for the support person's attendance. People should choose their own support person.

- Choose venues and digital platforms that are accessible to the widest possible range of people, regardless of whether you expect people with particular requirements to attend.

- For physical venues, confirm the availability of:

  – public transport, parking and passenger drop-off points

  – properly accessible, clean and available toilets (including toilets on the same level of the building as the event)

  – continuous pathways and even surfaces

  – a front entrance (not side/back entrance) that is wheelchair accessible

  – multiple seating options for wheelchair users (rather than one allocated space for wheelchairs)

  – for long meetings, a quiet room where people can rest, lie down or have a break (with staff available to provide directions and assistance)

  – enough space inside the venue to move around easily

  – tables and stages that are suitable for wheelchair users

Key considerations: accessible activities

- Accessible face- face-to-face interactions, including looking directly at participants who are Deaf, hard of hearing or have a hearing impairment when addressing them, and identifying yourself when approaching participants with vision impairment.

- Providing large-print name tags

- Ensuring any videos have captions and that the facilitator describes and explains any videos, slides or other visual materials

- Collecting information in a transparent, accurate and accessible manner (such as recording feedback on butcher's paper or in large font on-screen)

- Including regular breaks (for example, every 45 or 90 minutes) and breaks that are long enough to permit people to get refreshments and use the facilities

- Making sure the speed and content is clear and easy to follow.

Key considerations: appropriate and accessible facilitation

- Facilitation or group management should be open, non-judgmental, respectful and flexible.

- Staff should receive training on inclusive facilitation and group management.

- Facilitators should be open to a range of contributions in a range of forms, be honest and accountable to participants.

- Facilitators should be prepared to change tack if an activity is not working.

- Facilitators should be equipped to respond to participants experiencing stress, distress, grief or trauma, including by demonstrating empathy, asking if it is the right time to engage, giving participants plenty of time and offering support and the opportunity to debrief.

- It may be appropriate to engage external facilitators where the organisation does not have the necessary expertise in-house. These might include facilitators with experience of inclusive engagement and/or facilitators from the community or communities being engaged (such as disability advocates or domestic violence survivor advocates).

- Attendance by senior staff and decision-makers can demonstrate respect for consumers' perspectives.

For more detailed guidance on accessible engagement, see:

Department of Human Services (Vic), _Inclusive Consultation and Communication with People with a Disability: A Guide for Victorian Government Departments and Agencies_ (Disability Services Division, DHS, December 2004).

Sally Robinson, Disability Studies Research Institute and Jan Dyke, _Walking the Talk: A framework for effective engagement with people with disability, families and people who support them_ (Disability Services Queensland, nd).

Sensitive and appropriate engagement

Organisations should be aware that participants or potential participants might be experiencing stress, distress, grief or trauma, and discussions and questions raised during engagement activities might trigger or exacerbate these experiences. Participants may be in the midst or aftermath of a personal crisis (such as a bereavement, health issue, mental health crisis, job loss, homelessness or financial hardship) or a public emergency or disaster (such as bushfires or floods). This can have a range of consequences, including making it difficult for people to take in information and make decisions quickly.

In some circumstances these key considerations may be required

Key considerations: sensitive and appropriate engagement

- asking if it is the right time to engage and regularly 'checking in' with participants throughout the process

- investigating (and asking) about the best way to communicate with individuals and the community (where, for example, usual communication channels are disrupted or unavailable)

- making sure support is available for participants (such trauma-informed support for domestic violence survivor advocates), telling participants how they can (discreetly) seek support if they require it, and ensuring that all participants have the opportunity to debrief with skilled facilitators and/or peer supporters who understand their distress and can respond appropriately to it

- offering plenty of time to prepare and participate, and clear information

- offering the option to participate in pairs rather than being the lone 'voice' from a group or perspective

- considering which voices might have 'become silent' and spending time to identify and identify new connection points and networks through which to make contact.

Using, reporting and evaluating consumers' contributions

Acknowledging and celebrating the contributions of engagement participants and informing them how their contributions informed or influenced project outcomes demonstrates respect for participants and enhances trust and investment in the engagement process.

Organisations should acknowledge participants' contributions to their work. Feedback, reporting and evaluation processes should be designed according to the considerations in this checklist.

Key considerations: using, reporting and evaluating consumers contributions

- Organisations should ask participants whether they would like to receive feedback about the outcomes of the engagement activity and how they would like to receive it (for example, their preferred formats and communication channel).

- Outcomes should be communicated in multiple formats and via multiple channels

- Where participants have indicated that they would like to receive feedback, organisations should send participants:

  – a summary of what was discussed during the engagement activity shortly after the activity was conducted

  – a summary of how consumers' feedback was used and the influence it had on the process and final outcomes (including acknowledging feedback that was not incorporated)

  – copies and accessible summaries of final reports and other publications.

- Community feedback sessions may be an appropriate way to discuss and explain the role of consumers in decisions.

- Organisations should evaluate their consumer engagement processes, including:

  – seeking feedback from participants and facilitators on what worked well and what did not (ensuring that the evaluation process follows inclusive engagement principles)

  – reflecting on whether the engagement activity was inclusive and whether feedback was received and acted on during the process

  – engaging with the wider community of consumers to consider who was missing and plan for improvements in the future

  – sharing experiences and reflections with colleagues within and beyond their organisation.

For more information on developing and designing and conducting inclusive engagement activities see pages 55-71 of the Sensitive and Appropriate Engagement report.