

Planning engagement with birth parents to support service delivery

A resource for professionals seeking to engage birth parents to support service delivery and quality improvement

This resource provides guidance to organisations planning engagements with birth parents to support service delivery and continuous quality improvement. Greater engagement with birth parents is part of the growing recognition that safe and quality services cannot be delivered without the input of those who will ultimately use, and benefit from, these services.

Engagement of parents needs to be genuine, meaningful, and safe

Best practice in engagement ensures the meaningful inclusion of parent voices and experiences in policy development and in service design, delivery, and improvements. This means planning engagements that are trauma-informed, with inbuilt mechanisms for the genuine and safe participation of parents, making sure:

- their lived expertise is valued,
- diverse voices are included,
- there is a clear purpose and goals,
- background information is shared in an accessible way,
- plain language is used,
- there is scope for parent voices to genuinely influence decisions (avoiding tokenism),
- adequate time and resources are invested,
- there is no prescribed story of “success”,
- there are mechanisms for sharing power,
- there are mechanisms to reflect parent voices back to them,
- decision-making is transparent,
- organisations are open to constructive challenging of status quo¹.

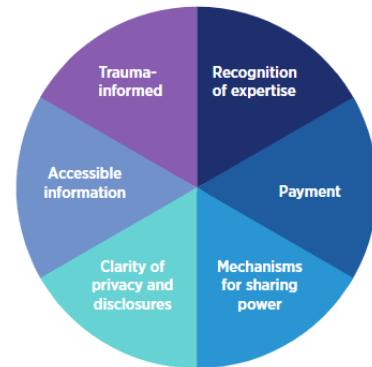
Best practice also means that appropriate remuneration is provided for those who share their expertise with services in formal participation opportunities. This can help engagements to be beneficial to participants as well as services. When planning engagements that include remuneration, services should be aware of the potential impact of payments on parents (for example, noting some government payments are impacted by other income), and project/program budgets should be established with money allocated to this cost.

¹ NSW Government (2021). Engaging with Lived Experience. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/engaging-with-lived-experience-framework.pdf>

"A considered and planned investment of time, resources and budget allocation will result in savings and improvements far greater than the investment²"

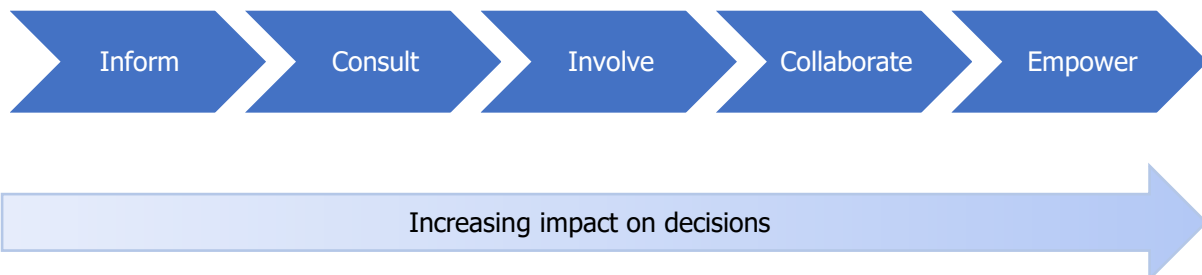
Parents' participation should always be informed and voluntary, with options for exiting the engagement at any time if they make that decision. Work with parents should also be underpinned by a strength-based approach and come from a place of unconditional positive regard.

In the Voice of Parents project³ six key principles of ethical participation are identified (see opposite image); further details can be found in *Voice of Parents: A model for inclusion: Supporting participation of birth parents*.



Engagement of parents needs to be fit-for-purpose

To ensure that the inclusion of parent voices in services is genuine, meaningful, and safe, engagements should be well planned, purposeful and fit-for-purpose. This means making informed decisions about the level of engagement planned with parents who have lived experience, and what their role will look like; for example, thinking about the extent to which parents will be consulted or included in real decision-making processes. While there are many frameworks for making these decisions, some commonly used scales of consumer participation exist, such as the following continuum⁴:



As well as clearly identifying the purpose and extent of engagement, there are different levels at which participation and/or co-design can happen. For example, engagement with parents might occur at an individual, program redesign, service design, place-based, cohort, or system level⁵. At any level of engagement, parents should be very clear about what their role in participating is, and what to expect about the outcome of their engagement.

² NSW Government (2021). Engaging with Lived Experience. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/engaging-with-lived-experience-framework.pdf>

³ Visit the [Voice of Parents](https://www.voiceofparents.org.au) website for more detail

⁴ This example draws on the International Association of Public Participation (IAP2) Spectrum of Public Participation. Retrieved from https://iap2.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/2018_IAP2_Spectrum.pdf

⁵ WACOSS (2016). Co-design principles to deliver community services in partnership in WA. Retrieved from <https://www.wacoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/WACOSS-Co-Design-Discussion-Paper-Revised-20160919.pdf>

Ideally, parents should be involved from the inception of a project involving contact with birth parents, to ensure there is both a need and an incentive for ongoing engagement. They can also help an organisation to understand the best approach for engaging people with lived experience, for example, whether this is through consultation, co-design methodologies, working groups and more.

Consider how your organisation can harness digital innovations to increase opportunities for participation (particularly for parents in rural or remote areas, or who struggle to access opportunities due to childcare needs, service involvement, poor access to transport, limited accessibility) and interactive exchange of information. When taking this approach, however, organisations must also be mindful of the digital divide and potential for new barriers to arise due to technology use and access.

Parents need to be informed about their participation

Parents need access to information about their participation in a way that makes sense to them. This might mean providing information about participation in a variety of ways to accommodate their different needs and preferences, for example, to reduce barriers to inclusion for parents who may have difficulty reading, comprehending, or concentrating.

When engaging parents, consider:

- Options for information provision, based on parent needs/preferences (for example, using plain language, translated options),
- Being creative and flexible (for example, written, audio, video, picture form),
- Regularly check for understanding so parents can be informed about the choices that they make,
- Supportive strategies such as texts or phone call reminders about participation opportunities, or to support understanding of engagement,
- Follow up contact to gain parent insight into improving engagement processes.

You may also need to clearly show parents that they have expertise of lived experience, as they may not consider the value of their voice unless this is explicitly recognised. Addressing this could be particularly important when working with parent groups who have traditionally struggled to have their voices heard, or who have conflictual histories with service involvement (such as involvement with child protection).

Develop a plan for measuring success and continuous improvement

Developing a plan for measuring success can help organisations to engage successfully, demonstrate impact and continuously improve their processes. Taking this approach will also provide an organisation with the rationale for investment of resources, including ongoing commitments needed to optimise future engagements.

A best practice approach to designing and analysing engagement evaluation involves consumer or lived experience representatives in the process. Following this, organisations should share key learnings across their programs and contribute to the ongoing evidence base in the sector (for

example, through publication of learnings, informal information exchange, presentations). Some common metrics for evaluating the success of lived experience or service user partnerships include⁶:

- Who was involved and how diverse are their voices?
- What was the process (experience) like for participants and staff, and what were their levels of satisfaction?
- How did the project/program meet its aims and objective?
- How did the engagement contribute to broader, long-term goals?

Some indicators of success could look like⁷:

- More people, with more diversity of voice can participate
- Principles of engagement translate into practice
- Findings are implemented for continuous improvement
- Clarity of purpose
- Impact of lived experience input on decision-making
- Clear feedback loop

Promote an organisational culture that values lived experience

Organisational leaders play a crucial role in facilitating a culture that supports lived experience engagements. Starting from the top level of governance (for example: see the Voice of Parents resource for boards), organisations should facilitate a consistent, all-of-organisation approach to valuing and incorporating lived experience engagement as routine practice and as a strategic priority. Leadership should work with management and staff to ensure there is an awareness and understanding of the value, and principles of engaging with lived experience people in partnerships, and this should be enshrined in organisational strategy that guides engagement activities⁸. This is further supported by an organisational culture that is open to challenging the current status quo and is committed to hearing feedback to optimise results.

Additionally, managers can facilitate good practice by ensuring⁹:

- sufficient resources are working to reduce barriers to participation,
- pathways are created for independent facilitators as needed (for example, in sensitive discussions),
- participants with lived experience have access to support networks (peer and paid).

⁶ Health Consumers Queensland (2018). A guide for health staff: Partnering with consumers. Retrieved from: https://www.hcq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/HCO_StaffGuide-V.Sept2021.pdf

⁷ NSW Government (2021). Engaging with Lived Experience. Retrieved from: <https://www.nsw.gov.au/sites/default/files/2021-08/engaging-with-lived-experience-framework.pdf>

⁸ Health Consumers Queensland (2018). A guide for health staff: Partnering with consumers. Retrieved from: https://www.hcq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/HCO_StaffGuide-V.Sept2021.pdf

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Finally, consider how your organisation can support the upskilling of participants to gain confidence and skills to contribute to conversations and processes that directly affect their lives, both in your engagement and in their future opportunities to have a voice.

Prepare your organisation for cultural capability in partnering with parents from diverse backgrounds, including parents from Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait families. Help to foster staff skills including:

- Strong knowledge of their own cultural and how it shapes their beliefs, attitudes, and behaviour
- Understanding of cultural influences on other people's beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours
- Valuing of diversity
- Open to learn about other people's culture and experiences
- Self-reflective in considering cultural competency (including receiving feedback)
- Effective cross-cultural communication skills
- Awareness of unconscious bias (e.g. stereotyping)
- Commitment to ongoing training*

*Drawn from research by Health Consumers Queensland: https://www.hcq.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/HCO_StaffGuide-V.Sept2021.pdf

For further information about this guide or Voice of Parents, contact: <email>