

Community consultation

Community consultation is not just a procedural step; it is a fundamental aspect of responsible program design and implementation. It involves engaging with community members, listening to their voices, and understanding their unique needs, challenges, and aspirations. This process is essential because it lays the groundwork for developing programs that truly address the issues faced by the community.

Undertaking genuine community consultation can lead to more relevant and impactful solutions. Instead of imposing preconceived ideas or solutions onto the community, consultation allows us to identify the most pressing issues and co-create strategies to address them. By actively involving community members in the decision-making process, we empower them to take ownership of the solutions, fostering a sense of pride and investment in the outcomes.

Community consultation helps us to understand the cultural nuances and sensitivities of the community. Each community is unique, with its own traditions, values, and ways of life. By engaging with community members directly, we can gain insights into cultural practices and preferences, ensuring that our programs are respectful, inclusive, and relevant.

Programs developed through meaningful community consultation are more likely to be successful, sustainable, and positively received by the communities they serve.

Consultation in First Nations and discrete communities

When working with Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander and discrete communities, respectful, intentional, and meaningful consultation that follows [protocols](#) is essential for program success.

Here are some key steps to follow:

Understand cultural protocols

- Familiarise yourself with the cultural norms, traditions, and protocols of the community you intend to work with. This includes understanding appropriate ways to approach and engage with community members.

Face-to-face engagement

- Prioritise in-person meetings when possible to build rapport and establish trust. Face-to-face interaction provides the opportunity for conversation and storytelling, which can offer deeper insights into the community's perspectives and experiences.

Engage with First Nations leadership

- If you intend to deliver a program in an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander community, you must first consult with the local Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander Regional Council.
- If you intend to deliver a program to Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander young people, you must consult Traditional Owners, Elders, and community leaders to seek their guidance and approval for your proposed program.
- Continue to seek guidance from further appropriate stakeholders within the community.

Be transparent and open

- Clearly explain your program goals and intended outcomes and benefit to the community. Seek feedback, and create space for the community to ask questions, raise concerns, and provide input.

Listen to and centre the community

- Defer to the community as experts in their own experiences, acknowledging their unique insights and perspectives when designing and delivering programs. By listening attentively and centring community voices, you can ensure that initiatives are culturally responsive and truly meet the needs of those they aim to serve.

Collaborate and co-design

- Work closely with the community to integrate their knowledge, values, and priorities into your program design. This collaborative approach ensures the program is culturally appropriate and relevant to the community's needs.

Build trust and relationships

- Take the time to establish genuine, long-term relationships with community members. Building trust is crucial for successful consultation and program implementation.

Commitment and accountability

- Ensure accountability by refraining from making promises to the community that cannot be fulfilled. Building trust requires honesty and integrity, so it is crucial to align commitments with available resources and capabilities. By maintaining transparency and accountability, you uphold the integrity of your relationship with the community and foster mutual respect.

Follow up and maintain communication

- Continue to engage with the community throughout the program's lifecycle. Keep lines of communication open, share progress updates, and seek and implement ongoing feedback.

By taking these steps and respecting First Nations voices, you can foster strong partnerships with discrete communities and co-design programs that are responsive to their needs and aspirations.

Practical steps for seeking community consultation

Community consultation can take various forms, each with its own benefits and considerations. Here are some common types of community consultation and practical steps you can take.

Establishing authentic partnerships

- Initiate dialogue with community leaders, organisations, and key stakeholders to build trust, respect, and mutual understanding.
- Acknowledge the expertise and perspectives of community members.
- Explore opportunities for co-designing programs with community members to ensure ownership, relevance, and cultural appropriateness.

Assessing organisational alignment

- Reflect on whether your organisation or individual capacity aligns with the identified community need and whether you have the necessary cultural competence and sensitivity, skillset, training and staff to effectively and appropriately address it.
- Evaluate existing community-led initiatives and services to avoid duplication and identify opportunities for collaboration or partnership.

Empowering community leadership

- Acknowledge and support existing community leadership and initiatives that are addressing the identified need, fostering a sense of empowerment and self-determination within the community.
- Explore opportunities to build the capacity of local leaders and organisations to lead and sustain efforts to address the issue collaboratively.

Engaging in meaningful dialogue

- Conduct open and inclusive discussions with community members to understand their perspectives, experiences, and priorities regarding the identified issue or need.
- Facilitate focus groups, community forums, or town hall meetings to encourage participation and gather diverse viewpoints.

Co-designing programmatic responses

- Determine whether the programmatic response should be co-designed with specific members of the community to ensure relevance, effectiveness, and sustainability.
- Engage community members, particularly those directly affected by the issue, in the planning, design, and implementation phases to co-create solutions that reflect their lived experiences and aspirations.

Establishing clear roles and responsibilities

- Clarify roles, responsibilities, and expectations for all stakeholders involved in the community consultation process, ensuring transparency, accountability, and effective collaboration.
- Define decision-making processes and mechanisms for resolving conflicts or disagreements that may arise during the consultation and co-design process.

Selecting appropriate consultation methods

- Choose consultation methods that align with the preferences, needs, and accessibility of the target community, considering factors such as language, literacy levels, and technological access.
- Utilise a combination of methods, such as surveys, focus groups, community meetings, and online platforms, to reach diverse segments of the community and gather comprehensive feedback.
- Adapt consultation approaches based on the cultural norms, values, and communication styles of the community, ensuring inclusivity and participation.

Creating opportunities for engagement

- Design engaging and interactive consultation activities that encourage active participation and dialogue among community members.
- Provide multiple avenues for input, including written submissions, verbal feedback, visual displays, and group discussions, to accommodate different communication preferences.
- Organise consultation events at convenient times and locations, offering childcare, transportation, interpretation services, and other supports to facilitate participation.

Listening and learning

- Approach community consultation with humility, openness, and a willingness to listen and learn from community members' lived experiences and perspectives.
- Actively listen to community concerns, ideas, and suggestions without judgment, allowing space for diverse voices and viewpoints to be heard and valued.
- Reflect on feedback received during the consultation process and be prepared to adapt program plans or priorities based on community input.