



Consumer & Stakeholder Engagement

THE ASK:

Effective consumer and stakeholder engagement supports high-quality outcomes for consumers. Governing bodies must understand key concepts (such as consumer-directed care) and oversee processes to ensure that stakeholders are appropriately identified, consumer issues are well-understood and suitably managed.

Covered in this Topic Guide

- Consumer-centred care
- Partnerships in care
- Role of the governing body
- Engagement with other stakeholders

Where are we now?



Governing bodies] need to understand the sector they are governing and our core business – which is people. And that needs to be at the forefront of our learning. There needs to be more of a voice for our stakeholders (i.e. consumers themselves). We need to flip the conversation around – taking that concept, style of aged care forward in a positive way is really important.

GOVERNING BODY MEMBER

Key concepts

The following high-level definitions are provided to assist in interpreting some of the key concepts discussed in this Topic Guide:

- **Consumer-centred care** is described as care and services designed around an individual's needs, preferences and background. It refers to the partnership between consumers and providers, where the consumer is at the centre of decision-making and planning.
- **Partnership in care** describes a person-centred approach that recognises an existing relationship and establishes an agreement between the consumer, a partner in care, and the provider. Where a consumer chooses to have a partner in care, that person may be involved in the delivery of services to, and the day-to-day care of, a consumer.
- **Stakeholders** of an aged care provider are those individuals or groups who affect and/or are affected by a provider and its activities. This includes consumers, family members, carers or other consumer representatives. It also includes broader groups such provider staff, regulators, suppliers, and the broader community.

Why is consumer engagement important?

Consumer engagement is about involving consumers (and their families and carers) in all aspects of care through discussions and informed decision-making about their day-to-day care as well as engaging them in service planning and delivery. Consumer engagement forms a central part of stakeholder engagement, which should include an open dialogue with people or groups who actively engage with a provider and are influenced by their activities now and into the future.

Story from the sector



Consumer and stakeholder engagement in aged care goes beyond social connection

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- It is important to ensure all voices have been genuinely heard and that transparent discussions and decisions are documented and communicated.
- Processes should be inclusive and flexible to the range of needs of consumers and stakeholders and be responsive to how they want to engage.

ACME Community Services is a medium-sized provider delivering in-home care services to a number of consumers living in the town of Greenacre. Recently, the ACME governing body asked the executive team how they identified and addressed the needs and preferences of their consumer demographic. When the governing body enquired with the executive team, it was clear that there was no data or any information relevant about their consumer base as a whole. ACME instead considered matters on a case-by-case basis as they were raised by consumers.

The governing body requested that a review be undertaken of their consumers by the executive team to understand their individual needs. The review found that a number of consumers who live near each other subscribe to the same religious faith. The executive team used this information to engage directly with the local church. ACME was able to organise events with the church for these consumers and in doing so developed a better understanding of consumer needs and a better outcome for consumers was achieved.

Tips to understanding your consumers and other stakeholders

Older Australians at the Centre of Care

- Engage with a diverse range of consumers to gain personal appreciation of their experiences and needs.
- Ensure the governing body has sufficient oversight as to who the provider's consumer cohorts and stakeholders are.

Obligations and Accountabilities

- Ensure that your provider's stakeholder engagement framework has been developed in line with insights from consumers and other key stakeholders.
- Ensure your plan, policy or framework (or a summary) is accessible to individual stakeholders and groups.

Knowledge, Skills and Experience

- Stay up to date with planned changes to the sector that may influence particular consumers or stakeholders groups.
- Set a clear approach to developing and recruiting staff with the right skills to meet the consumer needs and the provision of safe and quality aged care services

Leadership and Culture

- Establish a culture of caring about your provider's interaction with (and place within) the community.
- Utilise innovative methods, technology and social media to engage with consumers and stakeholders.

Reflecting on your practice



Think...

Below are the top things you need to be **thinking about**:

- Does your provider adopt a consistent and comprehensive consumer-centred care approach, through its strategy and service delivery?
- How does the governing body satisfy itself that the services the provider provides align with the needs and wants of consumers and stakeholders?
- Does the governing body know how consumers and stakeholders facing barriers to engagement (e.g. with cognitive or sensory impairment, or facing cultural barriers) are being heard and addressed?



Ask and say...

Below are the top **questions you need to be asking**:

- Have we identified the needs of all of our key stakeholders and consumer cohorts and how are those needs understood across the organisation?
- Are governing body members able to engage effectively, safely and meaningfully with consumers and other stakeholders?
- Are consumers and stakeholders represented on the governing body? If not, how are their needs being considered and built into organisational processes?
- Are you ensuring that specific efforts are being made to access and engage more vulnerable individuals and marginalised communities?



Do...

These are the top **actions and behaviours** of leaders:

- Engage with consumers and their representatives (where appropriate), to provide input on behalf of consumer groups or individual consumers.
- Use language that is appropriate, respectful, inclusive, empowering and non-stigmatising when engaging with consumers.
- Understand dementia and how to support and engage with consumers living with dementia and their representatives.
- Understand cultural sensitivities and differences when communicating with consumers from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.
- Develop shared understandings and goals with all consumers to build trust and strong relationships.

Consumer-centred care

Consumer-centred care is broadly described as care and services that are designed around the consumer and delivered in a way that meets the individual's goals, needs and preferences. Consumer-centred care sees the consumer as an equal partner in planning, developing and monitoring care.

Over the past decade there have been significant reviews of aged care in Australia. Older Australians have told the sector that they want to partner with providers in making decisions about their care and services. With the introduction of the Aged Care Quality Standards and with the reforms placing an increased focus on consumers, it is imperative that consumers are placed at the centre of planning, delivering, and reviewing care.

Consumer engagement is about involving consumers (and their families and carers) in all aspects of care. This means consumers play a central role in discussions and decisions about their care needs, including service planning and delivery, setting priorities, and identifying improvements to care and services, and measuring and evaluating health care services. Consumer engagement can occur in many ways at different levels – through informing, consulting, involving, collaborating, or empowering, depending on the circumstances.

When consumers are effectively engaged in decisions about their care, there are also a wide range of benefits for providers and care staff. These include:

- Increased knowledge and empowerment.
- Consumer loyalty and accountability.
- Increased mutual respect and enhanced relationships.
- Flexibility and innovation in care delivery.
- Achievement of best outcomes in care.
- Financial stability.

Relevant obligations

The aged care reforms are designed to deliver a sector that Australians can have confidence in, that consumers are receiving safe quality care at all times. Under the Aged Care Act 1997 and subordinate legislation, aged care providers have a range of requirements in relation to placing consumers at the centre of care. These include:

- [Aged Care Quality Standards](#): The Aged Care Quality Standards focus on consumer outcomes and describe what quality care looks like, shifting away from a focus on provider processes. Strong and authentic consumer engagement is a foundation of the Quality Standards, with providers required to demonstrate how consumers are involved in the planning, delivery and review of their care and services.
- [Charter of Aged Care Rights](#): This document focuses on empowering consumers to play an active role in understanding and exercising their right to express their needs and direct their care. Providers are required to support consumers to understand the Charter.
- [Restrictive practices](#): From 1 July 2021, aged care providers have specific responsibilities under the Aged Care Act 1997 and the Quality of Care Principles 2014 relating to the use of restrictive practices in residential aged care or short-term restorative care in a residential care setting. These requirements are to ensure that restrictive practices are only used as a last resort and if used, are done so in the appropriate manner with assessment, regular monitoring, review and evaluation.

Partnership in care

This person-centred approach recognises an existing relationship and establishes an agreement between the consumer, a partner in care, and the provider. If a consumer chooses to have a partner in care, that person may be involved in the delivery of services to, and the day-to-day care of, a consumer. It is important that providers act in accordance with the consumer's choices about who and what their partner in care can have input on.

A partner in care is a person who has a close and continuing relationship with the consumer such as a family member, loved one, friend or representative. They frequently and regularly visit a person living or staying in a residential aged care service to provide aspects of regular routine care and companionship to that person.

Benefits of partnerships in care

There are several benefits to establishing and working with consumers as partners in care:

- Visitors often contribute to the care, wellbeing, and quality of life of the consumer.
- Supports and maintains routines for consumers, in particular those living with dementia.
- Assists the partners in care to learn new skills and understand how to implement safe practices when visiting the service and providing care to consumers.

Example activities for partners in care

There is a broad range of activities that a partner in care may undertake with a consumer, including:

- Personal care and assistance with meals.
- Exercise and leisure activities.
- Companionship, conversation and social engagement.
- Access to and supervision in outdoor spaces or the community.
- Culturally specific and individually appropriate support.
- Accessing allied health services.

Role of the governing body

The role of the governing body is to ensure that the organisation focuses on the consumer in all aspects of service delivery. The governing body should implement processes and mechanisms to provide coordinated consumer (and representative) input into governance decisions like setting strategy objectives and service design and delivery.

Embedding the consumer voice

The consumer's voice should be embedded at the core of governing body decision making. In order to do so, governing bodies can consider:

- Inviting consumers or consumer representatives to help set the agenda for each governing body meeting.
- Starting every meeting with a consumer story or member experiences from attending site visits where they engaged directly with consumers and their families.
- Circulating a summary of meeting outcomes to all consumers and their representatives.
- Inviting consumers to strategic planning days and working with them to prepare for the day, including communicating the day's events, the agenda and what is required from them.

Ensuring the consumer is being engaged directly

Ask questions and encourage communication with management as to how consumers are engaged in making decisions about all aspects of their care and services including:

- Understanding how management currently engages with consumers and where changes may be needed.
- Identifying how management plans consumer engagement activities and how these are implemented in a consistent, sustainable, safe and inclusive way (in the context of broader governance and risk management systems).
- Understanding how management supports the workforce at all levels to improve consumer engagement.
- Continually monitoring and evaluating consumer engagement through reporting and conversations with management.

Implementing and monitoring systems and processes

Ask questions and obtain assurance from management as to the relevant systems and processes in place to support better practice consumer-centred approaches, including:

- Provide education and training practices for the workforce to promote learning and skills development, care understanding and autonomy for consumers.
- Embed a culture that encourages consumers and their families to provide feedback and complaints.
- Establish systems and processes to capture the consumer voice, including complaints, at all stages of service delivery and using this information to support continuous improvement activities.
- Ensure continual information sharing and integrated communication between all people involved in a person's care, consumers and their representatives.

Ensuring that organisational policies and procedures have a consumer focus

It is the role of the governing body to instil a culture of consumer focus and respect in the provider. This involves tabling key organisational documents such as commitment statements, strategic plans and policies in governing body meetings and requiring data and reporting on these commitments, to demonstrate the governing body's commitment to consumer-centred care. This will help to ensure that:

- Consumer voice is clear in core documents that set the strategic direction of the organisation.
- Consumers are involved in the development and review of policies and guidelines for the service.
- Consumers and/or consumer representative committees are provided an opportunity to provide input to draft policies and ensure they are clear, concise and meaningful to consumers.
- Inclusive service standards are used by the organisation to support the design and delivery of care and services that are inclusive of all consumers.
- Workforce at all levels receive training on consumer-centred care and are able to articulate how the organisation embeds this in daily operations.

Ensuring that services and care align with consumer needs and preferences

Ask questions and obtain assurance from management as to how the services and care provided in the organisation align with the needs and preferences of consumers, including:

- Promoting a workplace culture that centres around consumer engagement to meet their needs and preferences and communicating why it is a priority for the organisation to meet their needs and preferences.
- Actively reviewing trends in relation to consumer feedback, complaints and experience, and using this information to inform decision making and make improvements to how care and services are delivered.

Engaging with other stakeholders

Positive provider reputation is a prized asset that is earned over time. It can be a source of competitive advantage, influencing the quality of experience for consumer, their families, employees, suppliers and other stakeholders.

By contrast, a reputation can be destroyed in an instant, and be very difficult to re-establish. Reputation damage affects the personal reputations of governing body members and executives, employee morale, consumer confidence – and in turn provider performance. Reputational risk has been identified as one of the most important risks a provider faces.

Role of the governing body

As part of its role to set and monitor against the strategic direction of the provider, the governing body is responsible for setting expectations regarding stakeholder engagement, including ensuring that it remains a priority for the provider. Building a strong culture of engagement practice, supported by a stakeholder and consumer framework, will enable a provider to engage with stakeholders and consumers more clearly, consistently, and effectively. True collaboration is complex and challenging; however, it is the only way to achieve a provider's vision of shaping, strengthening, and sustaining an aged care that puts older Australians at the centre of care.

Stakeholder engagement framework

In establishing a stakeholder engagement or management function, governing bodies should formalise the arrangements and processes, including developing an overarching stakeholder engagement plan, policy and/or framework.

Common themes of sound consumers and stakeholder engagement frameworks include:

- Identifying consumers and stakeholders.
- Responsibilities for developing relationships with agreed accountabilities (between the governing body and management).
- Defined methods for gathering information on consumers and stakeholders (e.g. survey's, research, questionnaires).
- Developing accountabilities for monitoring consumers and stakeholder concerns, influences and sensitivities.
- Establishing positions on relevant public or industry specific policies.
- Establishing a variety of methods of communication with consumers and stakeholders (e.g. forums, town halls, meetings, site visits).

Steps to effective stakeholder engagement

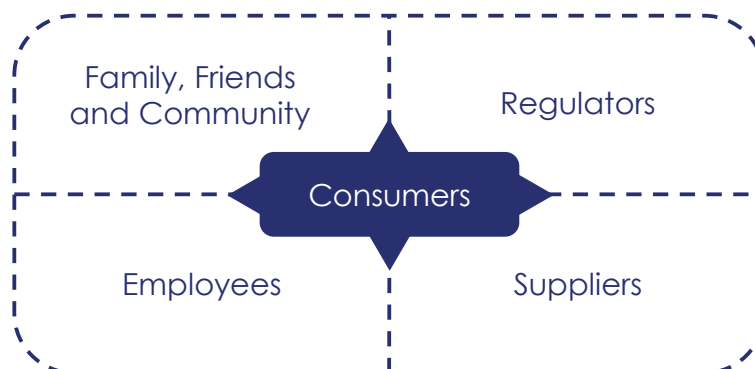
Step 1: Identify your key stakeholders

The first step in engagement is to identify who your key stakeholders are. The following principles should guide your approach to engagement activities.

Purposeful	Inclusive	Timely	Transparent	Respectful
Begin each engagement with a clear understanding of what you want to achieve.	Identify the relevant consumer groups and stakeholders and make it easy for them to engage.	Involve the consumers and stakeholders from the start and agree on how you will engage.	Be open and honest in your engagement and have clear expectations from the outset.	Acknowledge and respect the expertise and needs of your stakeholders and consumer groups.

Identifying key stakeholders

Stakeholders will differ depending on the nature, size and complexity of the provider but generally include family, friends and the community. It is important to remember that the centre of these considerations, is ultimately the consumer who should remain at the centre of all care decisions.



Step 2: Develop your approach to stakeholder engagement

It is important to note that no one engagement method fits all. Being clear on the purpose of engagement, and desired outcomes, will assist in determining the level of engagement necessary and the most appropriate method(s) to achieve the desired outcome.

Engagement with consumers

Direct and regular engagement with consumers is fundamental to delivering safe, high-quality, consumer-directed aged care. Some actions that governing bodies members can take to help their provider manage and engage with consumers include:

- Establishing a governing body committee to provide coordinated consumer (and representative) input into all aspects of the provider's activity. This committee should have a clear term of reference, which specifies the role that consumers play (including any decision-making power).
- Inviting consumer representation on (or similar attendance at) existing key governance committees such as a Clinical Governance committee.
- Inviting representatives from advocacy groups to attend governing body meetings to share insight into issues facing the sector and the community, emerging trends and to contribute to the development of service design and implementation.
- Inviting consumers/ representatives to attend and contribute to strategic planning sessions.

Engagement with family, friends, and community groups

Identifying, understanding, and engaging with the family and friends of consumers or community groups interested in or impacted by a provider is increasingly seen as a minimum requirement. The rise of social media has provided a platform for community members to share feedback both instantly and publicly. Some actions that governing body members can undertake to help their provider manage and excel with their community stakeholders include:

- Requesting a report from the executive team on the provider's community groups and assign accountability for governing body members to own key relationships.
- Ensuring community stakeholders are engaged as part of the provider's product/service/project development process.
- Ensuring feedback from community stakeholders is incorporated within reports to governing body meetings and is considered during strategic planning discussions.

Engagement with regulatory bodies

Building a constructive and trusting relationship with regulators is in the best interests of a provider's governing body and executive team. However, building and maintaining such a relationship is no small feat. Given the potential impact that mismanagement of regulatory stakeholders can have governing body members are increasingly seen as an important part of a provider's regulatory stakeholder engagement strategy.

The role of governing body members with respect to regulatory stakeholders includes:

- being held accountable for compliance with the Aged Care Act 1997 and any subordinate legislation, including the Quality Standards.
- Having a deep understanding of consumer, stakeholder, and community expectations regarding service delivery and how to implement processes to meet those expectations.
- Setting and maintaining a culture of constant engagement and understanding of compliance requirements throughout the organisation.
- Establishing and demonstrating requirements for clear, open, transparent, and truthful communication with stakeholders.

Step 3: Evaluation and continuous improvement

It is important to monitor and evaluate your consumer/stakeholder engagement activities to measure their success and continuously improve processes. Stakeholder engagement should be regularly:

- monitored using qualitative and quantitative indicators (e.g., survey processes, complaints, anecdotal feedback).
- evaluated against the provider's consumer and stakeholder engagement strategy objectives.
- documented in a framework, to be revisited and continually improved.



Tips for engaging with diverse communities

As a governing body member, you should ensure that your provider is committed to building a safe environment which responds to consumer and stakeholder diversity and embeds inclusive service provision across all of its processes by ensuring that:

- Your provider's commitment to inclusive service provision is captured and promoted to all key stakeholders, including ensuring that printed and online collateral is reflective of a commitment to delivering services in an inclusive way.
- Key provider documents such as commitment statements, strategic plans and policies include reference to your provider's commitment to inclusive service provision.
- Quality and continuous improvement processes include the monitoring of inclusive service strategies (i.e. metrics against which success can be measured).
- Staff are provided with high-quality training related to cultural competency and working with other people of diverse experiences (both as consumers and other stakeholders).
- Your provider identifies key roles across the provider with dedicated responsibility to drive and promote culturally inclusive service provision.

Engagement with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people

As a governing body member, you should ensure that your provider takes particular steps towards understanding and meeting the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people by:

- Ensuring that the provider's safety and quality priorities address the specific needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers and stakeholders.
- Considering culturally appropriate communication methods to engage with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander consumers and Stakeholders.
- Ensuring that the provider demonstrates a welcoming environment that recognises and values the importance of the cultural beliefs and practices of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (e.g. including an Acknowledgment of Country at formal occasions).
- Working in partnership with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, advocacy groups or not-for-profit organisations on large activities or initiatives to ensure safe and inclusive strategy and service design.

Engagement with consumers living with dementia

As a governing body member, you should ensure that your provider takes particular steps towards meeting the specific needs of consumers living with dementia by:

- Acknowledging and including the person living with dementia as a valued member of the community through engagement, recognition and participation in activities and social gatherings.
- Involving carers and advocates as vital partners in care in supporting decision making in all assessment and care planning processes.
- Ensuring the person living with dementia receives timely, respectful, and holistic personal and clinical care involving families, carers, advocates, substituted decision-makers and relevant health and clinical care professionals to assess and respond to ongoing care needs.

Useful references and links

[Aged Care Act 1997](#)

[Standard 8. Organisation governance | Aged Care Quality and Safety Commission](#)

[Guidance and resources to support the Aged Care Quality Standards](#)

[Quality of Care Principles 2014](#)

[Care that is right for me](#)

[Consumer engagement in aged care](#)

[Partnerships in care](#)