

EFFECTIVE CONSUMER PARTICIPATION IN ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

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ABSTRACT

In June 2005 UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide's employed two permanent part-time Consumer Consultants to work across their twelve Community Mental Health Teams. UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide is a non-government organisation that offers a wide range of community services including psycho-social rehabilitation in both metropolitan and rural areas of South Australia through their Community Mental Health teams. These teams are conscious of having effective and responsive consumer participation and this led to the development of the two mental health consumer consultant positions. This paper will explore the successes and difficulties in implementing, integrating and pursuing flexible, appropriate and consumer friendly organisational change.

INTRODUCTION

In June 2005 UCWPA employed two permanent part-time Consumer Consultants to work across their (then) 12 Community Mental Health Programs.

In this paper we explore the successes and difficulties in implementing, integrating and pursuing flexible, appropriate and consumer friendly organisational change.

CONSUMER CONSULTATION: WHY?

Consumers are the experts regarding their own needs and services ideally should be consumer driven. Genuine consultation is fundamental to inclusive service provision and not to do so is paternalistic in effect, even if not intention

This is abundantly clear in the following policies:

“Consumers.. should be empowered to **fully and meaningfully participate** at all levels, including individual treatment plans, **service delivery, planning and policy**” National Mental Health Strategy p10

“The MCHII is all about creating a cohesive and **consumer centred** mental health system and a supportive environment for all staff” pamphlet p 1 SA Mental Health Care Improvement Initiative

“Consumers...who are affected by mental illness need to **participate in all stages of planning, evaluation and implementation**” p 2 Mental Health Coalition of SA: Mental Health Policy Statement

CONSUMER CONSULTATION: WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Consumer consultation means to actively pursue consumer participation throughout service planning, development, delivery and evaluation, and to provide clear avenues and opportunities and support for consumer participation.

CONSUMER CONSULTATION INHOUSE AT UNITINGCARE WESLEY PORT ADELAIDE COMMUNITY MENTAL HEALTH TEAMS

In our psycho-social rehabilitation programs consumers direct their own support needs. In addition the in house consumer consultancy program provides further consumer input in the following ways:

- An essential consumer reference point embedded within service planning, development and delivery in UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide's Community Mental Health Programs
- Developing organisational insight into the direct experience and impact of living with mental illness
- A living demonstration of consumers as mental health care workers
- Demonstrating and promoting self-care and a safe workplace through appropriate, flexible and respectful work practices
- Effecting positive and appropriate organisational cultural change within a non-government non-clinical mental health service

CONSUMER CONSULTANCY: WHERE WE STARTED FROM

Began in June 2005 with a twelve month contract working with 12 Community Mental Health Programs. Now expanded to working across 17 different Community Mental Health Programs servicing approximately 420 consumers.

Started with a very broad job description that included:

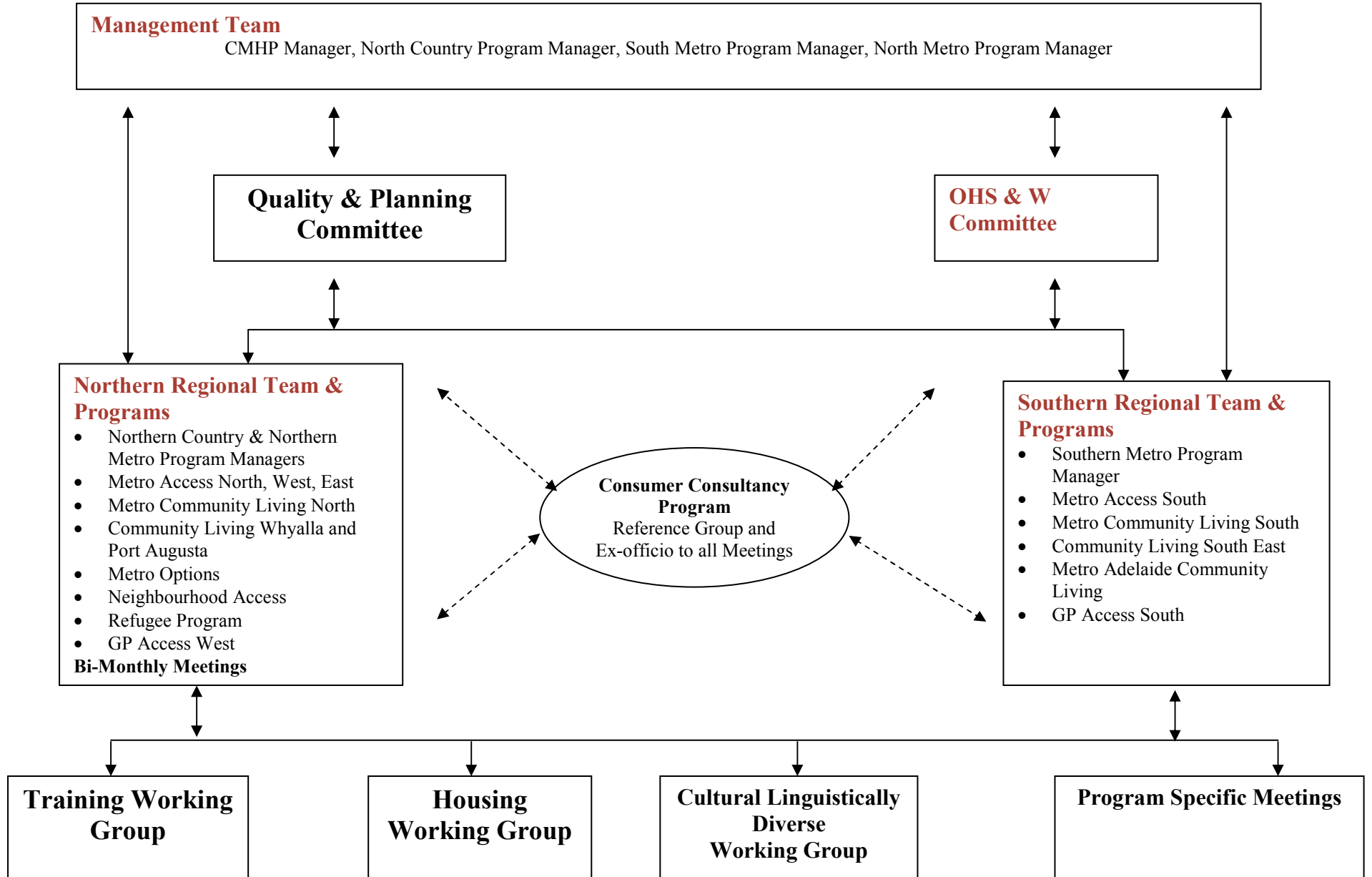
- Recruitment and orientation processes
- Reference and planning groups
- Involvement in Consumer satisfaction/evaluation processes
- Advise and consult with Coordinators and Community Support Workers
- Liaise with and advocate for consumers of UnitingCare Wesley Port Adelaide's Community Mental Health Teams
- Facilitate involvement of consumers in decision making processes
- Travel within metro and country areas

The enormous breadth of the job description was a little overwhelming at first, but proved to be a bonus. We had fantastic, supportive and sensitive supervision from Daniel Havey and Phil Jones who helped us to focus what was realistically achievable and encouraged us to work with our strengths. If the full scope of each of the areas in our original job description were to be realised we'd have plenty of interesting work for a whole team of consumer consultants.

CONSUMER CONSULTANCY: WHERE WE ARE NOW

- Working across UCWPA's Community Mental Health Teams
- Involved in Quality and Planning, Training, Housing and management meetings
- Integrated Consumer expertise throughout service delivery and planning
- Role models for effective and responsive consumer participation
- Developing further pathways for consumer participation
- Developing sustainable Consumer friendly workplace and service delivery culture

UCWPA Community Mental Health Programs



CHALLENGES DEVELOPING CONSUMER FRIENDLY ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

As consumers in the workplace we have to be adamant in advocating for the practices and supports we require to maintain a sustainable working environment.

Often there are differences between established workplace culture and expectations, and individual consumer's needs. It can be difficult, but necessary to:

- Say "No" to working breakfasts and early starts
- Say "No" to working lunches or scheduling appropriate breaks in a day
- Feel able to ask for support regarding "ordinary" organisational tasks, such as time slips
- Negotiate flexible work arrangements
- Challenge common workplace performance expectations that maybe unsustainable for some consumers at some times
- Point out that in most instances it's not the end of the world if it doesn't get done "now", "by next week" or even "at all" in some cases!

Fear is the probably the single biggest challenge to be overcome. It can take many forms such as:

- What if "they" (consumers) take my job?
- What if they see their case notes?
- Should we give them a key to the office/petty cash/toilets/etc.?
- What do I do if s/he goes wiggly in the workplace!?
- What if I get unwell and the project fails?
- What if "their" expectations of consumers are unrealistic?
- What if they (the workplace) don't understand what I need to stay well?
- What if they think we are "super-consumers" whose illness never interferes with anything (that they see)?

FACILITATING CONSUMER FRIENDLY ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Be open to different ways of working

- Be flexible and responsive
- Have the will to engage constructively with consumer criticism about established or planned workplace practices
- Let go of knee-jerk reactions like "but this is how we've always done it"
- Dual time is often more productive, overlapping time splits can be seen as "value adding"
- Value the "guerrilla work ethic" – work happens in mysterious ways!
- Valuing different skills – and work out ways of integrating them. 'You're good at writing and I'm good at typing'
- Consult with consumers throughout all phases of tasks not just "is this okay" after a decision has already been made

Education, training and practice (You're getting some right now!)

- For all staff, including management, about what it means to be genuinely consumer inclusive. i.e.: training, accessibility, support, flexibility, acknowledgement, etc.
- For consumers, about having their voice heard and their needs met. i.e.: meeting structures, asking for support, networking, administrative support etc.
- Recognise consumer experience and expertise and value it financially, incorporating it throughout the organisation via training and consultation
- Stigma: Recognise it exists within us all and challenge it in yourself and others
- Instigating and role-modelling healthy and sustainable ways of working for **all** staff

Actively listen to consumers and be prepared to implement changes

- Make time (sometimes extra) for supervision and support
- Be prepared to be challenged
- Engage with consumers about their needs
- Ask questions
- Engage in creative discussion and solution finding!!

Allow time for dialogue with other consumer workers, and consumer workplaces. Encourage peer supervision where possible.

Be comfortable with ambiguity

- Non-negotiable role boundaries i.e.: worker/consumer, worker/client, consumer/person can stifle positive change

Factor in wellness strategies

- Time off to stay well
- Flexible working hours/arrangements

It can be done and it can be fun!!

IN CONCLUSION

Consumer consultation requires openness to change, active listening, willingness to learn, flexibility, responsiveness, determination, will, and negotiation from both consumers and employers. It further requires an understanding that employers come from a greater position of power and influence from which to employ these skills, and that consumers may require significant support to be able to engage in these processes.

REFERENCES

Australian Health Ministers, National Mental Health Plan 2003-2008, Canberra: Australian Government, 2003.

Government of South Australian, 2005, Department of Health, Mental Unit, Mental Health Care Improvement Initiative, 2006, pamphlet p 1.

Mental Health Coalition of South Australia, November 2005, Mental Health Policy Statement, p 2.