



# Writing Terms of Reference for a consumer advisory group

Terms of Reference (ToR) are an essential component of any consumer advisory group. This document includes a suggested list of items for inclusion. This is a guide only, as Terms of Reference are best tailored to the particular group and with the full participation of the consumer members.

## 1. Mission statement

This is normally a short statement, preferably one or two sentences, highlighting the group's mandate.

## 2. Boundaries

The boundaries might include a statement of the group's authority to recommend and/or implement change and any powers given or delegated to them. It is also useful to include here a mention of the systems, policies, procedures, legislation, etc., that provide the context for the group. Also, note what tasks, operations, obligations are outside the scope of consideration by the group.

## 3. Activities/specific issues to be addressed

This section is an essential part of the Terms of Reference as it outlines the scope of the work which is to be undertaken by the group. In preparing this list (it may be dot points), clarity is essential to provide focus and direction for the group. Be specific and realistic. This can be updated periodically as the scope or nature of the work progresses.

## 4. Recruitment and terms of membership

Establishing a clear process for recruiting members early on will make everyone's life easier. Recruitment is a key aspect of any group and will need to be clearly outlined. This could include number of members, skills and experience required or preferred (for example, the group may decide that a specified number of members need to be users or potential users of the health service).

You will want guidelines regarding timeframes for membership. For example, what is the length of terms for members? Is there a limit to the number of years a person can be a member? Can long-term members be rolled over into a 'consumer emeritus' status which would allow them to be brought in for advice or support without continuing as a member?

## 5. Resignation and dismissal of members

Normally a member of the consumer advisory group may resign at any time. It is helpful to incorporate into the Terms of Reference a system for eliciting feedback from a resigning member through an exit interview. This feedback can be essential for highlighting sources of dissatisfaction or disenchantment among members.

The organisation, or the advisory group itself, may choose to remove a person from the consumer advisory group if they decide it is not in the interests of the organisation (or the group) for the person to remain a member. This is obviously a decision which should not be taken lightly and, preferably, would be done in conjunction with the consumer leaders among the group. If the organisation or group intends to make such a decision, they must give the member written notice setting out the intended decision and the grounds on which it is based.

There may be a number of possible reasons for dismissal of a member which you may wish to spell out. Some examples:

- the person is not working at the required standards (and is unable or unwilling to do so)
- they have contradicted the aims of the group or
- the person has lost the trust and confidence of the other members.

The organisation may also choose to add a clause which allows them to remove a person from the consumer advisory group if, without reasonable excuse, that person fails to attend a specified number of consecutive meetings.



## 6. Timeframes

- Expected duration of the group: Is it permanent? Or will it last only through a particular project?
- Are there any significant or obvious milestones along the way? Does the completion of these affect the membership of the group? For example, completion of one stage of a large project may mean that it is necessary for members to change roles or there may be a need to recruit new members with a different set of skills or experience.
- Are the timeframes set in concrete or are they negotiable? If negotiable, under what circumstances?

## 7. Meetings

- Schedule and duration of meetings (e.g., monthly for 1.5 hours)
- Process for setting up periodic meetings, and if meetings may be required other than those listed above
- Process to select a Chair and/or if Chair is to be rotating. This might include whether or not the Chair must be a consumer, the option of co-Chairs, etc.
- Position description for Chair. Will this role include administrative duties or will the organisation manage those? Who will determine the content of agendas?
- Will minutes be taken? If so, by whom and how detailed? Where will they be circulated?

## 8. Resources and training for members

- Reimbursement of out-of-pocket expenses will need to be covered in the Terms of Reference. For example, will members receive a sitting fee? Will other support for attendance be provided, such as travel costs, accommodation, parking, child care, carer respite, etc.
- What resources are available to the group and how they will be accessed?
- For example, secretariat and clerical, computer access, word processing, telephone, photocopying, catering for meetings, etc.

- Is there an orientation program for group members? If so, what is included in that program or information packet?
- Will there be any training provided for group members? This might include sessions on committee protocol or storytelling.

## 9. Reporting guidelines

Develop and include in the Terms of Reference a reporting structure, no matter how simple, for the group. Who will they report to, how and how often? Who will write or present these reports? This is essential not just for practical purposes, but because developing good reporting systems will help to increase the group's influence and ability to shape organisational policy.

## 10. Grievance procedure

Consumer advisory group members have the right to make a complaint in relation to the activities and operation of the group. The organisation may want to put in writing its commitment to resolving complaints fairly, reasonably and promptly. A complaint may be made in person or in writing. The first point of call should be the Chair of the group, then the person responsible for the group within the organisation (a member of the staff) and then the CEO of the organisation, before engaging in a formal grievance procedure.

The formal grievance procedure should follow standard procedures that the organisation has in place for management of complaints for staff and Board members.

## 11. Review of the Terms of Reference

Establish the timelines for reviewing the Terms of Reference and the process to be undertaken. How often will they be reviewed and who will conduct the review. Ongoing groups may choose to allocate a time during a specific meeting every year for this process to occur.