Tool 02:

Remote stakeholder engagement

02

Remote stakeholder engagement summary sheet

The most important single priority when attempting to implement a project in a defined community, particularly when the project team is not located locally, is stakeholder engagement and management.

This summary sheet outlines the basic elements of effective stakeholder management, with particular emphasis on focus groups and development of a Stakeholder Register. For further information, please consult Section 2 of the Remote Accord Implementation Project Toolkit.

Focus groups

A good introduction for projects and programs and an excellent means of identifying future key stakeholders. Considerations when planning and executing focus groups include:

- Ethics and consent – determine if the focus group is part of a research project or if involves any risk to participants.
- Human resources – need to have an appropriate, independent facilitator who is empathetic, respectful and engenders trust. Also consider the use of a note taker to ensure and record flow of conversation.
- Venue and set-up – ensure accessibility, assess technical requirements, and consider open and equitable layout of the room. Alternatively, focus groups can be conducted online.
- Participants – consider the size and dynamics of the group – identify at least 20 attendees – and ensure that the relevant target groups are represented. Respecting cultural requirements and ensuring safety of all is paramount. Remember to record details of attendees.

Other methods of for regular contact with stakeholders

- Immersion in the community – attend local coffee shops and cafes and local events.
- Regular attendance at local industry events.
- Face to face interactions – particularly in the initial phases of a project to build trust and open communication.
- Regular 'update emails' – have a fortnightly or monthly email to keep all stakeholders updated.
- Newsletters – a more formal (and less frequent) means of communication.
- Surveys – a good tool for both data collection and to stay connected with stakeholders. Always ensure that results of surveys are fed back to all who were requested to participate.
- Infographics – provides an excellent snapshot of an aspect of a project – results of data collection or surveys, progress on project initiatives. Easily digestible and able to be displayed in hard copy as well as being sent electronically.

Stakeholder management and register

- Develop a register of stakeholders, making sure to include:
- Their role and who they represent – organisation or group.
- Best communication method and appropriate contact details.
- Their value, expertise, and relevance to the project.
- Their capacity to contribute to the project.

The most important consideration when engaging with stakeholders is to ensure that any consultations or interactions are followed up by your project team at a frequency and in a manner that meets the needs of that stakeholder.

Remote stakeholder engagement

This section of the Toolkit provides an overview of stakeholder management in remote and very remote Australia with reference to the Project Team's experience. The most important single priority when attempting to implement a project in a defined community, particularly when the project team is not located locally, is stakeholder engagement and management.

While this guide explores the importance of local stakeholder engagement and provides information and tools for doing this, the perils of consultation fatigue is an important consideration when dealing with communities in remote Australia and is also addressed.

Focus groups

Focus groups are a good introduction for projects and programs within a community and are an excellent means of identifying any participants who can be pivotal community members and champions of initiatives.[1] Focus groups are guided interactive sessions that provide an excellent means of obtaining feedback from both health providers and community members.[2]

The idea is to capitalise on the group dynamics to elicit more information and detailed knowledge than would otherwise be gained from a one-on-one interview. Participants are encouraged to interact with each other in a controlled environment and require a skilled facilitator to keep the discussion on track.

Local focus groups are essential for driving meaningful reform in remote communities as they provide a platform for direct community engagement, ensuring that local voices are heard and valued in decision-making processes. These groups bring together a diverse range of stakeholders, fostering collaboration between service providers, community members, and government representatives. By facilitating open dialogue about region-specific challenges and opportunities, focus groups help generate practical, locally relevant solutions that reflect the unique needs of the community.

Planning and executing focus groups requires the following considerations:

Ethics and consent:

- If the focus group is part of a research project, then ethics approval is required. If the focus group is not part of a research project, it still needs to be assessed to rule out the potential for risk to any participants, in which circumstance ethics approval would be required.
- Ensure that all participants sign a consent and are informed that they can remove that consent at any time during or after the meeting. Figure 1 provides a template for a focus group consent form.
- If the group is to be recorded, ensure all participants consent to this prior to commencement – this could be included as part of the signed consent, with an undertaking to destroy any recordings after the event has been documented.
- It may be important to assure participants that all information and comments are deidentified in any documentation or reporting.

Human resources

- Focus groups can have a facilitator who is external or internal to the organisation, but it is best to avoid using someone who works with the participants on a day-to-day basis.
- Attributes to consider include empathy, sensitivity and someone who engenders trust.
- During the focus group, it is important that the facilitator listens actively and respectively, ensuring that the conversation flows, and all participants are allowed to tell their stories.
- Consider the use of a note-taker to ensure the collection of information and data does not impede the flow of conversation.

Venue and set-up

- Ensure a venue that is accessible for participants but is private, with distractions and noise reduced to a minimum.
- Ensure all technical requirements and issues have been met and resolved prior to the first participant arriving.
- Seating in a U-shape or semi-circle is best, so that all participants can see any speakers and there is no perception of some participants being more important than others (e.g. if seating is in rows or at tables throughout the room).

Participants

- Consider the size of the group and the effect that may have on the dynamics: too many may be overwhelming, and too few may not elicit adequate information. Identify up to 20 with an aim to have at least half attend.
- Ensure the relevant target groups are represented as much as possible.
- Ensure there is an Acknowledgement of Country or Welcome to Country as part of the introduction and that any other cultural requirements of the group are met.
- The safety of participants is paramount. Ensure that the contact details of all participants are recorded to follow up later should they require subsequent support.

Creating terms of reference for focus groups

In circumstances where focus groups may be ongoing, a valuable strategy is to create a terms of reference for the group. This allows the group to continue to work cohesively and productively in a collaborative manner. It involves clearly defining the group's purpose, objectives, and scope, in consultation with the participants.

Start by outlining the focus group's role, such as identifying local challenges, fostering collaboration, and advocating for community needs. Specify the membership criteria, ensuring diverse representation from service providers, community members, and local leaders.

Establish the group's meeting frequency, decision-making processes, and expectations for participation. Lastly, clarify the focus group's goals to provide a shared understanding of its mission and responsibilities. This ensures structure and accountability while allowing flexibility for the group to evolve over time.

The terms of reference should be approved by the group at the first or second meeting. If the group is meeting over a significant period (more than six months) the group should review the TORs to ensure they remain relevant to the progress of the project. Figure 2 provides a template for the development of a terms of reference.

Figure 1

Focus group constent form

Project Summary:

[Insert brief summary here]
....

....

....

....

I, ...(name), being over the age of 18 years, consent to participate in the...

held at .... (location) on .... (date).

1. Details of the focus group have been explained to my satisfaction.
2. I agree to audio recording of my information and participation.
3. I understand that:
   - I may not directly benefit from taking part in this focus group.
   - I can withdraw my consent at any time.
   - I can decline to respond to any questions or discussions as I wish, during the focus group.
   - I will not be identified in any notes or reports published about this project.
   - Declining to participate or removing my consent at any time will not mean that I cannot benefit from any aspect of this project in the future.
   - I can change my mind at any time during or after this focus group and have information I have provided withdrawn from any notes or reports, if I request that.

Participant Details

Role...

Organisation (if any)...

Contact (phone or email)..

Signature: ....

Figure 2

Focus group terms of reference

Name of the project or group:

Focus group terms of reference:

Purpose

Scope

Membership and responsibilities

This includes who chairs or facilitates the meetings and sets out any responsibilities for the participants.

Name	Role	Organisation	Responsibilities

Duration of group

Frequency and timing of meetings

Secretariat

Reporting responsibilities

Date of commencement:

Date of review if applicable:

Other methods for regular contact with stakeholders

A variety of methods can be employed to ensure regular and valuable contact and collaboration with communities and stakeholders. The main consideration is how the stakeholders want to be communicated with. Be prepared for methods and times that may be out of the usual working day.

As well as regular agreed methods such as newsletters and updates, it is useful to stagger data collection or feedback tools throughout the project period, so that all involved feel they are regularly contributing to the knowledge and outcomes of the project as well as simply being provided with information. It is important not to 'overload' stakeholders with either information or requests.

In all communications, it is imperative that the Guiding Principles remain the central framework for all interactions. With any interaction you have, always follow up with a thank you or similar, either by phone or email.

Below is a list of suggested means of stakeholder engagement, which is by no means complete.

Immersion in community

While linking in with existing community members or stakeholders that the project may have connections to is desirable, at times this method can be difficult. Immersion is an important tool of engagement when new to a community or when links are not well established. There may be distrust of new people or projects, and you need to establish yourself as a regular in the community.

Immersion in the community allows project teams to gain firsthand insights into a community by considering their behaviours, experiences, and emotions. This methodology involves "hanging out" informally, having two-way conversations, observation, and experiencing the community firsthand over several days.

Be a presence in the community:

→ Be in places that community members are known to congregate e.g. coffee shops, cafes

→ Attend local events

→ Be prepared to strike up conversations but always be genuine and interested.

This facilitates community interest and participation, shared decision-making and genuine partnerships that are not tokenistic.

Remember, many project workers come and go; you need to show that you are committed and reliable.

Regular attendance at local industry meetings

Through contacts that you already have or through organisations such as the local PHN or other health organisations, link in to any local industry meetings. Offer to talk to industry groups and be prepared to be flexible in your availability.

Face-to-face

Particularly in the initial phase of a project, face-to-face is always the best option. This may mean a lot of travel, but it allows stakeholders to get to know and trust you. It also helps you to understand the community, its people, and its geography. Do not go into a community just the once – it is your willingness to repeatedly be present and learn about the community and the people that will engender trust and open the lines of communication.

One-on-one meetings

These can be face-to-face, online or over the phone. Face-to-face meetings are preferable, particularly in the initial stages of a project. Forward plan a trip to the area using the collaborative checklist contained in this Toolkit, research the key people you need to connect with, and cold call if necessary – try and offer something when you set up these meetings. Always remember to follow the guiding principles, as set out in in this Toolkit.

Yarning Circle

Project teams can use Yarning Circles to build report and gather information from local stakeholders in a community, and is a methodology sometimes employed when engaging with Indigenous stakeholders.

A Yarning Circle is a traditional Indigenous practice used to learn, share, build relationships, share cultural knowledge through narrative, and come together as a community.[3]

Entering a Yarning Circle is recognised as a privilege for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples. Sitting in the Circle allows conversation and sharing to flow naturally – allowing all members of the group to be seen clearly, facing each other, and placed equally around the Circle.[3]

Regular update emails

These can consist of a regular 'dot-point' email or texted document that is sent to all relevant stakeholders, remembering that the format needs to be tailored to the receiver's preferred mode and format. It is suggested that these occur on a consistent day and time and could be fortnightly or monthly, with the aim of providing information, but also keeping the project relevant and front-of-mind for them. That needs to be balanced with not over-communicating. Try to keep the sharing of information confined to these regular updates, rather than sending information too frequently, unless of an urgent nature. Remember, if you lapse in providing a frequent regular reminder of the project, then chances are they will too.

Newsletter or more formal update

Once again, this is to keep stakeholders updated on the project and keep it front-of-mind for them but takes a more formal and less frequent approach. Frequency depends on the life of the project, but it is suggested to be second monthly or quarterly. Formatting depends on the community and stakeholder preferences but could be based around the objectives or initiatives of the project, to maintain consistency and augment keeping the project on track to meet the anticipated outcomes.

Surveys

These are an important tool in the project arsenal both from a data collection perspective and as an opportunity to learn more about the community, stakeholders and organisations involved.

Surveys should be conducted sparingly, with pre and post surveys being valuable in measuring outcomes where evidence of improvement or change can be tenuous.

Surveys may be short and simple, or a bit longer, depending on the information required from participants. An important aspect of conducting surveys is to ensure that the results are fed back to those that were requested to provide information, as well as the actual contributors. It shows that you are listening and are genuine in your efforts.

One of the valuable tools provided in this project has been the development of the Matrix, which can be used with, or self-administered by, organisations within a project community. See the section on the Matrix in this Toolkit for more information.

Infographics

These are an excellent tool for providing information on progress, or a snapshot of the project, and are especially valuable for the community, as they are easily displayed and digested.

Once again, providing these on a consistent basis is important and their frequency is determined by the length of the project. About three to six monthly is suggested. Topics for infographics could include:

- Data gathered about the community
- Results of surveys
- Progress on project initiatives.

Stakeholder management

It is important to keep the guiding principles in mind when interacting with and managing stakeholders.

When developing a list of stakeholders, the following needs to be considered:

- Who they are, their role and who they represent?
- How they want to be communicated with, including their contact details.
- The value and relevance they can bring to the project – some stakeholders may be interested and be part of the community, but their interest, expertise, representativeness or reach within the community may be limited.
- Their capacity to contribute to the project – they may not have the knowledge or experience to make them a key stakeholder, or they may not be in a role or position of influence to enable them to make decisions about the project.

Part of good stakeholder engagement and management is to keep all that information in a readily available format and place. It is recommended that any project creates a comprehensive stakeholder register to keep track of all those involved.

Creation of a stakeholder register

A stakeholder register or master list, allows all the details of any stakeholders to be kept in the one location. At a minimum, it should contain fields for all the information you need to keep about your stakeholders. A good option for such a register is to use an Excel spreadsheet or a database specifically designed for the task, as this allows you to search and sort the list. Where possible, have separate fields for the stakeholder's role, organisation, street name etc. of address and town or location as this will assist with accurate sorting.

Fields in Stakeholder Register

The following fields should be considered for inclusion in a Stakeholder Register:

- Name – first and surname in separate fields
- Organisation
- Role
- Address – street
- Location
- Email
- Phone number
- Referred by
- Reason for inclusion
- Interest in project
- Role in change management process
- Preferred method of communication
- Date first contact
- Date most recent contact (optional)
- Preferred method of communication
  - Meeting minutes/notes
  - Infographic
  - Newsletter/ Report
  - Regular email update
  - Change management plan updates
  - Other.

Simply add additional fields that you may require e.g. what sort of coffee they like.

An example of a stakeholder register is included at Figure 3. This can be converted to an Excel document for ease of data capture.

Consultation fatigue

Consultation fatigue occurs when communities or individuals are over-consulted or poorly consulted and is a particularly prevalent phenomenon in remote and Indigenous communities.[4] Constant changes in government and policy direction, a plethora of well-meaning organisations and not-for-profit organisations, and lack of adherence to cultural protocols and norms, can all lead to consultation fatigue.[5] When combined with a feeling of needs not be recognised or addressed, consultation fatigue can detrimentally affect a project before it has even begun.

The following considerations can assist project teams in minimising the risk of consultation fatigue:

- Ensure quality over quantity with any interactions with stakeholders. It is important not be 'ticking boxes' but ensuring productive interactions that address and progress needs within the community.
- Take a coordinated approach to any consultations. Try to be aware of other priorities that stakeholders may have, and

work around them where possible. The best outcome would be to collaborate and coordinate with others where possible.

- While promises should not be made that cannot be delivered upon, try to ensure your project and actions are working towards building capacity in a community. In relation to workforce issues, ensure all strategies and objectives are SMART – specific, measurable, achievable, relevant and time bound i.e. they should have a target date for completion.
- Ensure consistent, long-term engagement, to develop a genuine relationship with communities and individuals – noting that long-term will be a longer time frame than in metropolitan areas.
- Use technology where appropriate. For many communities, interacting with other stakeholders can be difficult and having online meetings or consultations can be valuable. Equally, be aware that for many remote and very remote communities, connectivity can be an issue, so this should be assessed and mitigated where possible.
- Recognise and respect any cultural protocols or nuances for the community. These can be different in different locations; there is no one-size-fits-all.

Always refer to, and adhere to, the guiding principles as set out in this Toolkit.

Figure 3 - Example 1

Stakeholder register

Surname	First Name	Organisation	Role	Address/Street	Address/Location	Email	Phone Number	Referred by	Reason for inclusion	Interest in project	Role in change Management	Preferred method of communication	Date most recent contact	Preferred communication documents					
														Meeting/ minutes	Email updates	Infographic	Newsletter/ Report	CM Plan updates	Other

Figure 3 - Example 2

Stakeholder Register

First name	Surname
Organisation	Role
Address	
Email	Phone no.
Referred by	Reason for inclusion
Interest in project	
Role in change management process	
Preferred method of communication	
Date first contact	Date most recent contact

Preferred communication documents

- ☐ Meeting minutes
- ☐ Email Updates
- ☐ Infographic
- ☐ Newsletter/ Report
- ☐ CM Plan Updates
- ☐ Other

Case Study

The Project Team were very aware of the risk of consultation fatigue. Their main take-home advice was:

- *Do not promise the world or things that cannot be delivered.*
- *Appreciate realism.*
- *Stakeholder focus groups, immersion and face-to-face connections were particularly important in reducing consultation fatigue and engendering trust.*

Conversely, what drives communities away is:

- Failure to deliver on projects that have been consulted on previously.
- Failure to explain why projects have not been delivered.
- Failure to acknowledge previous contributions.
- Failure to report back a summary of consultation outcomes.
- Failure to report back on the impact of the consultation process.

Remote implementation project experience

In the initial stages, the Project Team aligned themselves with local industry groups where possible. In conjunction with this they visited the community regularly and took an immersive approach, frequenting local coffee shops and cafes, approaching people who looked like they were employed in health professions e.g. lanyard, identification tags, wearing health organisation logos etc. This was a sometimes-laborious process and required significant patience and persistence. In all instances, where contact details were provided, all these contacts were emailed or phoned thanking them for their assistance and following up on any questions or suggestions.

Once some contacts were established, local stakeholder focus groups were planned across each of the Project Communities, with the intent to meet every two to three months. The goal for each group was to naturally evolve into an independent, representative body, creating a unified voice for aged care in their respective remote regions. In reality, only one was held in each of the three communities.

The reasons for this were numerous:

- *It was difficult to get the various stakeholders and groups to agree on a time to meet.*
- *Some stakeholders felt threatened and did not have a good relationship with others.*
- *The one particularly successful focus group did not continue due to representatives being replaced within their organisations – changes in personnel can be quite frequent in remote and very remote communities thus resulting in loss of corporate knowledge.*
- *Participants were constantly inundated by projects – one person contacted to organise a time to reconnect after the focus group, stated …"no, you are the fourth one to contact me this morning."*

Focus group attendees came from a cross-section of organisations and backgrounds, including aged care service providers, service users, local government representatives, regional stewards, Remote Accord representatives, and other interested parties.

While the intent was to develop terms of reference and a proforma was set up, this was abandoned given the low appetite for having subsequent focus group meetings. One community were not interested at all, one pulled out when a key figure left their role and the third could not agree on a date, location etc.

The sessions that were held served as a platform to share local challenges and opportunities, fostering collaboration at the community level to work towards solutions and to advocate for regional issues. One of the sessions was particularly helpful in establishing trust with the community and progressing actions. There was no one real reason for this but the following aspects contributed:

- *The target community was quite large but had one central location that culturally all attendees gravitated regularly towards.*
- *In addition to the focus groups, The Project Team held a Yarning Circle in one community, which appealed to attendees.*
- *Persistent adherence of the Project Team to providing consistent and timely follow-up for attendees.*

Other communities did not have a central location, therefore gathering enough relevant stakeholders in person was extremely difficult and that focus group ended up being held online, which was the best option in the circumstances.

Figure 4 shows the draft terms of reference that were developed for one of the focus groups. It should again be noted; these were never enacted as the groups only met once per community.

Figure 4. Draft terms of reference for Murdi Paaki

Australian Government
Department of Health and Aged Care

Remote Accord Workforce Implementation Project
Murdi Paaki Regional Stakeholder Focus Group
Terms of Reference

As of 1st of February 2024

Purpose

The Remote Accord Implementation Project Murdi Paaki Regional Stakeholder Focus Group will act as a mechanism to share information, support informed decision making, and embrace collaboration in relation to the Workforce Implementation Project funded by the Department of Health. The Group will foster a partnership approach to facilitate linkages relating to key reforms in remote aged care and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander health. The Group will also provide opportunities for the sharing of early learnings from the Project.

Scope and responsibilities

The Regional Stakeholder Focus Group will meet with the intention of sharing information to help the Project meet its objectives. The Project objectives include:

- Embedding strategies that address multiple aged care workforce issues through developing and implementing place-based staff attraction and retention strategies.
- Conducing place-based projects to implement aged care service delivery reforms; and
- Developing resources to support ongoing service delivery reforms.

The Murdi Paaki Regional Stakeholder Focus Group will ultimately be assisting the success of the Project by sharing relevant information that will help strengthen the aged care workforce and improve the quality of aged care services in remote and very remote Australia.

Duration of the Project Reference Group

The Regional stakeholder Focus Group is formed to deliver on the scope and responsibilities as set out above. The Group's term will commence from the first meeting and will cease after the first draft of the final Project Report.

Frequency and timing of meetings

The Murdi Paaki Regional stakeholder Focus Group will meet every three months for 2 hours, via Teams Meeting or in person where practicable.

Date of commencement: XX/XX/20XX

Date of review if applicable: XX/XX/20XX

References

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