# The Health Complaints Commissioner Community Reference Group

## A Consumer Engagement Case Study

The office of the Health Complaints Commissioner (HCC) is independent and impartial with around 40 staff, most of whom work directly on complaints resolution. They resolve complaints about health services and the handling of health information in Victoria under the Health Complaints Act 2016 (Vic) and the Health Records Act 2001 (Vic).

### Background

In February 2017, the Health Complaints Commissioner (HCC) replaced the former office of the Health Services Commissioner. The change was an opportunity for HCC to develop a set of new and improved user-friendly communication tools – including a new website, online complaints form, branding and information materials.

### What was the opportunity?

HCC had the opportunity to set a new tone for how they interact with consumers and consider their input from the beginning to end of the design process. This was important at a time when the new laws allowed the HCC to provide Victorians with a stronger health complaints body with expanded powers and responsibilities.

### What did the HCC do?

In June 2016, HCC contacted the Health Issues Centre (HIC) to help form a Community Reference Group. HIC was able to use its extensive knowledge and recruitment networks to help HCC bring together a group of engaged consumer representatives. The role of the group was to advise HCC on communications materials for the new office. The HCC credited HIC with being key in helping them to achieve their project goals and realise the benefits of including consumer voices from the outset of project design. This process has also helped the HCC be more cost-effective.

## How did the HCC involve consumers?

- They sought input early, communicated throughout the process and closed feedback loops

    o The Community Reference Group was not passively receiving information. Members were actively involved from the beginning of the project design and were consistently asked for feedback. Members were then presented with the final information where they could see the results of their contributions. This meant that there was genuine co-design for each completed task.

    The Community Reference Group was also given consistent and timely communications. At the end of each meeting, a list of actions would be sent to the entire group within 24 hours. These lists included clear tasks and their deadlines and information about what would happen with the advice or feedback they provided. These out-of-meeting communications were important as it meant that all face-to-face meetings could be conducted more efficiently. The HCC found that proofreading and editing work as a 'homework' meant that meetings could be used to discuss important issues only. In order for this to work, there was a 'cc-all' rule when providing feedback on any work that had group collaboration.

- They allowed consumers to integrate at the right levels
    o The Community Reference Group had a direct line to the person who was managing the projects that they were providing feedback and advice on. Dr Grant Davies – the commissioner at the time – and his staff would drop in on every meeting and check how the group was going, answer all of their questions and provide any updates. This integration helped maintain the group's sense of value and project ownership.

- They were able to get the most out of members
    o The HCC set up meeting rules from day one. The group meetings were moderated to ensure that everyone was able to speak. This meant that everyone in the group was able to have their fair say and was spoken to politely. Because of this, although the HCC didn't insist on always reaching a consensus, it was often the outcome. Where there was not consensus, there was a real effort to address all concerns.

- They truly valued their Community Reference Group consumers
    - The HCC acknowledges that HIC's recruitment network was key in shortlisting consumers that helped achieve the project's goals. From the outset, HIC clearly listed what the purpose and expectations of the group were and this provided clarity. Once the group had been put together, the HCC scheduled monthly meetings at a time that suited all members after checking their availability and preferred meeting days. Above all else, the HCC paid each member of the group a nominal amount and catered the meetings. This investment was crucial in demonstrating that the organisation valued the group and helped to create a social environment that helped members to feel relaxed and willing to contribute. The result was a positive, supported environment which continued for the entirety of the project.

## What was the outcome?

The Community Reference Group was able to add value by helping the HCC to get their basic communication concepts right through evidence-based decision making. This was done through the group proofreading all work with a critical consumer's eye, suggesting edits for all brochure and website copy, website and complaint form user testing from their own experiences that may not have been considered. This helped to design a system that was created for consumers by consumers.

The group ensured the products developed were more appropriate to the audience than they would have been had there been no consumer involvement. They were a valuable structure to the HCC during a time of rapid and profound change which has led to better outcomes for consumers.