



Engaging clients in commissioning government services: Strategies for doing it well

Snapshot

- Engaging clients in the commissioning of Government services helps us to design programs that are better tailored to individual needs and aspirations. It tells us what is already working well and what could be improved.
- We conducted an Evidence Check to identify the best strategies for effective and authentic client engagement.
- While there is limited strong evidence available, the Evidence Check found that good client engagement:
 - facilitates the participation of diverse, and often-disadvantaged, groups and individuals
 - is able to show the impact of this participation on decision making
 - is seen by participants as worthwhile
 - is valued by staff who are commissioning services
 - contributes to more relevant services and better outcomes for clients.
- Commissioners can use a range of practical strategies to engage clients. Consider using existing networks and groups to recruit clients, be prepared for engagement, invest enough time and resources, make it easy and culturally safe to engage, and give clients feedback and recognise their contribution.

Introduction

Commissioning is an approach to service delivery that puts clients and outcomes at the centre. Engaging clients in commissioning ensures that the services we are providing are making a difference to the people we serve. It helps us to design, implement and manage our services based on our clients' needs, desired outcomes and evidence of what works.

Client engagement sounds good in theory, but how does it actually work in practice? How can we effectively involve our clients achieve real benefits? The "[Evidence Check - Client-centric commissioning](#)", conducted by researchers from the University of Newcastle, tries to answer these questions.

This Evidence to Action note summarises the key lessons from the literature identified in the Evidence Check. It offers practical strategies for effective and authentic client participation in policy and programming. It builds on the earlier Evidence to Action Note, [Engaging clients in commissioning: What are the benefits?](#) Both can be read together.



Why is client involvement in commissioning important?

Client engagement helps us better understand our clients' needs and aspirations, what is important to them, how they make and act on decisions in everyday life and what influences those decisions. This approach enables us to design and implement policies and services that better meet client needs and achieve positive outcomes. Importantly, by involving our clients, we can empower and support them to shape and influence their own lives and the services they access from DCJ.

Commissioning is DCJ's strategic approach for designing and delivering human services. Being client- and community-centric is a DCJ commissioning principle. DCJ values clients and communities as partners in all aspects of service design and delivery because clients and communities are at the core of commissioning. DCJ has adopted a structured commissioning process with eight interdependent steps. To maintain the focus on client outcomes, there are opportunities for client engagement at all steps of the commissioning process. The benefits of capturing client voice are outlined in the diagram on the following page.

What is an Evidence Check?

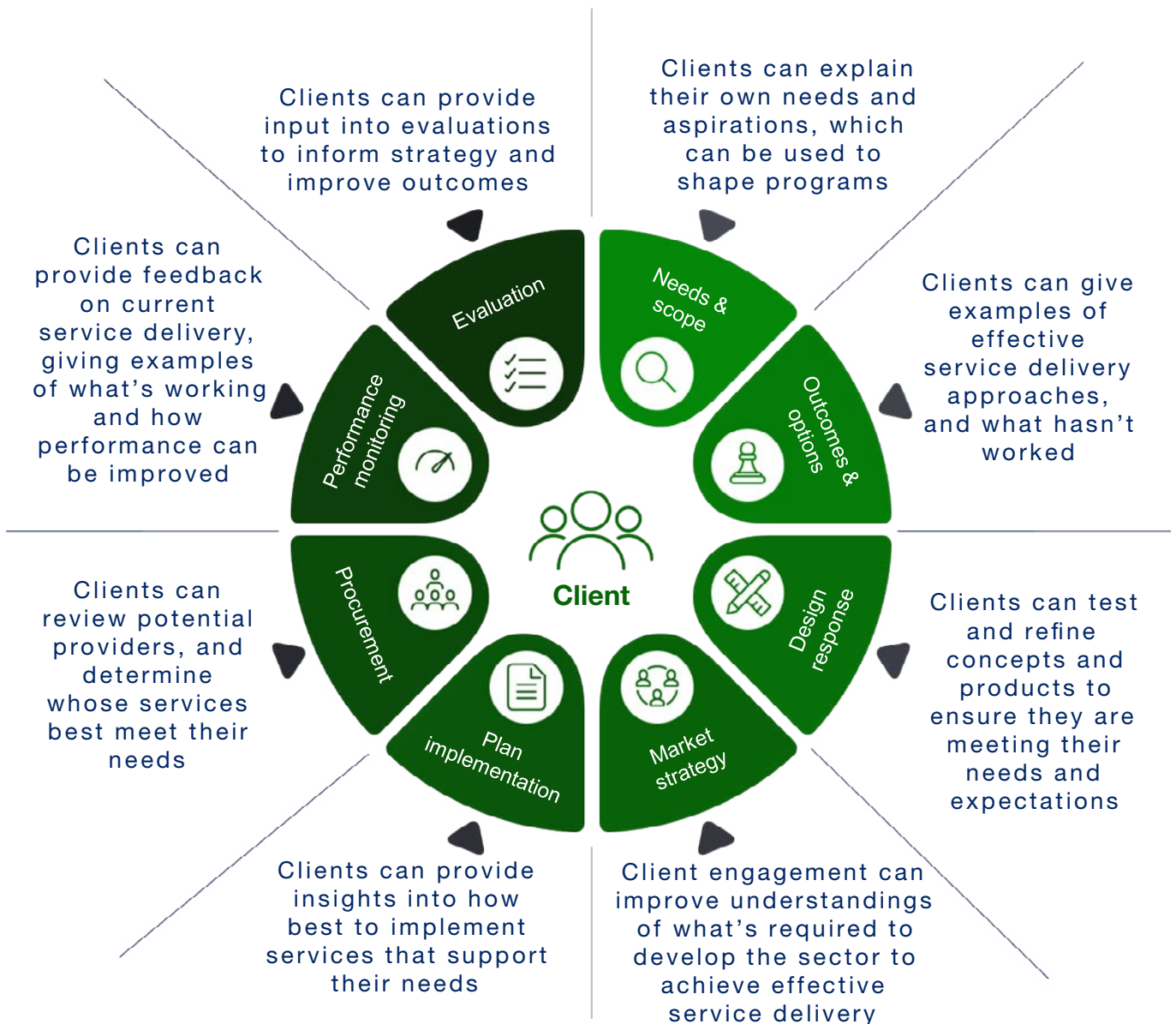
An Evidence Check is a synthesis, summary and analysis of the best and most relevant research evidence to inform policy and program design.

Who are the 'clients'?

DCJ's clients are a diverse range of individuals, children and families. Our clients include those who use our services and those who may use our services in the future (e.g. both tenants and housing applicants are DCJ clients).



Figure 1: Benefits of capturing client voice at each stage of the commissioning process, based on DCJ's Client Engagement tool



What did the Evidence Check find?

The research team from the University of Newcastle identified twenty relevant papers from the academic and grey literature to be included in the Evidence Check. Most of the literature relates to the commissioning of *health* rather than *human* services, although the boundaries between the two are often fluid. This limited body of research does not offer conclusive evidence to reliably tell us what the most effective approaches to client engagement in commissioning are. Nevertheless, the review draws out a number of valuable findings and lessons. These are summarised here and complemented with practical tips and examples.

Lesson #1 Draw on existing groups and networks to recruit clients

It can be challenging to recruit clients to participate in the commissioning process. Clients may have limited time, experience, confidence and resources and are likely to be navigating complex personal circumstances.

One recommended strategy, found in the literature, is to partner with groups that already work with, or are led by, clients. In a study of patient involvement in the commissioning of cancer services in the UK, most of the clients that participated were initially recruited through a cancer network partnership group they were active in.¹ Another study that focused on children and families in Australia, found that peak bodies and NGOs thought they were well-placed to facilitate engagement with their clients, because they already had strong relationships with children and families.² The risk of this approach is that the voices of a limited number of clients are heard - those who have capacity to take on advisory and advocacy roles.

What is ‘client voice’?

Client voice describes our clients’ feedback about their experiences with and expectations of our services. It focuses on their needs, expectations, aspirations and understandings of the world around them.

Practical tips:

- Build on existing partnerships with client groups, advocacy organisations and networks and their peak bodies at the local and state level, rather than establishing new relationships from scratch.
- Acknowledge the strength and value of community leadership and engagement forums, particularly Aboriginal community-controlled organisations.
- Consider encouraging joint tendering, partnerships or consortium arrangements for services between client-led and grassroots groups (who have strong local knowledge and relationships) and experienced service providers (who have strong service delivery and administration capacities).
- Accept that there is no ideal solution to having a representative sample of clients engaged in commissioning processes. ‘Snowballing’ methods – recruiting more participants as you go along - can be a useful approach. Local groups and NGOs are a useful first point of contact, who can then be asked to draw on their extended networks to engage clients more broadly.

Lesson #2: Effective client participation requires good preparation

Engagement in forums that are dominated by professionals can be very daunting. Both the clients and the commissioning staff need to be well prepared for the task. Clients are much more willing to make a substantial effort if they are clear about their role, its purpose and its impact on decision making and services. A study on patient representatives on commissioning review panels in the Netherlands found that participants had very different perceptions of their roles. Some thought that they should mainly offer technical advice, while others understood that their role was to share their personal perspective.³

When clients are asked to contribute their time, ideas and expertise, it is important to recognise them for their contribution. This can be in the form of money, books or gift vouchers, but also as public recognition of their efforts, decision-making authority, development opportunities or a celebration of service changes that resulted from their participation.

Practical tips:

- Have role descriptions for all clients that clearly set out the role’s purpose, expectations, requirements, timeframes, supports, relationship to other stakeholders and how it will influence decision making.
- Deliver tailored training to clients *and* professional stakeholders who will be part of the engagement activities.

- If possible, offer additional benefits of client involvement, such as training, certification, social connections or public recognition.

There is little guidance in the literature regarding reimbursement of client participants. One study found that clients expected, at least, their costs to be covered and, at best, to receive a payment.²

Client engagement can be:

- interviews (face to face, on-line or phone)
- workshops
- surveys (on-line or paper)
- focus groups
- written submissions.

Case Study 1 – Engaging young people from refugee backgrounds



Since 2018, the NSW Coordinator General for Settlement, Professor Peter Shergold AC, and Multicultural NSW have spearheaded the Refugee Youth Policy Initiative to create more inclusive and effective policy solutions for young people from refugee backgrounds.

Over 500 young people from refugee backgrounds were invited to the consultations. The goal was to better understand challenges and opportunities facing young people settling in NSW. Fifteen refugee youth peer researchers conducted the consultations, recruited and trained by Multicultural NSW and Western Sydney University, and the NSW Advocate for Children and Young People.

In August 2019, Multicultural NSW partnered with The Department of Customer Service (DCS) to bring together senior Government policy makers, community leaders and young people to directly negotiate together and unpack policy priorities emerging from the consultations.

In preparing for the workshop, the University of Sydney’s Sydney Policy Lab was brought on to run preparatory sessions to enhance the skills of government agencies and community organisations to better listen to the voices of lived experience and young people to build their negotiation and influencing skills.

The major theme that emerged from the workshop was that young people needed help to navigate the complex service system and access opportunities and programs that already exist. In response, Multicultural NSW and DCS worked together with young refugees and community stakeholders to co-design the Multicultural Youth Linker Pilot Program. The program aims to connect young people from migrant, refugee and refugee like backgrounds with supports and information they need to cope with COVID-19 and to meet their individual needs. The Multicultural Youth Linkers will offer advice based on their own experiences of settling in NSW and also connect young people to community and government services and programs.



Lesson #3: Make sure you have enough time and resources

Engaging clients in commissioning is time-consuming but well worth it. Staff need sufficient resources to organise client activities, training and skill development, as well as funds to support travel and other logistical requirements. They may also need time to build or strengthen connections with community groups, peak bodies and client advisory groups, which in turn need time to reach out to their networks. One of the biggest challenges to client participation is often the conflict between the long-term nature of relationship-building and the fact that commissioning often has to happen at a quick pace.

Interestingly, Evans and colleagues also found that the involvement of senior managers of commissioning bodies was a key factor for effective client engagement. Where senior managers took an active interest, participants felt that the partnership was genuine. The level of skill and experience senior staff brought to the engagement process was considered important to its success.¹

Practical tips:

- Be honest about the time and resources needed to effectively engage with clients and discuss this with the project manager as early as possible.
- Try to have a senior sponsor or executive attend at least one of the engagement sessions so clients can see their active involvement in the project.
- Time is needed to build trusting relationships with clients. Connect with community groups, peak bodies and NGOs to leverage their relationships with clients when forming your own and/or engaging with clients.

Lesson #4: There are opportunities for engagement throughout the commissioning process

Ideally, client participation should be ongoing throughout the different stages of the commissioning process “including in needs assessment; policy development; strategic planning; prioritisation; procurement of services; performance monitoring; and evaluation”. Evans and colleagues found that clients felt their engagement was more effective when they were involved from the earliest stages, and that they needed a role in setting the agenda.¹ This needs careful consideration of funding, time (of staff and participants), logistics and the burden of participation on clients. However, expectations for participation also need to take into account that people’s lives and circumstances can change over time. Ongoing involvement might be challenging for clients going through periods of crisis with other more immediate priorities.

Lesson #5: Make it as easy as possible to engage

Clients within human services are often those people who are the most marginalised and vulnerable. However, these are also the people whose voices are least frequently heard in policy-making, program design and service delivery. Lindsay and colleagues suggested that rather than perceiving clients as ‘hard to reach’, policymakers and service providers need to ensure that their engagement opportunities are ‘easy to access’.⁵

Practical tips

- Make sure that offices where client activities are organised are clearly signposted, easily accessible and welcoming.
- Recognise the challenges of particular client groups, such as families in crisis and people in detention when planning activities. Be flexible.
- Choose engagement tools that take into account that some clients may have limited access to technology and varying levels of literacy.

Case Study 2 – Young people in out-of-home care help design a pilot program to better support transition to independent living



An [Independent Review of the out-of-home care \(OOHC\) System in NSW](#) conducted by David Tune in 2016 found that vulnerable children and families who received appropriate support, both during and after OOHC, experienced greater stability and more positive long-term outcomes. Conversely, a lack of quality and timely planning for leaving care and support was found to result in poor outcomes for young people transitioning from OOHC to independent living.

In response to this, the Futures Planning and Support service model was jointly commissioned by the Department of Communities and Justice and Their Futures Matter (TFM) to propose a new way of supporting these young people. Futures Planning and Support is a tiered support model that includes:

- a connection service to promote access to services and supports
- a futures coach to give advice and mentoring
- an intensive case worker to ensure young people with multiple and more complex needs have access to supports
- brokerage funding available to financially support care leaver's individual goals.

Findings from a pilot program were expected to inform future investment across NSW. The pilot is a practical example of the benefits of involving clients (in this case, care leavers) in the multiple stages of the commissioning process and of engaging in culturally safe and appropriate ways. The team invested considerable time in building relationships and holding numerous focus groups, interviews and workshops with young people leaving care (clients), case workers, peak bodies, service providers including Aboriginal stakeholders and in rural and remote areas.

- Four care leaver groups and networks were involved: [AbSec Youth Ambassadors](#), [UC Change Ambassadors](#), Care 2 Change Lismore and [ID Know Yourself](#). The young people offered their experiences and voiced their needs and feedback. This was then shared in consultations held with other stakeholders to avoid the young people needing to retell their stories.
- An Aboriginal consultant was engaged to facilitate two Aboriginal yarn groups held in Coffs Harbour and the Central Coast. Seventy people including care leavers, case workers, service providers, AbSec and DCJ staff participated in this process.
- Findings from the consultation with care leavers fed into local co-design workshops in the Mid North Coast District to ensure the pilot model met the local clients' needs. Creating a culturally welcoming and safe atmosphere for the world café style workshops was a big focus. A local Aboriginal Elder performed the Welcome to Country and took all participants on a journey through the local history and culture.

Overall, embedding client voice at the centre of service design has created a relevant and tailored pilot model. An evaluation of the pilot is currently being conducted.



Lesson #6: Engage in culturally safe and appropriate ways

It is important that client engagement is extended to diverse groups of people in relevant and appropriate ways, including Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; people from CALD, multicultural, migrant and refugee backgrounds; people living in rural and remote areas; people from LGBTIQ+ communities, people with intellectual disability; and other vulnerable groups. Targeted approaches to engagement and participation may be needed for some of these groups, for example through advocacy groups and community organisations. It may also require preparation of tailored, translated and culturally appropriate information. One study found that local NGO workers who shared cultural identity with clients and had existing community connections, were important for engaging CALD clients in the commissioning process. Speaking the same language was not as important as a shared cultural identity.⁶

To engage Aboriginal clients, Henderson and colleagues found that facilitating engagement through existing Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisations was important in order to understand local needs and connect with the existing community-led governance structures.⁷ Achieving better outcomes for Aboriginal people, families and communities is our number one corporate objective at Department of Communities and Justice (DCJ). To support this DCJ recently launched an internal Cultural Capability Web App that offers useful guidance about engaging Aboriginal clients and communities. It emphasises the importance of ‘self-determination’ as a fundamental principle in engagement, as well the value of internal consultation (drawing on the knowledge and expertise of Aboriginal staff within the organisation) and external consultation (seeking input from Aboriginal groups and professionals outside the organisation).⁸ More information about how we work with Aboriginal people, families and communities can be found on the [DCJ website](#).



Lesson #7: Give clients feedback about their participation

Clients who contribute their time, ideas and energy want to see evidence that their engagement has influenced decision making. This is key to avoiding clients feeling their participation is 'tokenistic', and also to motivate them to keep being involved. One-off consultation is not enough. Even where the scope of client engagement is limited to one particular issue, there must be a follow-up communication to let clients know how their input will be used.

Practical tips:

- Use a range of communication methods to provide feedback to clients. This can be face-to-face, over the phone or by email, through social media or the DCJ website.
- If possible, let clients choose their preferred modes of communication and adapt communication tools accordingly.



Lesson #8: Help to build the evidence base

More research and evaluation is needed to address the substantial knowledge gaps in this field. We need to evaluate the implementation of particular client engagement strategies to measure their impact and effectiveness. Participatory 'action research' methods can offer further opportunities to engage, train, and even employ, clients as collaborative evaluators and researchers. For example, prisoners in Lewes Prison in the UK were involved as peer researchers in each stage of the procurement process for a new substance misuse support service, including:

- assessing the current service
- contributing to service specifications
- devising questions for tender
- evaluating bidder responses
- devising questions for bidder interviews
- undertaking a service user interview of shortlisted bidders
- working with the successful provider to promote the new service.⁹

Client engagement - not easy but worth it

The Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) points out that client involvement in government is challenging. It is time-consuming, complex and risky, because interests of diverse people and groups must be managed, and there is diminished control over outcomes. However, this form of participation also holds great promise for policy and program design and implementation. It may help to:

- generate more innovative ideas
- achieve economic efficiencies by improving responsiveness
- foster cooperation between different groups
- reinvigorate trust between citizens and public servants.¹⁰

Ultimately, client engagement in commissioning is important for its potential to shape better health and human service outcomes. As such we have responsibility to engage our clients in the most effective and respectful ways.

What is next?

Client engagement is a key component of commissioning at DCJ. This resource is just one in a suite of policies, tools and resources being developed to upskill and build staff confidence in applying a commissioning approach to their work.

More information

Davies, K, Buykx, P, Curryer, C & Krogh, C 2020, [Client-centric commissioning: an Evidence Check rapid review brokered by the Sax Institute](http://www.saxinstitute.org.au) (www.saxinstitute.org.au) for the NSW Department of Communities and Justice, Sydney.

Resources and tool kits for client engagement

Department of Health and Human Services VIC 2019, [Client voice framework for community services](#), Victoria State Government, Melbourne.

Healthcare Improvement Scotland and Scottish Health Council 2013, [Evaluating participation: a guide and toolkit for health and social care practitioners](#), Healthcare Improvement Scotland, Glasgow.

NSW Family & Community Services 2011, [Aboriginal consultation guide](#), NSW Government, Department of Communities and Justice, Sydney.

Moore, T, McDonald, M, McHugh-Dillon, H & West, S 2016, [Community engagement: a key strategy for improving outcomes for Australian families](#), Child Family Community Australia information exchange, Australian Institute of Family Studies, Melbourne.

Youth Affairs Council of Victoria 2013, [Involving young people: guiding principles](#), YACVic, Melbourne.

References

- ¹ Evans, DH, Bacon, RJ, Greer, E, Stagg, AM & Turton, P 2015, 'Calling executives and clinicians to account: user involvement in commissioning cancer services', *Health Expectations*, vol. 18, no. 4, pp. 504-15.
- ² Mason, J & Association of Children's Welfare Agencies 2018, *Commissioning for outcomes in NSW – an NGO perspective*, ACWA, Redfern, NSW.
- ³ Schölvinck, A-FM, Schuitmaker, TJ & Broerse, JEW 2018, 'Embedding meaningful patient involvement in the process of proposal appraisal at the Dutch Cancer Society', *Science and Public Policy*, vol. 46, no. 2, pp. 254-63.
- ⁴ Australian Government Department of Health 2016, *PHN Primary Mental Health Care Flexible Funding Pool Implementation Guidance. Consumer and Carer Engagement and Participation*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- ⁵ Lindsay, C, Pearson, S, Batty, E, Cullen, AM & Eadson, W 2018, 'Street-level practice and the co-production of third sector-led employability services', *Policy and Politics*, vol. 46, no. 4, pp. 571-87.
- ⁶ Chadborn, N, Craig, C, Sands, G, Schneider, J & Gladman J 2019, 'Improving community support for older people's needs through commissioning third sector services: a qualitative study'. *Journal of Health Services Research & Policy*, vol. 24, no. 2, pp. 116-23.

- ⁷ Henderson, J, Javanparast, S, MacKean, T, Freeman, T, Baum, F & Ziersch A 2018, 'Commissioning and equity in primary care in Australia: views from Primary Health Networks', *Health & Social Care in the Community*, vol. 26, no. 1, pp. 80-9.
- ⁸ NSW Family & Community Services 2011, *Aboriginal consultation guide*, NSW Government, Department of Communities and Justice, Sydney.
- ⁹ National Health Service UK 2018, [Framework for patient and public participation in public health commissioning](#), viewed 5 May 2021.
- ¹⁰ The Australia and New Zealand School of Government (ANZSOG) 2020, [The promise of co-design for public policy](#), viewed 5 May 2021.



Produced by

Lina Jakob

Family and Community Services Insights, Analysis and Research (FACSIAR)

NSW Department of Communities and Justice

320 Liverpool Rd, Ashfield NSW 2131

www.dcj.nsw.gov.au

Email: facsiar@dcj.nsw.gov.au