

Getting started: writing terms of reference for a committee

Terms of Reference (ToR) are important for any committee. Below is a suggested list of things you might want to include. Use this as a guide only, as Terms of Reference are best tailored to the particular group and written with their full participation. The less jargon and legalistic terms you use, the more useful you will find your ToR. It should be a tool to help you achieve, not an obstacle.

Mission statement or Vision

This is normally a short statement, preferably one or two sentences, stating what you hope to achieve, and your 'big picture' idea. For example, Starbucks' Mission Statement is: *'our mission: is to inspire and nurture the human spirit – one person, one cup and one neighbourhood at a time.'* This really has nothing to do with making coffee – that comes later. What do you hope to achieve, broadly, as a group?

Purpose

This is a statement of the things the group can do. If there are policies, procedures or legislation that affect the group, mention them (briefly) here. If there is anything obvious that's outside the group's scope, mention it here. For example: 'The advisory group does not respond to individual patient and family complaints.'

Activities/specific issues to be addressed

In preparing this list (dot points are good), 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, so don't worry about trying to include everything.

Terms of membership

The terms of membership could also include the 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 former users of the health service.

You will want guidelines regarding timeframes for membership. For example, what is the term-length 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 to provide peer support without continuing as a member?

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 is essential for understanding 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 should 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
- 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.

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 it's 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?

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? This is a very important issue as it will inevitably shape the focus and direction of the group.
- How will the minutes be recorded and distributed? Who is responsible for this?

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.

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.

Grievance procedure

Consumer 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.

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.

Additional items

Some organisations have specific policies around confidentiality and/or a Code of Conduct for committee members and staff. You may need to cite these within the Terms of Reference.