

Principles of good consumer engagement

- Be clear what you mean by a “consumer” i.e. a person who purchases or uses a good or a service – this is not the same as a citizen (tax payer), or a community (a geographical or interest based collective), or a stakeholder (wider group of interests)
- Be clear what you want to achieve with “engagement” – have clear policy objectives and measures of impact.
- Be clear about the scope of what you are asking and honest about any limitations or constraints
- Understand the “spectrum of participation” and difference between each part of that spectrum:
 - Inform, consult, involve, collaborate, empower
- Objectivity – an open approach to obtaining consumer views and to interpreting them
- Transparency – to build consumer trust and show that you take consumer views seriously
- Commitment – to listening to consumers’ views and acting on them
- Leadership – effective consumer engagement must be led from the top of the organisation
- Evidence-based
- Engage early in the process
- Recognise the business benefits
- An ongoing process that is embedded across the business – not just a stand-alone business planning/price control review exercise. Utilise consumer engagement as part of a continuous process allowing consumer views to shape business planning and priorities and provide feedback as they develop.
- Seek to understand consumer views on a range of topics and on all aspects of the business plan, rather than pre-determining their priorities or seeking to endorse your own priorities
- Be inclusive:
 - Work with consumer groups to gather the fullest range of interests
 - Understand and balance the differences between different consumer segments
 - Understand and balance the differences between existing and future consumers
- Be accessible to all consumers
- Be aware that those who often participate i.e. the “usual suspects” are not always representative
- Use targeted approaches to tailor engagement to suit the knowledge and awareness of different groups of consumers
- Understand that consumer vulnerability can apply to anyone faced with particular situations or company/market behaviour
- Gather evidence through a range of methodologies and tools including willingness to pay, qualitative research, surveys, complaints intelligence, market data
- Be responsive – seek to adopt a flexible process to engagement, responding to the information revealed as the process progresses
- Demonstrate impact of engagement – ensure that the engagement design process plans for and allows evaluation of success
- Use the Consumer Principles (see below) as key tests of successful engagement

The Consumer Principles

The Consumer Bill of Rights pushed for by John F Kennedy in his 1962 speech to the US Congress established four basic rights; the right to safety, the right to be informed, the right to choose, and the right to be heard. These rights formed the basis of the Consumer Principles, a set of tests used by consumer organisations to across the world to assess whether goods or services are being provided in the consumer interest.

Access

Can people get the goods, services or information they need?

Choice

Can consumers affect the way goods and services are provided through the choices they make in the marketplace?

Information

Is information available, is it easy to understand, and does it help consumers to make informed choices?

Quality and Safety

Do goods and services meet acceptable standards?

Redress

Is there a simple, cheap, quick and fair system for dealing with complaints and disputes if things go wrong?

Representation

Are consumers' views properly represented in services where there is little or no choice?
And is the process of decision-making transparent?

Fairness and Equity

Are some, or all, consumers unfairly discriminated against?