

# Guide for organising local consumer meetings

The Virtual Australian Association of Mental Health Consumers

*Nothing about us without us is for us*

[www.consumersaustralia.org](http://www.consumersaustralia.org)

## What's included in this guide

<b>Introduction and a bit about us</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Why we need local consumer meetings</b>	<b>3</b>
Can you organise a local consumer meeting in your area?	3
<b>Step 1: Register your interest and local area</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Step 2: Plan your meeting</b>	<b>4</b>
Finding a venue or place to meet	4
A date & time	5
An agenda	5
Suggested Agenda for 1 <sup>st</sup> Meeting	6
Promoting the meeting	13
<b>Step 3: Run the meeting</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>Step 4: Share the meeting outcomes with us</b>	<b>15</b>

This is a draft document. If you have ideas for how to improve this guide, please tell us. Either comment in the **Local Meetings Forum** on our website, or click **contact** on the top menu on the website.



## Introduction and a bit about us

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Mental health consumers need a united, independent and powerful national voice.

- Our human rights are routinely violated.
- We are frequently subjected to discrimination and violence, yet most Australians believe myths rather than truth, and remain scared of us.
- We die about 20 years younger than other Australians.
- We don't get choices in the support and treatment we want and need.

It's not good enough.

We need to have more collective influence. We need to come together, celebrate our diversity and share our strength.

To help this to happen, a group of consumers have built a website and a 'virtual' association so that we all have a space to come together and raise our voices for what we want and need. It's called the (Virtual) Association of Mental Health Consumers. You can visit it at [www.consumersaustralia.org](http://www.consumersaustralia.org).

Before long, we hope to create an official, independent, Australian mental health consumer association. Before we make it official, we want as many consumers as possible, from across Australia, to have their say about what we should do, and how we should do it. This project belongs to you.

Join us, have your say, get involved, make it happen, make a difference.

*Freedom is never given;  
it is won.*

— A. Philip Randolph



Image of the website

## Why we need local consumer meetings

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Our new website is great, but we need more.

We need consumers to organise local meetings across Australia.

Local meetings will:

- Spread the word and the excitement about our own, independent association
- Provide a space to talk face-to-face in more depth about consumer issues
- Make us more inclusive and accessible. Not everyone will find this website useful. Some people won't have computer experience, or may lack access to computers, or have other reasons that make this site difficult to access.
- Build stronger local consumer communities and networks
- Give us more information about what consumers across the nation want

### Can YOU organise a local consumer meeting in your area?

We need consumers across Australia to get together, spread the word, and speak up for what we want.

That means we need some people to step up and volunteer to coordinate a meeting in their own local area.

Can **you** do this?

If you can help, this guide is here to help you get started.

These are the steps to follow:

- Step 1:** Register your interest and local area
- Step 2:** Plan & promote your meeting
- Step 3:** Run the meeting
- Step 4:** Share the meeting outcomes with us

Each of these is outlined in this document.

## Step 1: Register your interest and local area

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Register as a local meeting organiser on the website here:

<http://consumersaustralia.org/the-association/meetings/>

This will let others know that a meeting is going to be organised in their area, and who to contact. Others may even volunteer to help.

*What are you committing to? One meeting or ongoing meetings?*

You don't have to commit to ongoing meetings, but it's likely that people will want to have more than one meeting. But even one meeting is enough to get us started. You might even like to ask for volunteers at the first meeting to take over the role of organiser.

## Step 2: Plan your meeting

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To organise a local meeting you will need to organise:

- a. A venue or place to meet
- b. A date & time
- c. An agenda
- d. Promoting the meeting

### Finding a venue or place to meet

There are lots of options for where you can hold a local meeting. Just some of the options include:

*A local café:* Many cafes are happy to have a community group meet there, because they know people will order coffees etc. Some even have a room that you can use. Try asking a friendly local café to see if they mind.

*A library:* Many libraries have meeting rooms available. These are often free, but sometimes they charge a fee. Ask at your local library to see if they can provide a room. If there's a fee, you could consider asking people to pay a gold coin donation to cover the cost of the room.

*A local mental health service:* Many services might be happy to let you use a room for free. However some may not want to help, and some consumers may not feel comfortable meeting at a mental health service. Think about the pros and cons of this.

*A local park:* If the weather is good, there is no reason people can't just meet in the great outdoors.

*Someone's house:* You can always use someone's house for a meeting. Just be sure you are comfortable about strangers coming to your home – there may be some issues with this.

*A neighbourhood house or community centre:* Many areas have community spaces that would be happy to support an activity like this. Give them a call and see if they can help.

*There are lots more options as well:* An RSL club, a CWA association, a member of parliament's offices, a local school or college, an advocacy association or community legal centre ... and lots more.

## **A date & time**

The venue you choose will let you know what dates and times are available.

Consider whether you can have your meeting outside of working hours (ie, after 5pm, or on a weekend). This will make it easier for people who are working to attend.

You will probably need about 2 hours for your meeting.

You might want to add some extra time for socialising after the meeting.

## **An agenda**

This section includes a suggested agenda – but don't feel you have to follow it, it's only a guide. Ultimately, each person at each local meeting should be able to have their say about what matters to them – that's why we started this project.

## Suggested Agenda for a 1<sup>st</sup> Local Meeting

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### 1. Intro information

Ask people to introduce themselves and why they have come. Make sure people know it's OK to be anonymous or to just listen if they prefer.

Make sure it's clear that this meeting is only for people who identify as consumers or similar.

Tell people about the virtual association, the website, and the aims of this project. You can use the information on the first page of this guide to help, or even give people copies of it.

Allow some time to talk this over with people – what do they think about it all?

### 2. Discuss the purpose of the association:

Tell the group that the virtual association is trying to work out what the purpose of our association should be. We are pretty sure that we want it to be:

- For mental health consumers only
- Independent of government or other organisations
- Run by consumers, for consumers

But other details are all still up for discussion. Show the group the list overleaf of draft 'purposes' for the association.

Talk through the list to make sure everyone understands each item. Then hold a vote by show of hands:

- For each item, ask for votes on whether it should be included as a purpose
- Then ask for votes from anyone who expressly doesn't want it included.
- Do this for the entire list. Then at the end, go back through the list and tell people they can only vote once this time – for the item they think is most important.

Record any comments or suggestions about the list. Also record any additional suggested goals or purpose statements – people can vote on these too. Tell people we'll be gathering votes from every local meeting to guide us in what to do next.

Ask the group to name other things that should be part of purpose, and vote on those too. A list of items to include in our purpose is over the page.

**What should be the purpose or aims of our own independent mental health consumer association?**

Possible items to include in our purpose	Votes to include	Votes to NOT include	Votes for 'most important item'
a. Promote, influence and facilitate the rights of Mental Health Consumers to enable improvements in mental health, wellbeing and quality of life of all people with lived experience of mental health issues;			
b. Promote and facilitate community education and awareness of mental health issues, including targeted campaigns and initiatives, to improve mental health and wellbeing of Mental Health Consumers, and all Australians;			
c. Provide national Mental Health Consumer leadership, increase the effectiveness and enhance the long term viability of Mental Health Consumer Charities, not for profit and other organisations by promoting partnerships and a coordinated approach to improving social inclusion, realising potential and is respectful of people who live with mental health issues;			
d. Promote the needs of all people at risk of mental illness through a systems approach to prevention, treatment/support, recovery and peer lead intervention;			
e. Provide national leadership on Mental Health Consumer matters			
f. Work towards consumers having equal human rights to others			
g. Build understanding of consumer diversity and strengths, and a much more inclusive and respectful way of thinking about our experiences			
h. Advocate for change in mental health, health, social and political systems which are in OUR interests – at a national and local level			
i. Bring consumers together around shared interests and passions, to recognise how we are often disconnected, and to facilitate connections			
j. Represent the needs and interests of the consumer workforce, including consumer consultants, peer support workers, and many more			
k. Strengthen the capacity of all consumers to raise their voice for their own needs, and to create platforms for collective local action			
l. Give guidance to organisations, sectors, governments, media etc about what we want and need			
<b>Extra ideas from the group – vote on these too</b>			
m.			
n.			
o.			

Attach comments or recommended changes to items above.

### 3. Who should be a member of our association?

Ask the group to talk about who they think should be able to be a member of the national mental health consumer association. These are some options:

- a. Only people who self-identify as a mental health consumer – or other language that they prefer – and it's up to people to define what that means for themselves.
- b. Or we can be more explicit. For example, is being a consumer about having mental health issues/experiences, or about having used mental health services, or both or either? Here are some considerations:
  - Many people have mental health experiences without having used the mental health system. Most people diagnosed with depression or anxiety, for example, will only see their GP. So this group is likely to raise different issues to people who have been inpatients of psych wards, for example. Do we want to create space for all of these issues?
  - Many people want and feel they need to access mental health services, but are excluded. People diagnosed with borderline personality disorder often have this experience. So while this group may not be able to speak about what happens in hospital, they have an important perspective to share about being excluded.
  - How do we keep this space 'about us' while still retaining values of respecting diversity and being inclusive? We need to hear people's opinions about this.

Record comments and ideas about each of these options.

- c. Do we want to allow organisations to become members of our association? If so, which types of organisations? So, for example, would we want state-based consumer organisations to be able to join and vote?

d. Do we want to create a type of membership for people and/or organisations who are not consumers, but who want to support us? Our 'allies', if you like.

- This could help us build support outside of our membership for our future campaigns for change
- It could also help us raise more money for our work
- But some may think this could compromise us, too.
- What do you think about having a kind of 'associate membership', so these people can pay a member fee, and access useful information, but they cannot vote on decisions like full members?

Record comments and ideas about each of these options.

#### 4. How should we make decisions?

Eventually, once we become an official association, we will need to appoint people to decision making roles. We expect that in every way possible, we will always call on members of the association to have a say in all major decisions.

Until we get to this point, we will need a way to make decisions. We have lots of decisions to make to get things going. There is a vote on the website to collect ideas about this.

Invite the group to vote on these options too – and to suggest other ideas for how to make decisions. Details about these options and a vote scoring sheet are over the page

## What type of voting should we use to make decisions about our association?

Each person can only make one vote. Explanations are at the end.

Voting options	I definitely want this option	I'm not sure, but I probably want this option
1. Simple majority vote: 51% must agree		
2. Simple majority vote with VETO option		
3. Large majority vote: 75% must agree		
4. Large majority vote with VETO option		
5. Consensus vote: At least 95% must agree		
6. Representative voting		
7. I'm not sure		
8. Other (If you select other, please share your idea)		

### About the different options:

Option	Notes	Pros	Cons
1. Simple majority vote: 51% must agree	If more than half of us agree, then the decision is made.	Easy to understand, quick decisions.	Leaves a large group feeling dissatisfied. Could split the group. Could leave people feeling they don't belong or aren't heard.
2. Simple majority vote with VETO option	If enough people disagree strongly, then the vote can't pass and it has to go back to discussion.	Provides a safety mechanism to stop decisions if enough people strongly disagree.	May tend to polarise people or feel frustrating.
3. Large majority vote: 75% must agree	Three-quarters of us have to agree to pass a decision.	Still simple, but more inclusive.	May take us longer to make decisions.
4. Large majority vote with VETO option	If enough people disagree strongly, then the vote can't pass and it has to go back to discussion	More inclusive, but still with a safety mechanism if people strongly disagree. Less likely to see vetos with such a large majority.	May still tend to polarise people, and take longer.
5. Consensus vote: At least 95% must agree	Almost everyone has to agree on decisions before they are made.	We'll have to keep talking until we find solutions that work for almost everyone. It will be very inclusive.	It might take us ages to actually make decisions. Sometimes we may not be able to agree.
6. Representative voting	We set up a democratic process with representatives (say, for different experiences or interests or expertise), and vote them in. Representatives then make the decisions.	It's a proven democratic system.	It will be difficult to do this in the short term – it might be a better long term option for after we've become official. Representatives don't always do what they say they will. It will be difficult to decide what gets represented and much say goes to each perspective.
7. I'm not sure	If you really don't know or mind which option we choose, then pick this.		
8. Other	If you have a better idea than these, please share it. If we get lots of great ideas here we can have another poll that includes them all.		

**More about vetos:** Vetos are a way to block decisions. They are also a way to recognise that people disagree with decisions in different ways. Sometimes we don't really mind that much if others don't agree with our own preferences. Sometimes we're annoyed but we can live with it. And sometimes, and this is when people would use a veto power, we disagree so much that we find a decision morally objectionable.

If we decide to include vetos in our decision-making processes, it means that if enough people disagree really strongly with a decision, then it can be stopped. If we set up a veto system, then we can also decide how it works. For example, we might say that at least 5% of people need to veto for it to take effect. Or maybe more, or maybe less. And we might even provide guidelines about how to decide to use a veto, such as 'you should veto a decision if you disagree so strongly that you would feel that you could no longer be a part of the association, or if you felt a decision was ethically unsound, or if you felt it was contrary to our fundamental principles.'

## 5. What next?

Tell people that you will share the meeting votes and feedback on the website.

- Make sure people know it's anonymous.
- Say that we'll be compiling feedback from every single local meeting.

Ask people if they'd like to meet again. If so, discuss how people can share the organising work.

- If you want to, set a date for the next meeting, and agree on someone to upload the meeting details onto the website.

Ask people for:

- Ideas for the next meeting agenda.
- Ideas for spreading the word to more consumers, and whether they can help to do this

Encourage people to join the website if they can.

- If someone is able, it might be useful to bring a laptop or iPad with internet access to the meeting. That way you can show people the website, and people can even join up then and there if they want to.

## 6. Close the meeting

Thank everyone for participating. Ask the group if anyone has any closing comments to share. End the meeting.

If you all want to, it can be nice to follow the meeting with a social gathering, even if that's just a cup of coffee somewhere.

END OF SUGGESTED AGENDA FOR FIRST MEETING

## Promoting the meeting

There are lots of ways to promote your local meeting. Here are some ideas:

- List it on the [www.consumersaustralia.org](http://www.consumersaustralia.org) website
- Use the sample flyer (word format) from the website, customise it to your local info, and distribute it. You can post it on Facebook, send it by email, or print it and put copies wherever consumers might go, for example:
  - Local mental health services
  - Large GP clinics
  - Services for housing, drug and alcohol use, emergency relief
  - Neighbourhood houses
  - Anywhere with a community notice board
- Photocopying flyers can be expensive. If you need a hand with the costs, let us know in the Local Meetings forum as someone else may be able to help. Otherwise, you can try asking local mental health organisations if they will let you use the photocopier to support a local consumer initiative. Local neighbourhood houses may also be able to help. Over time we will start fundraising to help pay for this type of thing – but for now the association doesn't have any money.
- Many local newspapers allow community groups to advertise events for free. Check out your local paper, and see if you can list your meeting there.
- Ask local organisations to include the meeting info in their newsletters or email lists. Again, if you're not sure who to contact, come and ask others in the Local Meetings forum on the website.

RSVPS: It can be a lot of work to manage RSVPs, and it can also involve giving out your own email address or phone number. If you'd rather not do this, then you don't have to have RSVPs – just ask people to turn up.

## Step 3: Run the meeting

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Tips to running a meeting:

- Turn up to the venue about 20-30 minutes before the start time if you can.
- Set up the room so it feels comfortable. Often the most comfortable set-up is sitting in a circle.
- Have copies of the agenda for everyone if this is possible.
- Bring a pen and paper for taking notes.
- Bring a loose sheet of paper for people who want to share their contact details.
- Greet people as they arrive and introduce yourself.
- If you're nervous, let people know and they're more likely to help you out and be understanding.
- Try to start on time, or no more than 10 minutes late.
- If not many people come, don't be disappointed. It can take time for these things to get going. Even one other person coming is more than you had before the meeting.
- When it's time to start, use the agenda as your guide. Start by telling people the different headings on the agenda and get agreement to follow this. If people want to change or add items to the agenda, discuss with the group whether or not to do this.
- Then just talk through each item on the agenda.
- Encourage people to have their say, but also be aware that not everyone may feel confident to do this. Be as supportive and inclusive as you can.
- Take notes of what people say on the key topics. You don't need to record everything, but if people have a strong opinions it's useful to write it, so you can share it on the site, so each person's views are heard. If someone is willing to help, it can be useful for one person to be the chair and lead the discussion, while another person takes the notes.

## Step 4: Share the meeting outcomes with us

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After the meeting, we encourage you to share what people had to say at the meeting. There is a space to do this on the website, and once we start collecting lots of meeting inputs, we'll bring the feedback all together. This feedback will help to shape the association's future.

To upload your feedback, go to this page:

<http://consumersaustralia.org/the-association/meetings/>

If need help to do this, contact us here:

<http://consumersaustralia.org/getintouch/>

**Thank you for helping to make a difference.**