



Health Issues Centre
Consumer voices for better healthcare

A photograph of a woman with short, styled blonde hair and black-rimmed glasses. She is smiling warmly at the camera. She is wearing a light grey, short-sleeved top. She is seated at a wooden table, and her hands are visible holding a white ceramic cup. In the foreground, the corner of a laptop is visible. The background is a bright, out-of-focus indoor setting, possibly a dining room or kitchen, with a window and curtains.

**Is staying apart keeping
us connected?**

Consumer Engagement during Covid-19

Following the full rollout of social distancing restrictions in mid-March due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Health Issues Centre conducted a survey of consumer representatives and Health Services to find out how the Covid-19 restrictions are impacting consumer engagement.

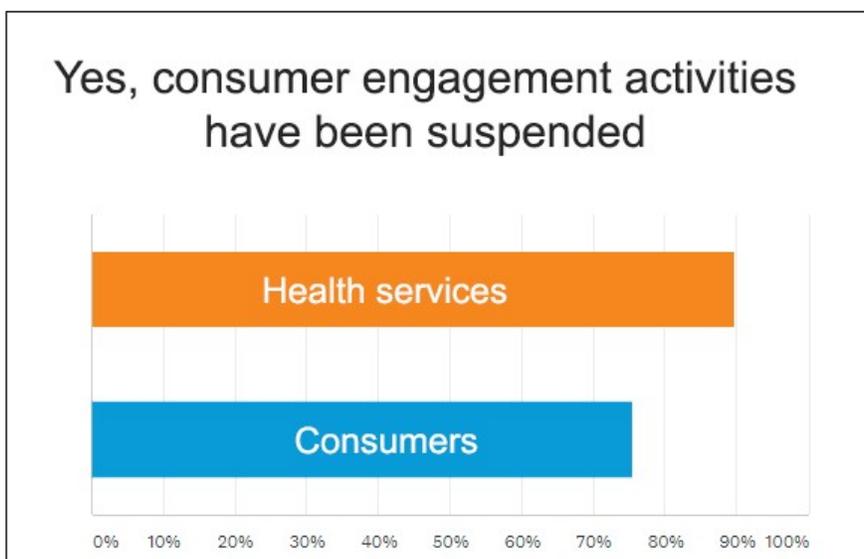
The survey was carried out in April and aimed to find out if the COVID-19 pandemic had impacted on the typical range of consumer engagement activities that our consumer representatives and health services engage in, including committee meetings, workshops and co-design projects.

In total 36 people responded to the survey. This included 27 consumer representatives and Alumni of Health Issues Centre courses, representing a total of 27 state-wide services. Just under a fifth of these were engaging with more than one service. An additional nine health services contacts also responded.

The results provide a useful snapshot of how the pandemic has impacted on the way consumer representatives and health services have remained engaged these last few months.

The vast majority of respondents reported that engagement activities had been suspended due to isolation measures.

Following the lockdown approximately 75% of consumers surveyed reported their health services had suspended their activities, while almost 90% - eight out of nine of health services contacts surveyed – said that activities had been suspended.

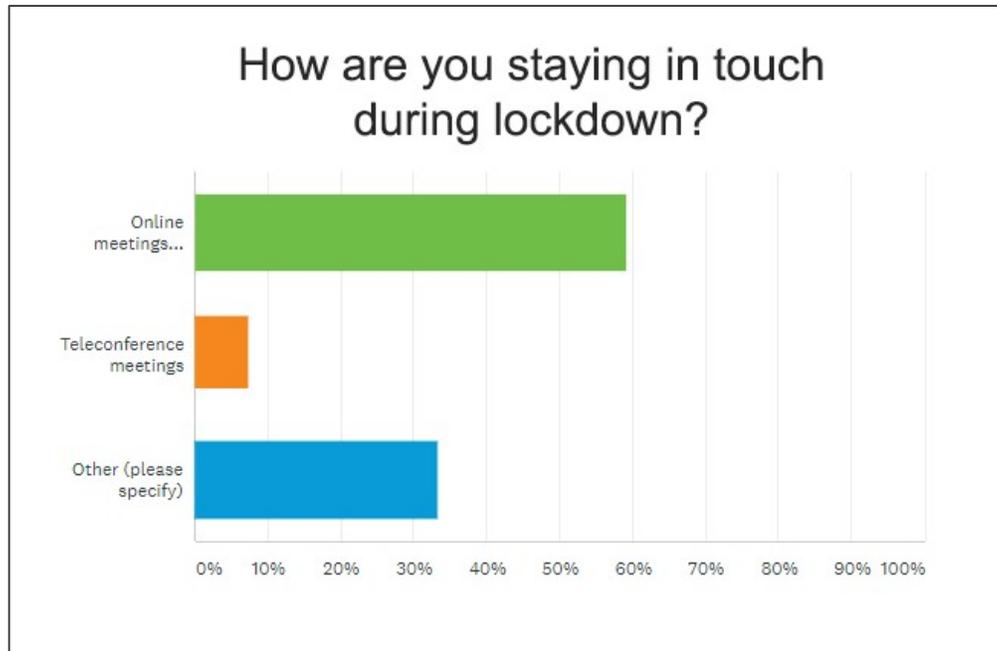


Most respondents said they were advised of the suspension by email (86%) with the remainder contacted by telephone (8%) or some other means (8%).

In relation to the frequency and type of communications that consumers had received during the pandemic just under half of all consumers felt that the communications they had received had been about right. However, around a quarter said that given the circumstances of the pandemic, such as the imposition of social distancing/social isolation, they felt the style of communication could have been more empathetic and communication more frequent. Health services broadly thought they had done the right thing by their consumers in terms of frequency, style and the mediums used to maintain communications.

Just under half of all consumers had not been given any indication of when normal services would resume. The remainder said they had been advised that a return to normality was dependent on the lifting of social distancing measures – a view echoed by health service contacts.

Where engagement activities have been maintained during the lockdown, this has been achieved via platforms such as ZOOM and Skype, with 21 out of 27 consumers and five out of nine health services respondents (approximately 60% overall) engaging in this way. Teleconferences accounted for about 8% of activity while platforms such as Facebook were not used. More than half of those who responded “other” indicated that they had received no communication at all, while the remainder had stayed in touch via email. One person indicating they had participated in a webinar.



When asked if Health services could have done anything more, or differently during the pandemic to maintain engagement with consumers approximately half of all responses suggested that, given the circumstances of the pandemic, the use of online platforms such as ZOOM and Skype had been valuable.

The survey results demonstrate that maintaining engagement with consumers through online platforms such as ZOOM and Skype is very achievable. Our own observations and experiences at Health Issues Centre are that most people have adapted very effectively to working and engaging with others using online technology. We encourage consumer representatives and health services to utilise these new ways of working, which may in fact become the norm in the future.

During lockdown, people are experiencing difficult and unusual circumstances that bring fresh challenges and exacerbate isolation and loneliness. It is more important than ever to maintain consumer engagement and stay in touch with the lived experiences of real people to ensure that well-meaning policies do not cause unintended consequences.

Health Issues Centre has considerable experience in engaging with consumers and health services via a variety of online channels. To find out more about how we can support you with training for your health services team or your consumer representatives, please contact training@hic.org.au.

**Health Issues Centre can support online skills capacity building.
Contact training@hic.org.au to find out how we can help.**