



A resource for aged care providers

Setting up a food focus group



A food focus group is sometimes called a resident food committee. It's a formal way to work with residents to get their input.

The groups are usually made up of residents and their representatives and sometimes staff members. Groups meet to discuss issues around food and dining in the aged care home. Resident members of the group can:

- decide what format the meeting has
- lead the meeting
- put together meeting agendas and minutes.

A food focus group creates a channel to communicate between residents and the provider. The group supports residents to give their opinions on the design of menus and their dining experience. They help encourage residents to have choice and make decisions about their food.

They are a great way to improve and innovate the services you deliver.

Setting up a food focus group can be simple and there are lots of different ways to do it.

Your service can adapt the suggestions in this toolkit to meet the needs and preferences of your residents.

It's important to make sure you record decisions about the food focus group and share them with residents.

This makes sure everyone understands what the food focus group is and what it will do.





Thinking and planning

What does a food focus group do?

A food focus group can:

- plan menus and give input into developing menus
- taste new menu items, including those that residents have suggested
- discuss ways to improve the dining experience (atmosphere, choice of crockery, cutlery and table linen, decoration)
- turn residents' food and dining complaints into practical actions and changes
- organise special events
- develop resident food surveys and help design comment cards to get feedback
- review feedback and what's being done to improve residents' dining experience
- support a culture of feedback and change
- have a 'food champion' or 'dining room ambassador' who supervises the food service in the dining areas. As well as talking with residents about their mealtime experience and sharing feedback with the management team
- get feedback from other residents not in the group, and work together to come up with solutions.

Key principles and meeting rules

A food focus group should have a set of key principles and 'meeting rules'. These make sure the group is fair, supportive and positive.

This is a good starting point, but you might want to add to the list to suit your service:

- Everyone has the right to take part.
- Everyone has the right to be heard.
- Everyone at the service can contribute directly to the group or through a group representative or feedback form.
- The group represents the diversity of the residents.
- People with communication difficulties or cognitive impairment are included and we have strategies to support them to take part.
- Everyone can share feedback, ideas and concerns in a safe environment.
- Communication between group members will be clear, open and respectful.

Meeting rules can include, for example:

- Members take turns speaking and stay on topic
- The group records, takes action and reports back on feedback, ideas and issues.





Getting people involved

Members

A successful food focus group is managed by residents.

It has a wide mix of members who represent the resident community.

Think about things like:

- making sure the group has a direct way to communicate with management
- making sure residents have the opportunity to join the group at any time
- promoting membership regularly through bulletin boards, flyers, social calendars, posters and in conversation
- including information about the group when new residents arrive at the service
- making sure residents run group meetings, with selected staff members (chefs, food service staff, dietary manager) invited
- not having more staff members than residents. Other staff members (nursing staff, lifestyle and activity staff, members of the management or executive team) are only invited as guest speakers or for assistance. For example, residents may ask staff to help with taking minutes
- inviting carers and family members if some residents need extra support
- using a good facilitator to help guide meetings (this could be a volunteer or staff member, such as a lifestyle coordinator or assistant).

Making the group inclusive

When organising and running meetings, think about the needs of the members. These things can help you make sure the food focus group is inclusive and accessible:

- Make sure communication is clear and open.
- Use plain language and avoid jargon or industry acronyms.
- Make sure printed information has large and easy to read fonts.
- Avoid colours that are hard to read – like yellow.
- Make information available in a range of formats and languages.
- Think about the different languages and cultures of your residents. Organise an interpreter if needed.
- Make sure that all group members can hear the discussion.
- Give everyone an opportunity to be heard.
- Make sure there is a different way for residents who have difficulty communicating or aren't comfortable speaking in a group to be able to give their feedback.

For example:

- have someone (family representative or carer staff member who knows the resident well) come with them to the meeting and speak for the person
- allow people to give written feedback
- have a way for residents to give anonymous feedback.
- Promote upcoming meetings to make sure all residents know about them.
- Provide physical support for residents who need it.



Running the meeting

Below is a list of things to think about when planning and running the meeting.

- Think about using a blended model, a combination of the town hall and representative models.
- Give group members roles and responsibilities. Key roles can include a chairperson or facilitator, secretary, minute-taker and general members.
- Prepare and circulate an agenda before each meeting. Usually, the group's chairperson or facilitator will prepare the agenda. The agenda should include items that the residents have come up with.
- You need to keep minutes at each meeting to record key ideas, feedback and actions.
 - Record minutes in a detailed or general way, depending on the preference of the group.
 - Have a specific minute taker attend each meeting as an observer.
 - After each meeting, give the minutes to all residents or make them available in a place everyone can access.
 - Write down key actions and track them.
- Decide on a regular meeting location.
- Decide how often the group will meet. It can be helpful to schedule meetings around key menu development dates.
- Decide on how the group will vote to reach agreement on key decisions.

It is important to remind people that food focus groups are just one way to provide feedback and input into food, nutrition and dining at the service.

Not everyone will want to take part in the group. Residents don't have to wait for a meeting to raise issues or ask questions.

They can do this through other feedback channels at any time. Your service should have other ways that people can raise a problem or concern.

Choose a type of food focus group that suits your service and the preferences of your residents, such as:

- **'Town hall' style** – you invite all residents to attend. This works best in smaller aged care homes.
- **Representative** – a few residents go to meetings to represent all residents. This works well in larger aged care homes. You need to have a process for involving all residents, such as regularly scheduled sub-meetings in each residential area to share information.



Putting it into action

It's important to prepare an agenda before the meeting, with standing agenda topics. This is a helpful way to plan, prepare and keep meetings on track. The chairperson asks the group members for anything they would like to discuss in the meeting.

The chairperson gives the secretary of the group items for the agenda. This could be a staff member, such as a lifestyle coordinator or administrative assistant.

The secretary prepares the agenda and gives it to the chairperson at least 2 days before the meeting. They then check to make sure key items are covered, checking against previous meeting minutes and updating with progress on any follow-up actions since the last meeting (if any). They then share the agenda with group members before the meeting.

During the meeting, the secretary takes minutes and records any follow-up actions from the meeting discussion. After the meeting, the secretary types up the minutes and shares them with the group. They also update the action log. They give this to the chairperson who reviews and approves it to be shared with the group. The group gives the action log to the service's management to review and follow up any actions.

Working with staff

There are many more ways providers can support and improve how they engage with residents. For example:

- Make sure staff understand what working and engaging with residents means for their role and how they can help improve things.
- Make sure staff have the skills to engage well with residents with different needs and backgrounds.
- Encourage staff to talk with residents at mealtimes to get real-time feedback about their meal, dining experience and food choices.
- Create opportunities for staff to share residents' feedback with food service staff.
- Encourage residents to attend food focus group meetings.
- Provide support to food focus group meetings where needed.

For example, converting handwritten notes into digital documents for printing, photocopying and providing quiet private space for the meetings.



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