



Health Quality &
Safety Commission
Te Tāhū Hauora

‘I know what an outcome looks like when it honours our culture and values’: One consumer’s experience of trying to change the system from within

Ngā mihi

This case study shares the experience of Ata (not their real name), a Pacific consumer member of the Northern Regional Consumer Council (NRCC).¹ It is not an evaluation of the council; it is a reflection on what it feels like to sit at the table and what happens when you care deeply, but aren’t always sure you’re making a difference.

We are grateful to Ata for their openness and willingness to share their experience and reflect on their involvement of being a member of the NRCC.

This story is shared as a practical lens for clinicians, service designers and programme teams seeking to strengthen how they work with consumers, whānau and those with lived experience.

Key lessons

This case study highlights several factors that help strengthen meaningful consumer engagement.

- Early engagement creates greater opportunity for lived experience to shape decisions.
- Diverse consumer perspectives help identify barriers and cultural safety considerations.
- Time for discussion is essential for thoughtful and meaningful contribution.
- Consumers value understanding how their feedback has influenced decisions and outcomes.

¹ The NRCC, established in 2024, brings together diverse consumer members from across the Northern Region to provide consistent engagement in the health system. Meeting regularly and operating in an advisory capacity, the NRCC engages with Health New Zealand teams on various projects and programmes. It offers feedback grounded in lived experience, with a strong emphasis on equity of access and outcomes, and care centred around whānau.

- Lived experience provides a form of expertise that strengthens care centred around the whānau.

Lived experience of the health system

Ata brings lived experience shaped by loss, inequity and contrast – having seen both when the system works well, and when it does not.

‘Through personal experience with family navigating major health crises (terminal illness), I’ve seen just how vastly support can differ from one person to the next. That disparity is something you only truly understand when you live through it.’

One experience felt coordinated, compassionate and responsive. The other did not.

That contrast continues to shape how Ata sees the system, and why they see consumer contribution as being key to improving it.

‘As Pasifika, the system can be really hard – around language, around cultural safety... all of that.’

For Ata, this is not abstract. It is about ensuring other whānau do not encounter the same gaps.

Lived experience is expertise

Consumers bring expertise that cannot be gathered through data alone. Lived experience helps organisations understand:

- how services are experienced in real life
- where there are barriers to access
- how culture and communication affect care
- what safe and responsive services feel like for communities.

These perspectives help strengthen service design and support more equitable outcomes.

From experience to engagement

The NRCC provides a formal mechanism for lived experience to inform regional decision-making.

Members meet regularly and provide feedback on projects and service design.

For Ata, participation is about contributing insight grounded in real-world experience and making sense of how that insight fits within system processes and timelines.

Projects often come with significant complexity, and time is limited.

‘... there’s a lot in here that, sometimes, we would have to unpack ... and with a limited amount of time, there’s [only] so much you can do.’

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There is an ongoing tension between wanting to contribute meaningfully and the practical constraints of how engagement is structured.

What works well

Ata continues to contribute because there are important aspects of the experience that are working well and the overall purpose remains meaningful.

Diverse voices around the table

‘Hearing everyone’s perspectives – it opens your eyes.’

Different lived experiences broaden understanding and raise issues that might otherwise go unseen. Members of the NRCC have a unique form of expertise that offers insightful perspectives and solutions to the projects that are presented to them.

Diversity strengthens insight

Different lived experiences surface issues that may otherwise be missed. Diversity helps organisations understand:

- Barriers effecting different communities
- Cultural safety considerations
- How services are experienced across contexts

A platform to name inequity

‘Being able to look at something with the community eyes, especially around inequities, what could be missing and then having input.’

The NRCC provides space to raise cultural safety concerns and identify access barriers. These conversations are not always easy, but for Ata, an excellent outcome is one where the community’s perspective is valued and utilised and the cultural safety of the people is preserved.

Identifying opportunities for strengthened focus

Ata is clear that this work has value and about the conditions that would help it have the greatest impact.

Engage early

‘Projects have already started [before] our input. If we’re coming in after it’s already started ... it’s hard to shift things.’

Early engagement allows lived experience to shape direction, not just respond to it.

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Early engagement shapes decisions

Consumers need to be involved at the beginning of projects to influence direction, not just respond to decisions made. Early engagement enables:

- Shaping priorities and design before they are fixed
- Identifying risks and unintended impacts early
- Stronger alignment with community needs and values

When engagement happens late, opportunities to influence outcomes are limited.

Make time for real conversation

Across Ata's experience, time is the most persistent constraint.

Time in and around meetings is important. The dialogue is what really starts to open up the thought-provoking conversations and ultimately useful feedback on the various projects and programmes.

'The conversation is where the real insight comes through.'

There is an understanding that the system itself operates within constraints. The pressure is shared but still felt.

Time enables meaningful contribution

Meaningful engagement requires enough time to:

- Read and understand material
- Unpack complex information
- Ask questions
- Connect lived experience to system design
- Contribute thoughtfully

The most valuable insights often emerge through discussion. not just written feedback.

Close the loop

Being included matters, but for Ata, impact matters, too.

'Having a seat is one thing ... but you want to know what happened because of what we said?'

Understanding is important to Ata.

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Closing the loop builds trust and impact

Consumers need to see how their input is used. This includes:

- Clarity on how feedback informed decisions
- Visibility of what changed (or didn't, and why)
- Ongoing communication across project stages

Closing the loop helps consumers understand where their voice makes a difference and how consumer input contributes over time. Understanding these things helps strengthen the work and the visibility of impact.

The inspiration that guides Ata

Seeing what's possible has inspired Ata to stay involved.

'I know what an outcome looks like when it honours our culture and values.'

That belief creates a strong sense of what is possible as well as frustration when the system falls short. Knowing what is possible is what keeps Ata motivated to keep contributing.

A final reflection

Behind every piece of feedback is not just an opinion but an experience, and a hope that things can be different for someone else.

Health New Zealand is continually seeking feedback from those involved in this work and improving based on the evidence presented in an effort to strengthen the NRCC's effectiveness. This case study contributes to that evidence. By continuing to build on what works well and responding thoughtfully to consumer experience, it is well positioned to deepen its impact and strengthen consumer involvement across the Northern Region.

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