

THE POLICY CHALLENGE

The LHINs have been working hard to build relationships with their communities and to involve consumers, service providers and other stakeholders in initial planning and priority setting. A wide range of different methods and forums have been used:

- Central East has recognized that social, cultural and economic barriers prevent many people from participating in traditional public meetings. They will be making special efforts to reach out to youth, people whose first language is not English and other communities, and will be paying for transportation, providing interpreters and mounting specific outreach to particular communities. Scarborough CHCs and other agencies are setting up consultations in their communities.
- Toronto Central employed e surveys, stakeholder meetings, public information sessions and action planning days.
- South East set up a project team of representatives seconded from key health care sectors for a day per week with the goal of getting beyond mere public consultation and existing silo mentalities. It intends to post its draft report and undertake extensive public review before finalizing its integration report.

The challenge now is to build on this start:

- how to sustain community involvement and enthusiasm beyond this initial round;
- how to assess how this initial round worked and improve it for the future;
- how to ensure that the full diversity of community voices, needs and perspectives is included in all aspects of LHINs decision making; and
- how to permanently embed community involvement in LHINs planning processes and work culture?

DIRECTIONS AND OPTIONS TO MEET THIS CHALLENGE

There are four key directions that will build community engagement productively and effectively into the fabric of all LHINs:

- learning from the first round of engagement on what works and what doesn't in particular communities;
- sharing and building on the lessons learned among LHINs;
- ensuring community members play a role in assessing the findings and implications of initial community consultations and deliberations, and in feeding these conclusions into planning for the LHINs' first integration reports in the fall; and
- sustaining responsive and effective community engagement for the long-term.

Assessing Initial Community Engagement

How did the early rounds of community engagement work out: from the LHINs' point of view and from their community partners?

No doubt, the Boards and management teams in each LHIN will be addressing this internally. They be considering how the logistics worked out, how many people and groups were involved, and whether communities and were happy with the process. However, the real issue is not so much process and stakeholder management, but how to get the most effective input and ideas from community partners, and how to build that input into LHINs planning.

The LHINs must involve their community partners in evaluating the initial round of consultation and communication. This will take as many forms as the initial consultations, adapted to the particular communities and processes that took place:

- In the Toronto Central LHIN three coordinating networks took a lead in coordinating action planning days on specific issues. These networks should all be involved in the evaluation.
- Other LHINs should also bring together the networks, agencies and residents involved to evaluate their processes.

One consistent action that could be taken in all 14 LHINs is to hold a community conference very soon to:

- report on the findings from the consultations and planning days – as a check-back mechanism; and
- reflect on how the process worked and can be made better for the future.

The goal of all this would be to look forward – what lessons can be learned for ongoing consultations and collaborations?

Lessons Learned Across the LHINs

Given the wide variety of methods used and communities involved, there are going to be many positive – and some, not so positive – lessons learned as the LHINs and their partners assess the early community engagement. It will be crucial to share these lessons among the LHINs and to build on what worked best.

The 14 CEOs and Directors of Planning, Integration and Community Engagement will certainly be meeting to share their experiences. But that should be taken further by:

- choosing several community representatives from the post-consultation evaluation conferences recommended above for each LHIN;
- convening a province-wide working conference of these community representatives;
- with the same goal of assessing and sharing lessons learned on how to develop the most effective and responsive community engagement.

This model of community representatives from all the LHINs coming together in working conferences could be used not just for this immediate evaluation of the early engagement, but for sharing lessons learned on an ongoing basis. One of the main challenges of the LHINs will be knowledge management on a province-wide scale:

- just as senior management regularly meet, so too could effective forums for province-wide sharing among community partners be institutionalized;
- one such forum could be annual conferences of community representatives from every LHIN;
- the Ministry will need to facilitate this cross-community engagement, just as it helps LHINs communicate and plan in a coordinated fashion.

First Test: Community Role in Developing First Integration Reports

Community input and involvement have to be seen to have an impact -- otherwise people and service providers won't bother to participate. The first test of this will be what happens as a result of the consultations: to what extent will the issues, perspectives and recommendations brought forward by residents, community groups and community-based service providers be taken forward within the LHINs planning processes.

Each LHIN should take the following actions:

- post a draft report summarizing the main findings of its consultations, with enough time for reflection and input;
- convene a meeting in their communities to check-back and validate the findings (as recommended earlier);
- set out a transparent process whereby those findings – plus the 2005 integration priority reports prepared by working groups in each region and other relevant information and analysis -- will be incorporated into the LHINs first integration priority reports;
- involve community representatives in developing these reports:
 - this, of course, is the trickiest issue;
 - drafting the report is the primary role of LHINs staff and the ultimate responsibility of their Boards, and these responsibilities must not be confused;
 - but effective and timely advisory or working groups could be set up – and the reports will be that much better for community involvement;
- publish draft integration priority reports, again with time and opportunity for public and community comment before submitting them to the Ministry.

This is an ambitious process, especially given the still tight timelines facing the LHINs to get their reports in. And community members are not naïve: no one expects all their recommendations to be adopted and all know that the LHINs will be balancing many competing pressures and interests. But the LHINs need to show their community partners that their input and involvement will have an impact, and they need to show they can produce reports that reflect the priorities and perspectives of their communities. The way to do that is to involve community members in actually developing the reports.

Sustaining Community Engagement

The final challenge is sustaining community engagement and building long-term collaborative relationships. Community involvement in planning has to be both **systematic** and **significant**.

What significant means was illustrated above:

- The LHINs need a transparent process where community partners are involved in analyzing the initial consultations, and helping to turn this into effective input. This cannot just be a token report back after all the priorities are set.
- And this cannot just be a one-off process either. Community partners or representatives need to be involved in monitoring the planning process to ensure that community input is taken seriously. This, of course, doesn't mean that every community recommendation is accepted – rather, that the full range of input is analyzed and responded to.

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- Advisory bodies can make this ongoing involvement and monitoring transparent and effective.

Systematic involvement of community partners means:

- building community involvement in at all stages of the planning and budget processes. The LHINs have set out planning cycles comprised of:
 - identifying needs and gaps;
 - developing plans and priorities that reflect and balance those needs;
 - allocating resources to put those priorities into action;
 - monitoring and evaluating outcomes and how well plans and services worked out;
 - then starting the planning cycle all over again and re-adjusting for the next year;
- community representatives need to be involved at each stage in the cycle;
- but expectations must be modest and realistic for the nature of this involvement:
 - staff are going to play the key role in developing plans and priorities – community representatives advise;
 - there are always going to be trade-offs;
 - consultation and involvement can't be endless or it will not be effective;
- but significant community involvement will make the inevitable compromises between competing local interests and priorities easier, not harder;
- innovative and effective mechanisms can be experimented with:
 - different forms of community advisory committees, especially more local or neighbourhood planning forums that can identify priorities and feed them up into LHIN-wide planning processes;
 - different forms of input and advice, ranging from going out to community drop-in centres to virtual meetings and priority setting exercises;
 - all of this will need to be adapted to the special challenges facing particular LHINs – whether the huge distances in the North, those that span dense urban and sparse rural communities, and the incredibly diverse major urban centres;
- the result could be not simply more engaged and supportive communities, but far richer and more responsive LHIN planning and priorities.

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