

Bringing Consumers into the room

**A scoping project to look at establishing an
Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group and other
consumer engagement strategies**

Project Report

WA Peaks Forum

September 2009

Table of Contents

Executive Summary	i
1 Methodology	1
2 The project context	3
3 Practice examples of consumer participation	6
4 Options for the WA Peaks Forum	9
5 Specific considerations to participation	19
6 Summary.....	23
7 Recommendations	25
Appendix One: People and groups consulted.....	27
Appendix Two: Types of housing issues.....	28
Appendix Three: Options for consumer involvement.....	29
Appendix Four: Outline for terms of reference.....	30

Executive Summary

The WA Peaks Forum is facilitated by the Western Australian Council of Social Service (WACOSS) and comprises 24 peak organisations, covering a broad spectrum of the non-government human services sector. The forum provides opportunities for information sharing, networking, mutual support, development of shared positions and policy responses.

The WA Peaks Forum has identified affordable housing as a key priority issue. Not only is housing a basic need, it is a critical factor in achieving successful outcomes for people - particularly people on low incomes, the ageing, people with disabilities and those experiencing problems with mental health, drug and alcohol, family violence or homelessness. As a network of peak organisations, members of the forum recognise that housing is an issue that crosses service areas.

Housing policy is also a current priority area for the State and Commonwealth Governments. A range of new policies, initiatives and partnerships has been introduced or are being considered. Directly or indirectly, forum members are actively engaged in a multitude of discussions with governments, the private sector and key stakeholders on the development of housing policy and housing services.

In June 2009, the WA Peaks Forum undertook a project to scope the proposal of establishing an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group. The driver for the project was to ensure that consumer perspectives are included in the housing policy work that forum members participate in and to support consumer participation in the planning and evaluation of housing.

Sue Ash, Chief Executive Officer WACOSS, and Bronwyn Kitching, Executive Officer Shelter WA, acted as a management group to the project. Christina Kadmos was engaged to undertake the project, which ran over 13 weeks from early July 2009 to the end of September 2009.

Whilst the original brief for this project focused on the scoping of one particular model of consumer inclusion, that is a consumer reference group, early in the project it was decided to broaden the brief to include alternative engagement strategies. The

project methodology included a literature review and discussions with WA Peak Forum members, agencies undertaking consumer participation, Government Departments and consumers.

A succinct description of the two main ways in which consumer issues are 'brought to the table' was provided by a consumer consultant interviewed for this project: one is where non-consumers carry a consumer message and the other is where consumers carry their own message. The work of this project has been to look at how both forms of consumer inclusion can be enhanced.

The project also explored how the specific issue of housing consumer participation links with current developments regarding consumer participation in general. These developments include an increased acknowledgement that including consumers in planning and evaluation is good business, and proposals to build the capacity of consumer representation at a state and national level.

A consultation paper written for the project outlined the key findings of the literature review and preliminary agency consultations in the areas of:

- why consumer participation is important;
- models of consumer participation;
- barriers to participation;
- what assists participation;
- the housing policy context; and
- the consumer policy context.

This final project report builds upon the consultation paper to further outline:

- practice examples of consumer participation gained from the project consultations;
- options for the WA Peaks Forum to consider in regards to affordable housing consumers and consumer participation in general;
- specific issues regarding participation models gained from the project consultations; and
- recommendations for where to go next.

Section One of the report provides details of the project methodology. Section Two summaries the policy context and Section Three outlines the practice examples of

consumer engagement strategies that were found in agency discussions and the literature review. In Section Four, a range of options for how the WA Peaks Forum can include housing consumer perspectives are discussed. Section Five looks at specific issues regarding consumer participation that need to be considered regardless of the particular strategies chosen. Section Six summaries the key findings and recommendations for the WA Peaks Forum to consider are provided in Section Seven.

All people spoken to as part of this project agreed that affordable housing was a priority issue and strongly supported the WA Peaks Forum initiating ways to engage consumers in affordable housing discussions. There was also strong consensus that consumers bring a unique and important perspective that cannot be fully represented by non-consumer perspectives.

Whilst the need to include consumers was widely recognised, the project found that there were differing ideas about how best to do this and which strategies are more effective. The majority of consumers and a number of agencies consulted support the general idea of some form of consumer reference group. However, there were also concerns raised about the practicality, recruitment, representativeness, resourcing and effectiveness of consumer reference groups. This report presents a number of engagement strategies for the WA Peaks Forum to consider, including that of establishing an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group.

Finally, the work of this project found that consumer participation strategies work best when they are part of an overall consumer engagement strategy that include a range of methods to suit the preferences of different consumers, as well as the objectives and available resources of the group wishing to include consumer perspectives. All strategies require clear objectives, resourcing and, most of all, a genuine commitment to wanting to bring consumers into the room, an authentic belief that consumers perspectives are imperative and a real respect for consumers themselves.

1 Methodology

The project methodology consisted of:

1. Scoping models used by agencies to promote consumer participation. Agencies contacted and visited were chosen for their connection to housing consumers or use of consumer participation strategies (not necessarily housing specific). Over 22 organisations were contacted and 13 were visited. A list of all agencies contacted for this project is provided in Appendix One.
2. Discussions about the project with the Departments of Housing, Commerce and Child Protection and the Disability Services Commission.
3. A literature review on consumer participation in general, housing consumer participation in particular and affordable housing policy development. The key findings of the review were presented in the project's consultation paper.
4. A consultation paper written and distributed to WA Peak Forum members with questions relating to the formation of an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group and alternative strategies for consumer participation. Four WA Peak Forum members provided specific feedback on the consultation paper. The project consultant also attended a meeting of the WA Peaks Forum to discuss the consultation questions.
5. Consultations with consumer representatives through meeting with the Mental Health Consumers Advisory Group of WA, hosting a consumer focus group (attended by six consumers) and interviews with consumer consultants. Participants to the focus group were recruited from WA Peak Forum members and existing networks. Focus group participants were paid a participation fee. In discussion with consumers, people were keen to share the types of housing issues that they want addressed as well as looking at ways in which they wish to be consulted. The types of housing concerns raised by consumers during this project are listed in Appendix Two.

1.1 Limitations and considerations to methodology

Due to the time constraints of the project, the scoping of current consumer participation initiatives was limited to looking at a small sample rather than a more extensive audit of sector practice examples. There are many more agencies that could have been contacted.

The project management group and consultant decided to focus energy on visiting organisations with an emphasis on consumer participation and consulting with WA Peak Forum members through the use of a consultation paper. Given the low response rate to the consultation paper, it was probably not a very effective strategy for gaining input from forum members. The project consultant could have met with forum members individually to discuss the project and capture their ideas, but this would have left little time to scope broad models of consumer involvement and discuss the project with external organisations.

From an original ten registrations, six people attended the focus group meeting, with three apologies and one non-attendance on the day. The apologies and non-attendances meant that the focus group did not end up including people from CaLD communities or Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, although recruitment of people from these groups were undertaken. The focus group also did not include a representative from a homelessness perspective. It did include people with disabilities, a social housing tenant, a private rental tenant, a student and someone with experience in community housing and residential caravan parks.

2 The project context

The project objective to include housing consumer perspectives in housing policy, planning and evaluation occurs within a context of rapid housing policy changes, as well as broader policy discussions around consumer advocacy, consumer informed service delivery and social inclusion. In project discussions, the project management group was mindful of these broader contexts and wished to ensure that links between this project and 'the bigger picture' were noted. Elements of the broader context within which this project sits are summarised below.

2.1 Housing policy

Housing is a policy priority for all levels of government and the non-government sector. A number of initiatives and policy changes have occurred and are occurring that will result in significant changes to affordable housing strategies. Examples of specific policy directions were outlined in the project consultation paper.

Non-government organisations find themselves responding to and participating in a housing policy landscape that is shifting. As one manager of a housing agency put it, it is difficult enough for housing workers to keep up with all of the changes, let alone housing consumers.

The WA Peaks Forum recognises that, within the housing policy work done by its members, there is a need to connect with and listen to the housing consumer perspective and to provide opportunities for consumer voices to be heard. As expressed by one forum member responding to the project consultation paper:

In order to redress the balance between government, community housing providers and other parties working on establishing affordable housing, a consumer voice needs to be represented.

In Western Australia, there are limited avenues for capturing housing consumer voices and no funded generic consumer organisation that can resource and facilitate the input of housing consumers. Unlike the health and disability sectors, housing consumer participation comes from a comparatively less resourced and historically less developed base.

2.2 Consumer framework

The proposal to establish an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group is placed within a context of increased acknowledgement of the importance of consumer advocacy and perspectives in market regulation.

Following a review by the Productivity Commission and arising from the work of the Council of Australian Governments', a number of reforms have been proposed to Australia's consumer policy framework. The reform discussions recognise the need for effective consumer advocacy, research and participation as part of the national framework. One outcome of the Productivity Commission's Review was a recommendation to look at models for funding a national consumer body and consumer research. In May 2009, the Australian Government released an issues paper, *Consumer Voices*, which explores this recommendation further.

A joint submission by Western Australian organisations to the *Consumer Voices* paper supported the establishment of a national consumer advocacy body to "champion the changing of policies and practices of government and business to benefit consumers" (Joint Submission July 2009). Further, the submission argued that it was critical that the "national model for supporting consumer advocacy is based on strong, effective and appropriately resourced consumer bodies and networks at the State and community level".

2.3 Consumer informed service delivery

The principle of consumer input in evaluating and planning services has gained increased support over the last decade or so. Forms of consumer participation have been part of health and disability services for some time and many WA health services have a consumer consultation plan, consumer advisory group and/or work with consumer representatives. Consumer informed service delivery is also being increasingly acknowledged in industry specific service standards e.g. National Community Housing Standards, National Standards for Mental Health.

One model of consumer informed service delivery is individualised purchasing models, such as those currently used in disability services and employment

assistance programs. As articulated by WACOSS in its Emerging Issues Forum, the "State and Commonwealth Governments are both demonstrating an interest in moving towards individualised models of service purchasing, providing individuals with control of their needs assessment, purchasing, and choices" (Emerging Issue Forum PPP 29 May 2009). The WA Economic Audit Committee is exploring models of consumer co-production in service delivery as part of its terms of reference, with their final report due in October.

2.4 Social inclusion

Social inclusion is a key policy objective of the Australian Government and includes ensuring that people have a voice so that they can influence decisions that affect them. Consumer participation as one means of social inclusion was raised by a number of people consulted for this project. From this perspective, it is not only because consumer engagement results in better outcomes and we seek to involve consumers, but because the act of involvement itself builds social capital, promotes participatory democracy and addresses social inclusion and social justice objectives.

In the context of affordable housing consumers, providing ways for people to be heard acts to value and empower groups of people who are often disempowered and stigmatised. The means of participation can be as powerful, if not more powerful, than the ends. For example, tenant associations can not only provide a link between tenants and landlords, the act of being involved in a tenant association can build social relationships and increase the skills and confidence of the individuals involved.

As one consumer of mental health services explained, when she is valued, respected, asked and included, it makes her feel better in herself, provides a way of connecting to others, and reminds herself that she has value and something to contribute.

3 Practice examples of consumer participation

A component of this project was to scope different models of consumer engagement. Based upon the literature review, general types of participation strategies, what assists and hinders participation and principles around participation were outlined in the project consultation paper. Specific practice examples of consumer participation initiatives that were shared or read about as part of this project are listed below.

These examples are by no means exhaustive of all of the ways in which organisations encourage consumer participation, but provide a sample of some.

Examples from government

- 👍 Each region in the Department of Housing currently runs at least two regional open forums a year where the regional manager is present and engages directly with Aboriginal tenants. Key strategies to achieve successful forums have included use of local networks, use of relevant language and being responsive. Information from the forums is collected centrally to help inform Department evaluation and planning.
- 👍 The Disability Services Commission seeks to consult with consumers through identifiable consumer groups and individuals. The Commission sets up advisory committees as needed, which include consumers. One mechanism that the Commission uses is the reference network, where anyone can speak directly to a member of the Board. Network meetings are advertised and people make an appointment to meet with a Board member and have their say.
- 👍 The Department of Commerce uses a variety of methods to undertake public and consumer consultations. These include discussion papers, forums, surveys, focus groups and the use of consumer representatives.
- 👍 The previous SAAP State Advisory Committee included a consumer representative. It is unclear if this will continue in the soon to be established Council on Homelessness.

Examples from consumers and consumer groups

- 👍 A consumer advocate started up TURF (Tenants United for Rental Fairness) in 2008. The group met on a number of occasions but is currently inactive.
- 👍 A public housing tenant has established the Homeswest and Affiliated Tenants Association as a support network for tenants.
- 👍 There are ten social housing rental co-operatives in Western Australia. Housing co-operatives are an example of high consumer participation as the housing is tenant managed. Co-operatives are involved in housing policy discussion forums and have a peak body, the Federation of Housing Collectives.
- 👍 The Metropolitan Association of Tenant Groups Inc. was a group of consumers who tried to support public housing tenants. The group was in operation for 14 years before folding in 2006.
- 👍 The Health Consumers Council of WA (HCC) provides information, advice and training for people wanting to be involved in both consumer representation and participation. The Council has representatives involved in over 60 committees, covering a range of health issues, locally, state wide and nationally. People can register their interest to be involved and consumer membership to the HCC is free and actively encouraged. The HCC runs a Health Issues Group that meets once a month and is open to any health consumer wishing to discuss an area of concern or interest. The Council also facilitates a consumer support network.

Examples from community services

- 👍 The Family Inclusion Network of Western Australia (FIN WA) provides services for natural parents in crisis following the removal of their child/children. Consumers sit on the Board and the agency is often asked to provide parent representatives on external committees. One way that FIN WA has encouraged consumers to carry their own message has been through supporting parents to present a workshop at a recent conference. FIN WA is currently exploring peer support models.

- 👍 Ruah Community Services run peer leader programs where consumers are trained and supported to provide services to other consumers.
- 👍 The HealthRight is a project facilitated by UWA that includes a peer support service. A consumer consultant recommended this project as a good example of bringing in consumers early in the planning process. Development of the project included close communication with consumers from initial inception through project development and implementation.

Housing examples from other states

- 👍 The Victorian Department of Housing has a Tenant Participation Framework, which includes requirements for tenant participation at a local and regional level. Commitments include funding for volunteer public tenant groups and a peak public tenant body. Twice a year, representatives from tenant groups, regional tenant forums and the peak meet with the Director of Housing.
- 👍 The Victorian Public Tenants Association was established in 2001 and is the peak body for public housing tenants living in Victoria. It is run by a committee of management made up of elected public housing tenants. The organisation is funded by the Office of Housing through the Public Housing Advocacy Program.
- 👍 Housing NSW has established a Social Housing Tenants Advisory Committee that comprises social housing tenants from across NSW. The Tenant Participation Resource Services Program is a Housing NSW initiative to provide increased access to information, advice and opportunities to participate.
- 👍 The NSW Community Housing Tenant Network is a group of tenants who are working to represent the interests of community housing tenants in NSW, support tenant leaders and representatives and connect to the wider tenants' movement. The network was started in 2005 and receives support from the Office of Community Housing and NSW Federation of Housing Associations.

4 Options for the WA Peaks Forum

This section applies the types of engagement strategies that were detailed in the consultation paper and the practice examples provided in Section Three, to outline a range of options that the WA Peaks Forum could use to include consumer voices. The proposal to establish a consumer reference group is discussed, as well as alternatives. These strategies can be used by the WA Peaks Forum as a whole or by individual forum members. Appendix Three provides a list of all ideas canvassed or suggested.

Which engagement strategies the WA Peaks Forum focuses on depends upon what the forum wishes to achieve and the level of resources available. For example, a consumer reference group lends itself to the aim of ongoing consultation and creating a defined consumer group to engage with. But it is also resource intensive and requires ongoing commitment on the part of consumers and organisations.

The findings of the literature review, provided in the consultation paper, suggest that engagement strategies work best when part of a suite of initiatives within an overall consumer participation plan. This allows for different strategies to be used for different purposes and to meet the diverse preferences of consumers.

4.1 Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group

A central option being considered by the WA Peaks Forum is to establish an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group, as reflected in this project's brief. A reference group involves a finite number of people that meet on a regular basis to discuss a particular agenda (which may be open or defined). The purpose of the reference group is usually to advise or inform another body or person so as to assist with evaluation, planning, policy or ideas development. In this case, the group would advise or provide input into the WA Peaks Forum and its members.

Strengths of the consumer reference group model include:

- It provides an avenue for consumers to come together and share information and perspectives.

- It provides an avenue for consumers to share their stories with the body being advised and be included in policy discussions.
- It provides an *ongoing* mechanism for consultation.
- It allows for the development of discussions and deliberations over time.
- It provides a formative experience for the consumers and organisations involved i.e. as consumers and organisations both gain experience from the exercise of engagement, the outcomes of the engagement improve.

If an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group is established by the WA Peaks Forum, its role could be to help inform the forum of housing issues from a consumer perspective, so as to add value to the work being done by the forum and its members on housing policy and initiatives. The reference group could report to the forum but, depending upon the terms of reference, may also be able to make independent submissions directly to external groups. The extent to which the group is a sub-committee of the WA Peaks Forum, or an autonomous reference group that is facilitated by the forum, would need to be explored and clarified in the development of terms of reference. An outline of areas that might be covered by a terms of reference is provided in Appendix Four. The Victorian Public Interest Law Clearing House Homeless Persons Legal Clinic has an excellent template for a consumer advisory group terms of reference.

Resources

A consumer reference group would require not just administrative and secretarial support but also process and policy support, with a central contact person to oversee the group and authorise administrative expenses. A part-time executive officer or policy worker assigned to support the group would be necessary, in much the same way that WACOSS currently resources the WA Peaks Forum. Good induction and consumer representative training would be essential. The question of participation fees would need to be considered (see Section Five).

Recruitment

A key consideration in establishing a reference group is achieving as broad representation in membership as possible. One element of consumer consultation, as expressed by an agency representative, is the need to ensure that it is not just the same consumer voices that get heard. A consumer consultant with many years

experience in consumer participation stressed the importance of a well developed expression of interest document and selection process when forming a reference group. She advocated selection criteria that require consumer representative nominees to demonstrate an ability to consult with and represent consumers and to identify what they think some of the issues may be.

One suggestion put forward by an agency and flagged in the consultation paper, is that nominations for a WA Peaks Forum consumer reference group come from the agencies that forum members represent. This recruitment strategy would involve forum members linking with their membership to identify and nominate suitable candidates who are then selected upon the basis of the selection criteria.

A strength of this idea is that the forum member that has nominated the consumer would provide support and information to the consumer, thereby addressing one of the key problems of engagement methods that use consumer representatives - the need to provide ongoing assistance. For example, the forum member could assist the consumer with the writing of a nomination application, provide technical support during their time on the group and work with the consumer to action matters arising from the group. Another advantage is that the recruitment method would assist in achieving a critical forum objective, that of ensuring that housing is considered from a cross sector perspective that includes specific considerations such as mental health, disability, aging, drug and alcohol services, domestic violence, youth and children. A challenge in the recruitment strategy would be to ensure that housing consumers not directly represented by forum members, such as Aboriginal housing consumers, are represented in the consumer reference group. This could be achieved by having a selection criteria and processes that allows for nominations from non-forum members and/or a terms of reference that requires a defined mix of housing consumers.

Consumer representative or consumer participant?

It is important to distinguish between those times when consumers are asked to represent a wider constituency and connection to a consumer group is necessary (consumer representative); and those times when they are asked to represent themselves only and there is not an expectation to represent others (consumer participant).

As a general principle, supported by the Health Consumers Council and Consumers Health Forum of Australia, a consumer representative should be an active member of a consumer group - nominated by the group and accountable to them. This principle was strongly supported by a number of consumer advocates interviewed for this project. The importance of consumer representatives being connected to consumer groups is twofold. Firstly, it provides a 'constituency' for the consumer representative that allows for informed input beyond the representative's own personal experience. Secondly, it provides for a level of accountability and support so that the consumer representative isn't isolated in their role.

In the context of affordable housing consumers, the principle of connection to consumer groups can be problematic because of the limited number of consumer groups in WA related to housing. For some areas of representation e.g. representing people with a disability in housing, it is feasible for a consumer representative to be connected to a disability consumer group, however for other areas e.g. representing low income private renters or public housing tenants, there are few specific consumer groups to draw from.

In forming a consumer reference group, the terms of reference should be clear on the extent to which people are being asked to be a consumer representative (and, if so, how connection to other consumers could occur) or a consumer participant.

Reporting to the WA Peaks Forum

A possible challenge in establishing a consumer reference group as a sub-committee of the WA Peaks Forum is that the forum is a network of organisations and not an organisation in itself. For consumers asked to sit on the reference group, the relationship between the reference group, the WA Peaks Forum and individual forum members, may seem vague and without clear direction. Consumers would need to know exactly where the reference group sits in relation to the forum and that their contributions lead to concrete outcomes. The terms of reference would need to ensure that there are clear, regular lines of communication between the forum, forum members, the housing work of the forum, and the reference group.

An alternative is that a reference group reports to a specific WA Peaks Forum member with a housing focus, such as Shelter WA or WACOSS - possibly providing

a more defined 'home' and place for a consumer reference group. Both options have pros and cons. When forum members were asked in the consultation questions whether a reference group should report to the WA Peaks Forum as a whole or a specific organisational member of the forum, four responses were received - two preferred a model whereby the reference group reported to the WA Peaks Forum, one preferred reporting to a specific organisation and one was open to both models.

If the WA Peaks Forum decides to establish an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group, steps involved would include:

1. Establishing the terms of reference and lines of communication;
2. Deciding on participation fees;
3. Determining the 'job description', selection criteria and selection process;
4. Determining how the group will be resourced;
5. Developing induction and training programs; and
6. Implementing, monitoring and evaluating the initiative.

4.2 Joint agency/consumer working group

An alternative to establishing a consumer reference group is for the WA Peaks Forum to set up a joint agency/consumer working group on housing that includes both policy workers from forum members and consumers. For example, during the work of the Social Housing Taskforce, the WA Peaks Forum could have established a joint cross agency working party that included equal numbers of workers and consumers to provide input into the review.

Strengths of the joint working group model include:

- It brings consumers and agencies *together* for dialogue and collaboration. A consumer reference group model is primarily a group of consumers - joint working groups bring workers and consumers together in equal numbers.
- The joint working group model allows housing workers to assist consumers to better understand the policy or initiatives being discussed and consumers can assist workers to better understand policy and initiatives from a consumer perspective - there is cross fertilisation.
- Joint working groups can address the isolation sometimes felt by consumer representatives and can address the concern often expressed by consumer

- The more trained and well supported consumer representatives there are, the more they will get used.

A number of people consulted for this project suggested that the WA Peaks Forum could develop a register of housing consumers drawn from local agencies and provide training, support and links to enable people to nominate for membership to various committees and taskforces. A challenge for this option is that, as a loose network and not a consumer organisation, the WA Peaks Forum is probably not the best structure for recruiting and training consumer representatives. This strategy would more strongly sit within a resourced housing specific or generic consumer organisation. Nevertheless, the WA Peaks Forum could play a significant role in advocating for the inclusion of consumer representatives in housing discussion forums and in advocating for the formation of a body that could support housing consumer representatives in much the same way as the Health Consumers Council does for health consumers.

In discussing the representative model with consumers for this project, the members of the Mental Health Consumer Advisory Group of WA were not particularly in favour of consumer representation models that rely on only one consumer representative in a committee, believing this strategy to often be tokenistic and ineffective. People who attended the focus group discussion shared a similar concern. Both groups were more in favour of models that allow consumers to meet together or where there are a number of consumer representatives on a committee.

If the WA Peaks Forum decides to look at the consumer representative strategy further, the Health Consumers Council, a forum member, would be a valuable source of expertise.

4.4 Focus groups and forums

In addition to, or instead of, establishing a consumer reference group or joint working party, the WA Peaks Forum could host consumer focus groups and/or public forums to better listen to and incorporate the consumer voice in housing. Topics could be broad, such as housing affordability, and open to all affordable housing consumers,

or specific, such as design improvement ideas in social housing, and be open to a defined group of housing consumers.

Strengths of focus groups and forums include:

- They do not require consumers to commit to more than a one off attendance.
- They do not require organisations to commit to more than a one off initiative.
- They can be used flexibly to respond to questions, ideas or proposals.
- They can be organised within short timeframes, as required.

Focus groups aim to recruit about a dozen participants while forums usually aim to include a large number of participants. Hosting a focus group as part of this project provided valuable and unique information and insight. The Department of Housing's model of regional forums for Aboriginal tenants appears to be an initiative that has worked well and provides an example of how forums can be effective.

Holding regular housing forums can also be a good way of recruiting consumers who may be interested in further consumer involvement on working groups, reference groups or for any other consumer engagement strategy.

4.5 Housing consumer surveys

Surveys are another way in which the WA Peaks Forum can consult with housing consumers. One forum member suggested that the WA Peaks Forum undertake an affordable housing consumer survey on what people consider to be their major concerns with the provision, or lack of, affordable housing. Once the survey and data collection is completed, the forum would meet to discuss the findings and decide how the results should be referred or actioned.

Strengths of consumer surveys include:

- They are discrete projects that do not require ongoing resourcing.
- It is possible to seek funding for consumer surveys as a discrete project.
- They do not require consumers to make an ongoing or time consuming commitment.
- Surveys can collect large sample sizes - potentially increasing validity and representativeness of the consumer input received.

- Surveys can allow input from consumers who find it hard or don't want to access other forms of involvement e.g. they live in non-metropolitan areas, are home bound or not are comfortable in attending meetings.
- Surveys can provide a level of quantitative and qualitative data that can be very useful in submissions to government and decision making bodies.
- Survey results can be published, adding to the body of knowledge as a whole about consumer concerns and preferences.

Surveys are a form of research and require specialised skills in design, sampling, reliability, validity, collection and data analysis. If the WA Peaks Forum chooses to undertake a housing consumer survey, depending upon the scale of the project, it could be developed as a joint initiative with a research centre. In Western Australia, the Department of Commerce partners with the University of WA to run the Centre for Advanced Consumer Research; this centre could be a possible research partner, although linked to the Law School, it tends towards more legal than housing research. The Housing and Urban Research Institute of Western Australia or Research Centre for Stronger Communities are other possible partners.

4.6 Connecting to members

One way that the WA Peaks Forum currently connects to consumer perspectives is through their member organisations. As peak organisations, forum members are connected to an extensive network of local agencies that are working with affordable housing consumers every day. An effective strategy for bringing the consumer voice into the room is to enhance ways in which consumer stories can be carried from the local level, through the peak organisations and into the housing work of the forum. This already happens to a large extent, but there could be room for more formalised mechanisms that capture consumer stories and delineate the consumer perspective from the service delivery perspective.

4.7 Facilitating consumer participation as a whole

As discussed in the consultation paper and previously in this paper, ways to involve housing consumers in affordable housing discussions sits within a broader context of consumer participation in all segments of social, economic, cultural and

environmental deliberations. Consumer engagement in social policy works best when it occurs on a multiple of levels, across a range of sectors and is supported by a network of consumer specific groups - both funded and voluntary. Consumer engagement is often referred to within the framework of the 'consumer movement' - which is about informing, empowering and including consumers across the board.

In wishing to enhance consumer engagement, the WA Peaks Forum could look not only at ways that the forum can directly consult with housing consumers, but also how the forum can support consumer participation in general. The broader the overall base of consumer participation, the greater the ability to bring consumers into the specific strategies outlined in this section.

Ways of promoting consumer participation in general could include:

- A WA Peaks Forum consumer participation project that captures consumer participation strategies currently undertaken by the sector and ways of enhancing participation. The project could include workshops, audits, idea banks, resource development or training.
- Encouraging the Department of Housing to invest in social housing tenant participation initiatives, as occurs in Victoria and NSW.
- Supporting the establishment of state and national consumer advocacy groups, in line with the recent joint submission to the Australian Government's issues paper, *Consumer Voices*.

5 Specific considerations to participation

The consultation paper raised a number of broad issues in undertaking consumer engagement initiatives. From project consultations and research, specific considerations are detailed further in this section.

5.1 Recruitment

A challenge for consumer participation strategies is recruitment. This is a particular challenge where there are not many existing consumer groups or consumer participation initiatives happening at a local level from which to connect with.

A common point made in project consultations was that recruiting consumers require strategies that *specifically target consumers*. For example, agencies may hold forums that are theoretically open to sector workers and consumers, however, unless there is a tailored consumer recruitment strategy, it is likely that mainly sector workers will attend.

Ideas for consumer recruitment put forward during the project include:

- advertisements in newspapers and radio;
- drawing consumers from the organisations that WA Peak Forum members represent;
- creating a pool of interested consumer participants;
- increasing the consumer membership base in organisations, where applicable;
- linking into networks and specific communities; and
- holding consumer focused forums and meetings.

Many people consulted stressed the importance of remembering that consumers are not a homogenous group and diverse recruitment is important. A point emphasised in the focus group discussion was the need to include all types of affordable housing consumers, including those who have experienced or are experiencing homelessness.

Some people consulted expressed the concern that when involving consumers, one is never sure of how representative the voices being heard really are. This is an important point, and all engagement initiatives should lead to the question of 'who hasn't been heard?'. However, concerns about validity and breadth of representation should inform the design of strategies and not be a reason for not undertaking them. As argued by a focus group member - consumers are often challenged about their bias and the extent to which they represent other consumers, but professionals also come to the table with their own biases and questions about representativeness.

Most of what consumers had to say about effective recruitment centred around the idea that organisations must fundamentally want to engage with and respect consumers, for consumers to want to be involved. Perhaps the most pertinent comment about recruiting consumers came from a consumer consultant who said "if you value people, they will be there". This is not to say that good intention alone is enough, rather that authentic valuing of people leads to well thought out strategies that ask people what they need to be involved and reassures them that their involvement is genuinely wanted and appreciated.

5.2 Participation fees

There was agreement by all consumers consulted and many agencies that participation or sitting fees was an important part of successful consumer engagement, depending upon the strategy being used. Participation fees are a concrete action that:

- values the person providing consumer representation or input;
- counters what is often a history of being devalued, thereby assisting the process of consumer empowerment (where empowerment is a desired outcome of consumer participation); and
- assists with power imbalances to participation when other participants are being paid to be involved.

Participation fees are not paid in all examples of consumer involvement and depend upon the type of participation strategy being used and the extent to which participation fees have become standard practice in a particular sector or organisation. One focus group member who has been a consumer representative

and advocate for many years said that the focus group meeting for this project was the first time he had ever been offered a participation payment.

The Health Consumers Council has a *Consumer Representative Payment Policy* that supports the payment of participation fees and a consumers right to accept or refuse such a payment. The recommended rates of payment are:

Minimum rate for the first hour (or part thereof)	\$25.00
Minimum rate for two hours (or part thereof)	\$50.00
Hourly rate after the first two hours	\$20.00

These rates are supported by the Department of Premier and Cabinet and Department of Health.

5.3 General aids to participation

Feedback from consumers and agencies on what assists or hinders participation generated a range of ideas and tips, as outlined below:

- Let consumers know that their participation is valued e.g. refreshments, participation fees, venues, interactions, being greeted.
- Address access issues e.g. physical access, transport and language support.
- Consumers may not have access to computers, printers, email and broadband. Even if they do, a lot of printing can be costly for the consumer. Offer to send out printed materials as well as electronic copies, consider contributing to internet costs for ongoing consumer representatives.
- A number of consumers and agencies said that online and telecommunications technology can be used in creative ways to increase participation and address consumer issues. Many consumer advocates link and organise with each other using online initiatives. One consumer who has been a representative in a number of national telephone link up meetings said that she loved telephone link ups because she didn't have to get ready and go out to participate - the opportunity comes to her in her home.

- If possible, employ someone to facilitate and support consumer participation. For example, the Mental Health Division employs a consumer consultant to support consumer representatives and consumer advisory groups.
- Some consumers will need training and support on using computers if computer access and competency is a requirement of participation.
- Ask people what they need in order to participate.
- Ensure the use of inclusive and easy to understand language.
- Ensure an agenda that is meaningful and purposeful for consumers.
- Remember that consumers often have a busy life and ensure that meeting times fit in with consumer preferences, rather than the other way around.
- Following up on doing what one says one will do is essential. It shows consumers that their input is treated seriously and valued.

5.4 Energy and flexibility

An important consideration raised in all consumer consultations was the need to understand that the ability of someone to commit to ongoing participation can wax and wane depending upon factors such as health, caring duties and life events. Strategies aimed at including consumers need a level of flexibility to accommodate varying participation levels.

A number of agencies discussed 'consultation fatigue', where a few individuals are always called upon to offer consumer input. One agency representative advocated for a broad 'army of consumers' to ensure that when people wish to decrease or suspend their involvement, there are others willing to take their place. This requires facilitating participation on a number of levels and creating a sustainable pool of consumers interested in being involved.

6 Summary

This project found widespread agreement amongst consumers and agencies consulted that:

- affordable housing is a basic need and vital foundation for achieving and maintaining social, emotional, economic and physical well being;
- affordable housing is a priority issue across service delivery sectors; and
- consumer perspectives need to be considered in the planning and evaluation of housing services and policies.

People consulted support the belief that consumer voices bring a unique and valuable contribution to deliberations. As articulated by one participant of the focus group, "governments need consumers' input to make effective decisions and consumers need to be effective in delivering their message".

In addition to the value that consumers bring to policy and program development, the project found that participation itself can have beneficial outcomes to individuals, communities, organisations and governments. Consumer engagement can be as transformative to the people involved as it can to the outcomes it seeks to achieve.

Whilst the project consultant found strong support for the principle of including housing consumers, there were differing ideas about how best to do this and which strategies are more effective. A number of organisations spoke about the problems they have experienced with consumer participation strategies and the difficulties in making them work. Whilst consumers also spoke of the difficulties of participation, they were more likely to focus on the benefits and offer ideas on how to best involve consumers.

The specific proposal to establish an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group was well supported by consumers consulted and participants in the focus group expressed a willingness to be involved in any working party that may be established to further develop the model. Opinion from agency representatives was more neutral, with suggestions that any such group would need clear terms of reference and adequate resourcing. Feedback from the members of the WA Peaks

Forum was limited and from the number of responses received, it is unclear the extent to which a consumer reference group strategy is the one most favoured by forum members.

In considering the formation of a consumer reference group, the WA Peaks Forum may wish to look at the alternative option of establishing a joint agency/consumer working group, as a stepping stone to other strategies. Either option would require resourcing, terms of reference, recruitment strategies and clear lines of communication. There was common agreement that ideally consumers should not only be invited to participate in certain strategies, but also be included in the planning stage; for example, involving consumers in the formation of the terms of reference and selection procedures.

It is in the WA context of few housing specific or generic consumer groups to carry the housing consumer voice that the WA Peaks Forum seeks to bring consumers into the room. In some states, resourced peak tenant or consumer groups in part carry out this role. In addition to looking at ways that the WA Peaks Forum can directly consult with housing consumers, as the primary network of community sector peaks in WA, the forum can play a significant role in advocating for increased resourcing of consumer participation overall. The forum is also well placed to formalise and enhance mechanisms that connect the consumer perspective, as coming from the multitude of agencies that forum members represent, to the housing work of the forum.

Project consultations and the literature review found that no one method of consumer engagement suits all consumers or consultation purposes. A variety of strategies are recommended as part of an overall consumer participation plan. For example, the WA Peaks Forum could establish a reference group or joint working party that runs forums and focus groups; plus the forum could partner with a research centre to undertake a consumer survey. Particular engagement methods and selection processes can bias the type and scope of input received. A diversity of approaches allows for a broader base of consultation (increasing social inclusion) and for the triangulation, or cross checking, of perspectives (increasing validity).

7 Recommendations

The following recommendations are put forward by the project consultant to assist further deliberations by the WA Peaks Forum and to provide suggestions on where this project may go next.

1. That in the context of housing as a priority issue, the WA Peaks Forum trial the formation of a consumer reference group or joint working group, sitting as a sub-committee of the WA Peaks Forum or a forum member.
2. That the formation phase of a consumer reference group or joint working group include consumers in the development of terms of reference, resource requirements and selection processes.
3. That recruitment to the reference group/working group be based upon nominations from WA Peak Forum members and other community based organisations.
4. That the reference group/working group be part of an overall WA Peaks Forum consumer engagement strategy which includes a variety of consumer input, such as through focus groups, forums or surveys.
5. That an element of the WA Peaks Forum consumer engagement strategy include enhancing linkages between the forum and local agencies that forum members represent, so as to better formalise, facilitate and hear the consumer perspective as coming from local agencies.
6. That the WA Peaks Forum encourage investment by the Department of Housing in consumer participation initiatives in affordable housing.
7. That the WA Peaks Forum encourage investment by the Australian Government in establishing a national consumer organisation and investment by the Western Australian Government in the establishment of a generic, state based consumer

organisation, that can broadly support and resource consumer participation and provide input from a consumer perspective.

8. That the WA Peaks Forum develops a policy on the payment of consumer participation fees that will apply to WA Peak Forum initiatives and can act as a template for the sector as a whole.
9. That all consumer engagement initiatives undertaken by the WA Peaks Forum be evaluated and the learning shared, so as to contribute to the body of knowledge on consumer engagement strategies and practices.

Appendix One: People and groups consulted

Agency representatives contacted

- Maxine Chi, Principal Policy Officer, Department of Housing
- Maxine Drake, Senior Advocate, Health Consumers Council
- Kerrie Duff, Senior Systemic Advocate, People With Disabilities (WA)
- Patrick Egan, Department of Housing
- Sandra Flannigan, Senior Project Officer, Department Child Protection
- Shane Hamilton, Executive Director, Housing Stimulus Package Taskforce, Department of Housing
- Terryn Harvey, Disability Services Commission
- Debbie Henderson, Family Inclusion Network of Western Australia
- Geoff King, General Manager, Noongar Mia Mia Pty Ltd
- Thomas Leeming, Economic Audit Committee
- Gary Newcombe, Director Policy and Strategic Development, Department of Commerce
- Lyn Mahboub, Chairperson Consumers of Mental Health WA (Inc)
- Mental Health Consumer Advisory Group of WA
- Anna Paris, Executive Manager, Ruah Community Services
- John Perrett, Manager Tenants Advise Service
- PILCH Homeless Persons Legal Clinic, Victoria
- Carol Scherret, Consumer Consultant, Mental Health Division
- Shelters NT, QLD and NSW
- WA Network of Disabled Advocates

Focus group participants

- Katie Arpino
- Jacqui Carter
- Richard Hill
- Graham Garstin
- Rayna Lamb
- Fiona Moran

WA Peak Forum members who responded to the consultation paper

- Community Housing Coalition of WA
- Community Legal Centre Association of WA
- Shelter WA
- WACOSS

Appendix Two: Types of housing issues

The following outlines the types of housing concerns that were raised by consumers in this project's consultations.

- Quality of service from Department of Housing as landlord.
- Quality of service from NGOs as landlord.
- Quality of service from private sector as landlord.
- Need for better designed housing, including universal design principles and visual privacy guidelines.
- Priority housing assessment and concerns that the 2/3 priority housing focus will result in greater social problems in medium to high density living.
- Discrimination in housing access and services.
- Better management of anti-social behaviour.
- More innovation.
- More communication with tenants and residents.
- Better home purchase schemes, with a people focus.
- More accountability.
- More direct action at times of crisis.
- Greater homelessness awareness and strategies.
- More choice and flexibility.
- Assistance for people less protected by laws e.g. boarders, caravan parks.
- Complaints investigation processes are not consumer friendly.
- Need to link housing and other areas such as mental health and drug and alcohol
- Location of housing and access to services.
- Feeling harassed by Department staff if you try to complain - seen to be a problem.
- Cost of housing.

Appendix Three: Options for consumer involvement

Listed here are all the suggestions for housing consumer involvement raised during this project.

- Establish an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group.
- Establish a Joint Working Group on Affordable Housing, including members of the WA Peaks Forum and consumers.
- Conduct a consumer survey.
- Hold focus groups as required on specific questions/issues/proposals. Recruit from members, advertisement, networks or consumer register of interest.
- Hold consumer forums on particular issues as required or as a regular event e.g. a yearly cross sector affordable housing consumer summit.
- Include consumer representatives on interagency working parties, if appropriate. Recruit from members, advertisement, networks or consumer register of interest.
- Encourage the use of consumer participation methods across the different sectors (not just housing specific).
- Run cross sector consumer participation workshops (not just housing specific).
- Conduct a sector audit of consumer participation strategies that are being used by member organisations (not just housing specific).
- Explore the feasibility of developing a consumer register of interest (pool of interested consumers).
- Support the development of consumer groups and the establishment of a general, peak consumer body in WA.
- Encourage investment in housing consumer participation initiatives by the government, non-government and private sectors.
- Encourage the inclusion of consumer participation strategies as part of all new affordable housing initiatives.
- Create an on-line blog where housing consumers can share their stories.

Appendix Four: Outline for terms of reference

1. About the auspicing body
 - who is setting up the group and why
2. About the consumer reference group
3. Purpose of the reference group
 - What the objectives of the reference group are - why it has been set up
4. Activities of the reference group
 - What will the group be doing?
5. Relationship between the reference group and auspicing body
6. Term of appointment
 - how long will the group run for - defined or open
7. Membership
 - Who membership is open to, selection criteria
 - Role of members
 - How members are chosen and how membership is ended
8. Code of conduct
9. Resourcing and support
 - How secretarial and training support will be provided
10. Remuneration
11. Reporting
 - Who the group reports to
 - Can the group make independent submissions to external bodies, or must all reports go through the auspicing body first
12. Meeting procedure
 - frequency, quorum, agendas, minutes etc
13. Decision making
 - How decisions will be made
14. Dispute resolution
 - How disputes will be managed
15. Changes to the terms of reference
16. Evaluation