

# Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group

## *Scoping Project - Consultation Paper*

*Where you sit is where you stand. Only those whose orientation is primarily that of a consumer of the services will be able to provide a consistently valid consumer perspective*

Russell McGowan  
President, Health Care Consumers Association of the ACT, 2003



Written for the WA Peaks Forum  
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## 1 Introduction

In June 2009, the WA Peaks Forum established a project to scope the idea of establishing an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group.

Shelter WA is providing the organisational 'home' for the project. Sue Ash, WACOSS, and Bronwyn Kitching, Shelter WA, are acting as a reference group to the project. A project worker, Christina Kadmos, is engaged to undertake the project.

The project is made up of three parts:

1. Background scoping of the need, possible role, different models and questions of model development.

*How this has been done:*

- Shelter WA held a Stakeholder Forum on June 2nd.
- The project worker met or contacted a range of organisations regarding models of consumer participation (Appendix 1). The extent of organisations contacted has been limited by the timeframes for this project. There are still a number of groups who will be contacted during the next five weeks, before final report writing takes place.
- A small desktop literature review was also conducted focusing on consumer participation and affordable housing policy development.

2. Consultation with the WA Peak Forum members and consumers about the proposed idea.

*How this will be done:*

- This consultation paper with consultation questions will go to Peaks Forum members by 3rd August for feedback by the 4th September.
- The project worker will meet with the Peaks Forum at the 11th August meeting to discuss the project and the consultation questions.
- The project worker will meet with the Mental Health Consumer Advisory Group of WA on the 20th August to discuss the proposal.
- The project worker will hold a consumer focus group meeting in August to discuss the proposal.
- The project officer is planning to meet with a representative from Consumers of Mental Health WA Inc.



## 2 Consumer Participation

Consumer participation refers to the process of involving consumers in decision making about services or goods and can include components such as planning, policy development, standard setting, service delivery, priority setting and evaluation.

There are a number of reasons put forward for involving consumers in decision making. The Productivity Commission's Review of Australia's Consumer Policy Framework notes that "enabling effective consumer input to policy making should lead to better policies, and generate greater support for those policies" (2008: p258).

The WA Consumer Advisory Council (2006:p3) suggests that consumer representatives in decision making can assist in:

- explaining how consumers are likely to view a situation or problem;
- identifying what consumers are likely to view as the priorities in a particular situation;
- suggesting how the consumer perspective relates to the view of other stakeholders;
- anticipating what the consumer response might be to devised strategies;
- offering solutions to a problem that will meet the needs of consumers; and
- predicting how their constituency will respond to proposals and ideas.

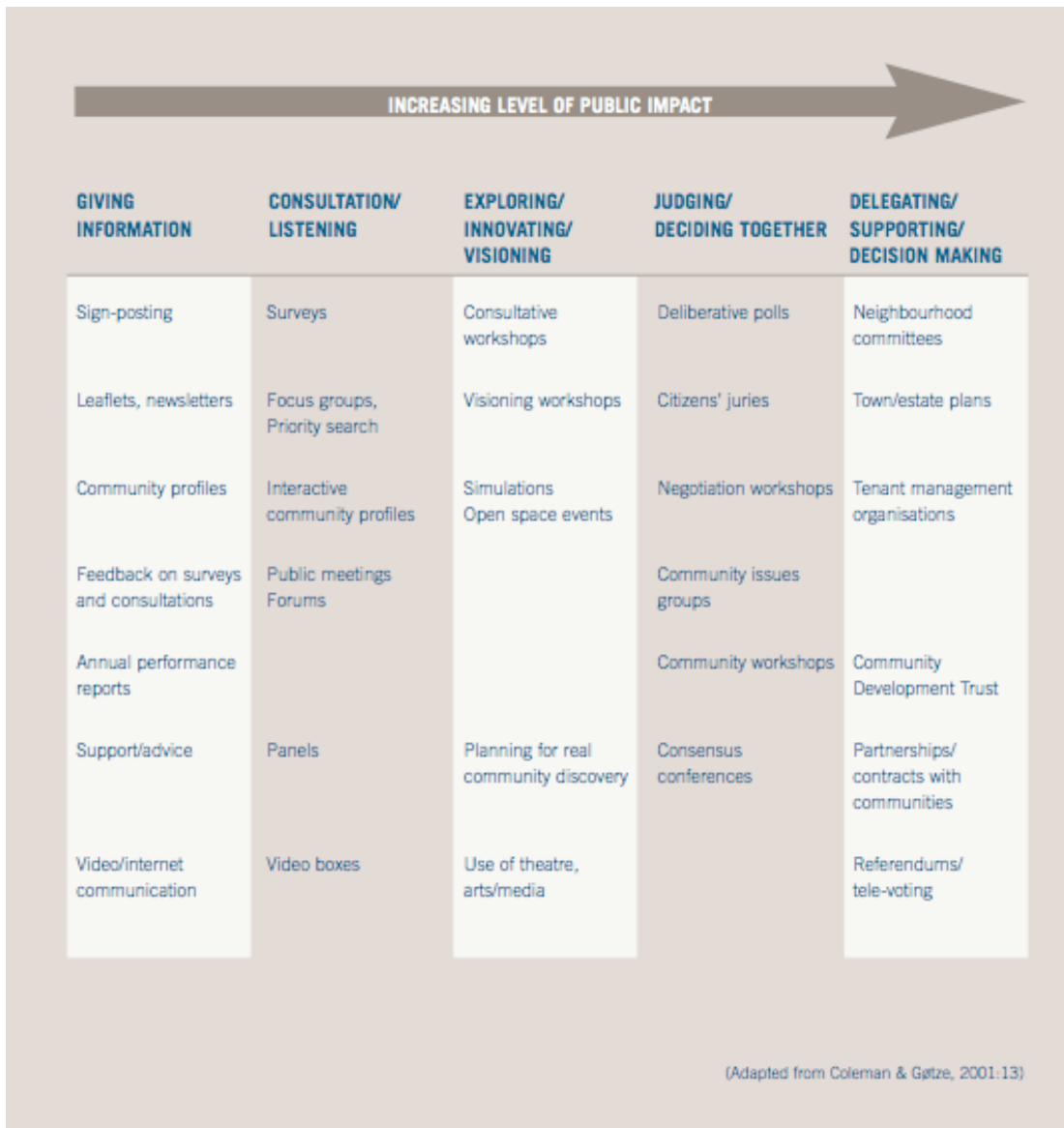
Other commentators link consumer participation to participatory democracy (Reddal and Woolcock 2004), international consumer rights (Consumers International 2002) and social justice (ACT Health 2007).

Consumer participation is also strongly advocated for as providing direct benefits to the consumers involved through greater empowerment, inclusion, skills, confidence and psychological well being (HomeGround Services and Rural Housing Network 2008). As articulated by the Western Australian Citizens and Civics Unit (2002:p3):

*Participation is both a means and an end. As a means, it is a process through which citizens and communities cooperate to provide input into programs and projects. As an end, it empowers citizens and communities through the acquisition of skills, knowledge and experience.*

## 2.1 Models of consumer participation

There are a range of consumer participation mechanisms that exist within the literature and as practiced within services and decision making forums. These methods are often discussed in terms of ladders of participation or hierarchies of involvement, although there is some debate around the extent to which ladders or hierarchies are useful metaphors, as this can suggest that some methods have greater value than others. Work undertaken by the Citizens and Civics Unit (2002:p9) outlines the following a model of engagement:



**Figure 1: Model of Public Engagement**

The International Association for Public Participation (2004) uses a spectrum approach based upon the level of public impact and objectives of engagement (see Appendix 2).

Other examples of consumer participation strategies coming from organisations contacted for this project include:

**Consumer organisations:** these are organisations formed solely to promote consumer participation, train and support consumer representatives, undertake consumer orientated research, provide individual and systemic advocacy and/or provide input into policy development. Examples include the Health Consumers' Council in WA, People With Disabilities WA and the New South Wales Consumer Advisory Group - Mental Health Inc.

**Consumer consultants:** consumer consultants are employed by services to provide consultancy services on consumer participation, to be involved in the induction and training of staff and may act as a consumer representative in specific decision making processes. They are generally not used to provide individual consumer advocacy.

**Consumer advisory groups:** these groups are made up of consumers and are usually formed to advise a specific organisation on matters from a consumer perspective. Advisory groups meet on a regular basis and have issues referred to them from the organisation that they are advising and/or may have the ability to set their own agenda items. Consumer advisory groups have a strong presence in the WA health and mental health system, although utilised to varying degrees.

**Consumer representatives:** one of the most common methods of consumer participation, consumer representatives are individual consumers who sit on advisory or decision making bodies to provide a consumer perspective. A 2005 survey of consumer representatives on WA government boards and committees found that approximately 40% of the boards and committees that responded to the survey had some form of consumer representation, with most of these having one representative as part of the overall membership (WA Consumer Advisory Council 2005).

**Peer workers:** this strategy involves consumers providing education, support or advocacy for other consumers. A number of innovative peer worker programs are emerging in homelessness services in Western Australia and Victoria.

**Consumer focus groups:** this method brings together consumers to look at a specific question, proposal or issue. A focus group is usually one off and tends to form part of a wider consultation or market research strategy.

**Consumer forums:** this method involves bringing consumers together and is usually on a larger scale than a focus group. A forum may include both educative and consultative functions. It is a method used by People With Disabilities (WA), the Health Consumers' Council, the Department of Housing (in regional WA) and the Department of Commerce.

**Collecting consumer feedback:** these strategies include analysis of consumer complaints or feedback, surveys, interviews and suggestion boxes. It is another common method of trying to hear the consumer voice. It does not involve consumers meeting together.

**Consumer employment:** a method strongly advocated by some sections of the consumer movement, this involves employing consumers within a service as a means to facilitate a culture of consumer understanding, responsiveness and consumer empowerment.

Another form of consumer participation which is emerging more and more within policy discussion and some program areas is that of 'consumer directed care' or 'co-production' (Shergold 2009; Cummins and Miller 2007). This model focuses on empowering the individual consumer to purchase, choose or broker the specific services that they require, rather than focus on delivering generic services for consumers to fit into. It is a model that has been used in job seeker services and disability services and is one being explored currently by the Western Australian Economic Audit. This emerging model will have a significant impact on how services have traditionally been organised and funded. As articulated by Peter Shergold (2009:p12):

*Traditionally, service users were perceived as grateful recipients. More recently they have been portrayed as informed shoppers in a market for public goods. The co-productive state, by contrast, conceives all citizens as active users and designers of publicly funded services.*

## 2.2 Barriers to participation

*A pre-requisite for consumers to have effective input into policy is that there are avenues via which consumer representatives can deliver such input. (Productivity Commission 2008: p275)*

Whilst much has been written about the benefits of consumer participation and, indeed, the need to consult with consumers forms part of many industry standards (National Community Housing Standards, Victorian Homelessness Assistance Service Standards), there is often a gap between the theory and practice of consumer participation.

Fine as an ideal, consumer participation often moves off the radar of action because it is seen to be too hard, there are not enough resources for it, there is a sense that consumers don't want to be involved, it is feared to be tokenistic, or, perhaps, because organisations don't really want to hear what consumers have to say.

In the Consumers' Federation of Australia's submission to the Productivity Commission's Review of Australia's Consumer Policy Framework, it was highlighted that:

*In our view, while some governments, agencies and reviews do take a progressive approach to consumer participation in the policy process, many do not. There is not a consistent approach taken across all levels of government that adequately acknowledges the value of consumer participation, and demonstrates support for that participation (as cited by the Productivity Commission 2008:p276)*

Referred to in the Commission's final review report, the Australian Public Service Commission found that only one quarter of regulatory agencies surveyed in 2005 actually consulted the public when developing regulations (Productivity Commission 2008:p277).

A survey of consumers undertaken by the National Consumer Council (2002) found that a significant barrier to participation was the lack of trust that consumers have in believing that their input will be considered. Many said that they believed consultation to be just an exercise to tick boxes and not a genuine dialogue.

### 2.2.1 Building consumer capacity

*As well as having opportunities to contribute to policy making, consumers or their representatives also need to have the means — time, money and know-how — if they are to make input that is effective. It is difficult for individual consumers to represent themselves. While some do engage in policy forums — for example, a number of individuals made submissions to this inquiry — people normally leave it to others to represent their views as consumers, and/or may simply trust or hope that their interests as*

*consumers are given due weight by those responsible for government policies. (Productivity Commission 2008: p278).*

A key barrier to consumer participation is a lack of capacity building and consumer leader formation. Where do consumer representatives come from? How are they formed, supported and sustained? It is important to remember that when industry or non-government representatives come to the policy table, sitting behind them is the resourcing, experience and training of their professional lives and the agencies that they represent. For consumer representatives they are often unsupported, may have limited training and may not be reimbursed for their time. The WA Consumer Advisory Council's survey on consumer representatives (2005) found that, of the bodies responding to the survey, just over half of all consumer representatives on government boards and committees were paid a sitting fee (56.5%) and only half (50.7%) were provided with induction, orientation or training upon appointment.

The Western Australian Department of Consumer and Employment Protection (now Department of Commerce), in its submission to the Productivity Commission's review stated: "Certainly there have been examples in the recent past within Australia where the lack of an independent, resourced and co-ordinated consumer voice has hampered public policy development" (as cited by the productivity Commission 2008:p280).

The Joint Submission from WA Community Organisations to the Productivity Commission's review noted:

*There is currently a general lack of investment in consumer capacity in Australia. Consumers participate in research, policy development and monitoring from a significantly unequal position of power and resourcing compared to industry and government. (as cited by the Productivity Commission 2008:p276)*

### **2.3 What assists consumer participation**

The research for this stage of the project found a number of key strategies that can assist the facilitation of consumer participation. These examples come from talking to agencies that support consumer involvement and the literature.

***Train and support consumers:*** Organisations such as the Health Consumers' Council and People With Disabilities (WA) run or have run consumer leadership training programs. These provide consumers with an avenue for gaining the skills and knowledge needed to

participate as well as create networks of support with other consumer representatives. In addition to one off training, consumers benefit from ongoing support and mentoring.

**Consumer membership base:** An organisation like the Health Consumers' Council (HCC) has a consumer membership base of about 400. This provides a solid foundation for recruiting and training consumer representatives. One strategy that gives the HCC such a large consumer base is that membership for individuals is free. This is a strategy that may have benefit for community service organisations seeking to increase their consumer membership base. It would allow members to be easily recruited at community forums, expos, websites etc. without cost being an impediment.

**Consumer participation plans:** A consumer participation plan articulates an organisation's commitment to consumer participation and maps a variety of strategies across the organisation for involving consumers. A plan ensures that participatory strategies are well thought out, comprehensive and link together and can avoid the danger of ad hoc, one off strategies. A consumer participation plan can also identify the resources required for participation strategies and who will be responsible for facilitating participation processes. The message from consumers in the National Consumer Council's survey was that consumer involvement needs to be an integrated, continual process, not a one-off event (2002:p1).

**Reimburse consumers:** It is not unusual for consumers to find themselves involved in lengthy meetings as the only unpaid participant. Whilst the concept of paying consumer representatives a sitting fee has gained support, it is not a universal practice. Nevertheless, it is probably safe to say that there is more support for the paying of a sitting fee than not. For many organisations, sitting fees for consumer representatives, fees for focus groups and even small tokens for participation in consumer surveys is simply standard practice. In addition to sitting fees, it is important to look at the reimbursement of expenses. For example, much correspondence in organisations are now done by email, requiring the recipient to print documents rather than receive them in the mail. This may be fine if you are an organisational representative using the office printer, but for consumers the cost of printing may be a substantial personal cost. Travel to meetings may also be a barrier for some consumers, this can include the cost of parking, use of taxis or accommodation costs if coming from another area to attend a meeting.

**Empower consumers:** Consumers need to feel valued and heard if they are going to participate. This can include strategies such as providing feedback on what happens with consumer input, acknowledging consumer participation in reports and looking at consumer recognition schemes. At a more fundamental level, it includes providing consumers with the power to bring their own issues of importance to the table. Sometimes, groups such as consumer advisory groups can only discuss matters that are referred to it from the body or individual they are advising. However, consumers will come to these groups with their own sense of priority issues. These issues may be outside the scope of the group's terms of reference or to do with the personal experiences of individual consumers rather than the business at hand. It is important to develop mechanisms that allow consumer priorities to be heard and individual queries or concerns to be channeled into appropriate processes for dealing with them.

**Ethical practice:** Whenever an organisation gathers information from or about consumers e.g. a consumer survey or focus group, it is a form of research and needs to be conducted ethically. Issues of freedom to participate, confidentiality, integrity and safety need to be considered. In turn, if consumers are to be involved in discussions where sensitive information is presented, they need to be aware of their ethical obligations.

**Recognise the value and limitations of consumer representation:** one criticism often leveled at the consumer representation model is questioning how can a consumer representative can represent all consumers. This is a valid question, especially, where a consumer is not connected to a wider consumer group that acts as their constituency. It is important to distinguish however, between consumer representatives that represent a wider group and have links back to that group for consultation purposes and those who simply represent their own individual experience as a consumer. Both provide valuable contributions. By distinguishing between the two types of representation, role confusion can be reduced and necessary consultation processes acknowledged where the representative needs to refer back to a group that they represent.

The Consumer Participation Resource Kit for housing and homelessness assistance services (2008) sets out a range of principles for consumer participation (Appendix 3).

### 3 Consumer participation in housing

Most of the examples of consumer participation researched in this project to date arise within the health, mental health, disability and youth fields (there are still some organisations to be contacted). This finding is in keeping with the literature review, where the bulk of writings, guidelines and best practice manuals appear within these areas.

There is currently no ongoing mechanism for consumer participation in general housing policy development in Western Australia. Examples of consumer participation in housing that were found include:

- Some community housing providers have a tenant representative sitting on the organisation's governing body;
- Some community housing organisations conduct tenant evaluation surveys or hold occasional tenant forums;
- The previous SAAP State Advisory Committee had a consumer representative, although it is unclear if this will continue in the soon to be established Council on Homelessness;
- The Department of Housing does not do a lot in the way of consumer involvement, although a number of initiatives have taken place in Aboriginal housing in regional areas, such as community forums;
- Some organisations, such as Ruah Community Services, run peer leader programs where consumers are trained and supported to provide services to other consumers; and
- Some organisations, such as Shelter WA, may have consumers as members of their organisation or may have consumers attend public forums on various topics .

More comprehensive examples of housing consumer participation were found in Victoria and New South Wales.

The Victorian Department of Housing has developed a Tenant Participation Framework which includes:

- a Tenant Participation officer in each region;
- requirements for housing managers and housing services managers to be actively involved in tenant participation at a local and regional level;

- funding for the Social Housing Advocacy and Support Program (SHASP) to support tenant participation;
- funding for volunteer public tenants groups;
- funding of the Victorian Public Tenants Association (VPTA) as a peak public tenant and tenants' group body; and
- opportunities for representatives from tenants groups, regional tenant forum representatives and the VPTA to meet twice yearly with the Director of Housing.

Housing NSW has established a Social Housing Tenants Advisory Committee as a consultative mechanism that comprises social housing tenants from across NSW. Originally piloted in January 2008, the pilot evaluation found the initiative to be beneficial and the work of the Committee continues. The committee's role is to provide feedback and comment to Housing NSW on matters that help to improve policies, operations and service delivery so as to increase tenant satisfaction. The Committee is made up of 12 social housing residents from public, community and Aboriginal housing. The members do not formally represent social housing tenants, rather they offer advice based on their individual knowledge and experience as a social housing tenant. A secretariat has been established in the Department to support the Committee. Committee members participate in a Leadership and Training Program that runs concurrently to Committee meetings.

The Tenant Participation Resource Services Program is a new Housing NSW initiative to provide social housing tenants with increased access to information, advice and opportunities to more actively participate. A total of nine Tenant Participation Resource Services (TPRS) will be funded across NSW.

The TPRS Program goals are to ensure social housing tenants:

- are engaged in communities;
- have their needs and priorities identified and considered in planning and service delivery;
- are informed about their rights and responsibilities and are supported with their housing needs ;
- have skills and resources to participate in community life; and
- receive services that are coordinated, flexible and responsive to their needs.

## 4 The Housing Policy Context

A great deal of change is happening in the arena of housing policy and service delivery at both a state and national level, as reflected in the priority that the WA Peaks Forum has given in choosing this project as one its main initiatives for 2009. This section outlines key aspects of the current housing policy context.

### 4.1 Housing affordability

Housing affordability is a term that has gained increased prominence in housing policy, referring to the relationship between household income and housing costs. There is no universally accepted definition of affordable housing in Australia. Julian Disney (2007:p1) suggests:

*a reasonable basic definition of 'affordable housing' which reflects both public usage and appropriate policy goals is housing which:*

- *is reasonably adequate in standard and location for a lower- or middle-income household; and*
- *does not cost so much that such a household is unlikely to be able to meet other basic living costs on a sustainable basis.*

Another definition of affordable housing, used by Shelter WA (2007) is "housing which is targeted at or reserved for people who are unable to compete effectively in the existing private housing market". Shelter WA defines the target for affordable housing policies as households with:

- incomes in the bottom 40% of the income distribution; and
- those households that require housing assistance schemes so that they pay no more than 30% of their income in mortgage payments or 30% of their income in rent.

Affordable housing can be provided by private markets, government housing programs and not-for-profit sector housing services.

There has been increased recognition in recent years that Australia is experiencing a housing affordability 'crisis'. The 5th Annual Demographia International Housing Affordability Survey 2009 looked at affordability in 265 markets in Australia, Canada, Ireland, New Zealand, the United Kingdom and the United States by measuring median house price to median household income. The 2009 survey found Australia to have the overall least affordable housing markets. In the 2008 survey, the five least affordable

markets were in the United States. This year, three of the least affordable markets are in Australia (2009:p10) and of the 64 severely unaffordable markets, 24 were in Australia, followed by 16 in the United States (2009:p11).

Research conducted for the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI 2007) found that housing markets have failed to provide an adequate supply of affordable housing for low income households. Housing affordability is widespread with lower-income households in the private rental market most at risk, although lower-income purchasers have also become increasingly vulnerable. Estimates are that approximately 50 per cent of private renter households in housing stress experience severe housing affordability problems (2007:p5). The impact of unaffordable housing has a flow on affect. As noted by the AHURI report: "while housing provides shelter, it also influences a raft of non-shelter outcomes for individual households, such as workforce participation, access to jobs and services, family stability and educational attainment" (2007:p1).

As a consequence of increased unaffordability in private markets, demand for public and community housing has risen, with over 19 000 people now on the WA public housing wait list. The growth in supply is less than the growth in demand, further adding to housing stress.

The reasons for Australia's current housing affordability problems are complex and the subject of much research and policy debate. A number of initiatives at a state and national level have been instigated to seek to address housing affordability and the supply/demand balance. These initiatives cross the areas of home purchase, private rental, social housing rental and crisis accommodation.

## **4.2 Commonwealth State agreements**

The Council of Australian Governments (CoAG), seeks to streamline, rationalize, connect and integrate various government bodies and processes to improve government service delivery. The reform agenda aims to minimise the number of funding agreements between Commonwealth and State governments, establish consistency in data collection and reporting and monitor and evaluate outcomes from the provision of public funds through a range of national partnership agreements.

The National Affordable Housing Agreement (NAHA) replaces the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement and the Supported Accommodation Assistance Program and will act as the foundation of co-joint housing initiatives in the coming years. It is supported by national agreements on social housing, homelessness and Indigenous housing.

The National Partnership Agreement on the Nation Building and Jobs Plan also provides new funding and some significant policy reforms in the area of housing. Key policy reforms (C7: p14 of the Plan) include:

- a. integration of public and community housing waiting lists;
- b. better social and economic participation for social housing tenants by locating housing closer to transport, services and employment opportunities;
- c. implementation of support arrangements to assist social housing tenants to transition from social housing arrangements to affordable private rental and home ownership as their circumstances change;
- d. reducing concentrations of disadvantage through appropriate redevelopment to create mixed communities that improve social inclusion;
- e. introduction of a national regulatory and registration system for not-for-profit housing providers to enhance the sector's capacity to operate across jurisdictions;
- f. increased transparency through the establishment of consistent and comparable accounting and reporting standards across jurisdictions;
- g. social housing providers to be subject to supervision to protect public investment;
- h. improved tenancy management and maintenance benchmarks for social housing;
- i. improved efficiency of social housing including through better matching of tenants with appropriate dwelling types and the introduction of rent-setting policies that reflect the type of dwellings occupied by tenants;
- j. contestability in the allocation of funds;
- k. leveraging of government investment to enhance the provision of social housing;
- l. better use of government land to provide affordable housing opportunities; and
- m. improved procurement practices that promote competition.

Other Commonwealth State initiatives include:

- An allocation of \$648.6 million to Western Australia to construct new dwellings and refurbish existing social housing dwellings as part of the \$6.4 billion Nation Building Economic Stimulus Plan (NBESP).

- The National Partnership Agreement on Social Housing, as part of NAHA, provides \$400 million for a Social Housing Growth Fund over 2008-2009 and 2009-2010, \$40 million of which has been allocated to Western Australia.
- The National Partnership Agreement on Homelessness, arising from the Australian Government's white paper on homelessness, *The Road Home*. The WA Implementation Plan focuses on joined up approaches between homelessness services and mainstream services, including the Department of Health, Mental Health Division, Drug and Alcohol Office, Corrective Services, Housing and Child Protection.
- A provision of \$1.18 billion over 10 years for Western Australia to provide new houses and upgrades to existing houses in remote Indigenous communities under the National Partnership Agreement on Remote Indigenous Housing.
- A provision of \$1 billion nationally over the next four years to build 50,000 affordable rental properties under the National Rental Affordability Scheme.

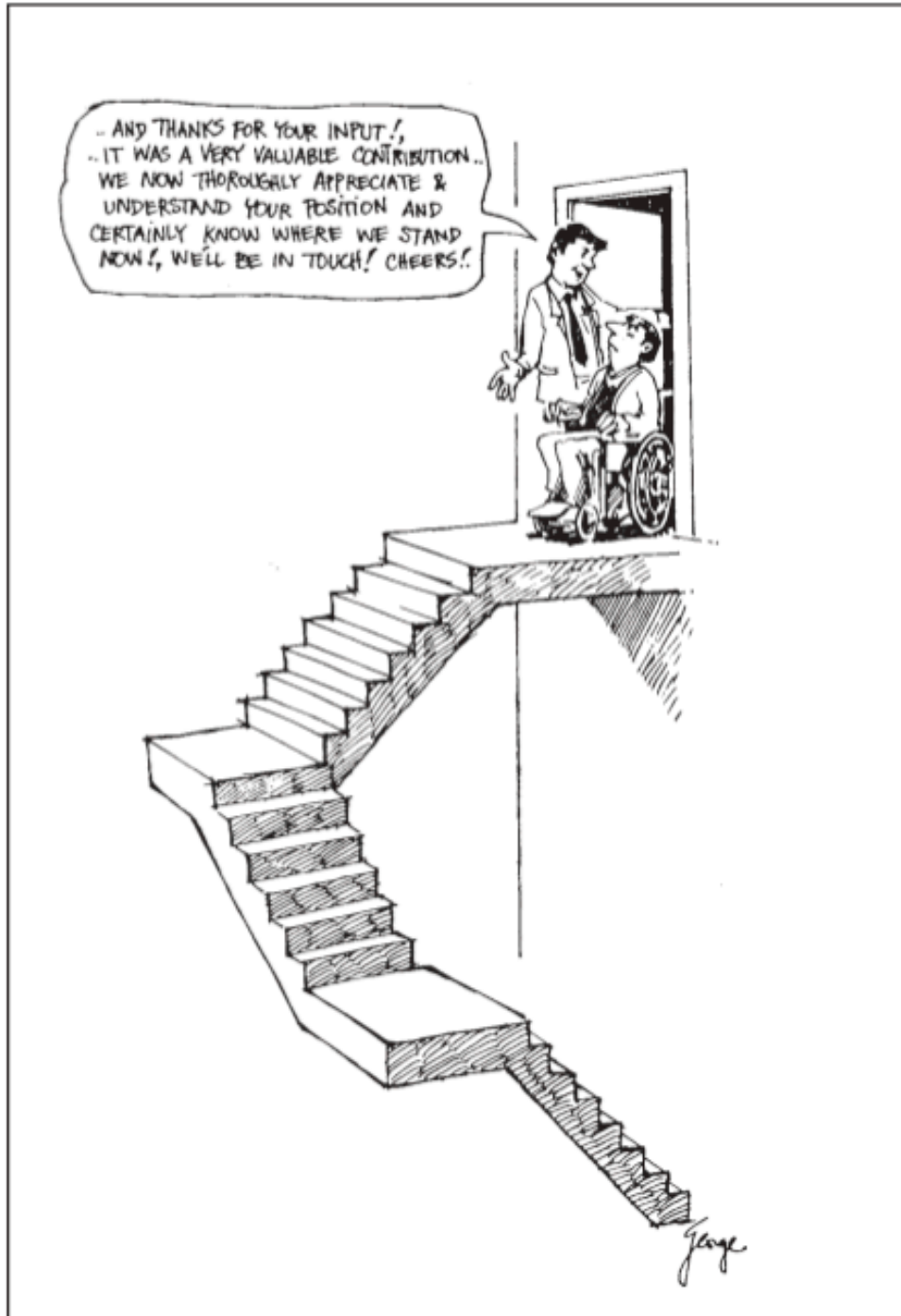
### 4.3 WA initiatives

In addition to co-joint initiatives with the Commonwealth, WA has undergone or is undergoing a range of housing policy reforms. These include:

- A state government aspirational target of 20,000 additional social and affordable dwellings by 2020.
- The establishment of a Social Housing Taskforce to research and advise on models for financing, providing and managing social housing stock in WA.
- A commitment to provide \$34 million over four years for additional supported accommodation options for people with disabilities.
- The introduction of a regulatory system for community housing providers and increased funding to grow community housing stock.
- The establishment of a new Western Australian Council on Homelessness to

provide the Minister with information and advice on homelessness related areas (replaces SAAP State Advisory Committee.

- The ongoing review of the *Residential Tenancies Act 1987* and the introduction in August 2007 of the *Residential Parks (Long-stay Tenants) Act 2006*.



## 5 The Consumer Policy Context

Arising from the Council of Australian Governments' National Partnership Agreement to Deliver a Seamless National Economy, a national set of generic consumer laws are being developed. It will align the consumer protection provisions of the Commonwealth Trade Practices Act and all States' and Territories' Fair Trading Acts. The generic consumer law will be known as the Australian Consumer Law.

One outcome of the Productivity Commission's Review of Australia's Consumer Policy Framework was a recommendation to look at models of funding a national consumer body and consumer based research. Australia does not have a funded national consumer organisation. In May 2008, the Australian Government released an issues paper, *Consumer Voices*, on exploring ways of sustaining consumer advocacy and consumer research. A Western Australian response to this paper is currently being developed.

At a state level, there is no generic consumer organisation that can be linked into to assist with housing consumer participation strategies. There are however, specific consumer consultative mechanisms in particular industries such as utilities and, as mentioned previously, health.

As part of the state Liberal Party's Mental Health Policy, a commitment has been made to establish and maintain a mental health consumer's voice in Western Australia. Details of what this will look like are still being discussed.

The Western Australian Government has established the Economic Audit Committee to review government expenditure and the structure and effectiveness of government service delivery. *Services to Meet Citizens' Needs* is one of the six themes of the Economic Audit Committee's Final Report due in October. The potential for extending the concept of personalized services, or 'co-production' as discussed earlier in this paper, is one of the strategies being explored by the Committee.

Australian Government policy includes a strong commitment to social inclusion and working in partnership with the community sector (specific consumer involvement is not so explicitly stated). The Government intends to develop a compact with the community sector to guide the development and delivery of services and policy.

## 6 Challenges To Forming An Affordable Housing Consumer

### Reference Group

The idea to establish an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group is at a very embryonic stage and the purpose of this paper is to set the idea within a larger policy framework and explore questions for further proposal development.

There are a number of key challenges to the proposal that have been highlighted in discussions with agencies to date. This section outlines some of these challenges and the implications for further model development:

#### ***Input into policy***

The purpose of the Reference Group, as articulated in the project outline, is to provide consumer input into *policy* development. This is quite different to providing input into direct service delivery or actually participating in service delivery. Research conducted by the National Consumers Council (2002), and reinforced by discussions with agencies, suggests that consumers are often more motivated to be involved with issues that have a direct personal impact, such as the delivery of a local service, than board policy debates that may not have a direct impact on their lives. This is not to say that there are not consumers with an interest in policy, simply that they may be harder to find.

*Implications for model development:* It is imperative that the organisation or network hosting the reference group ensures that policy is translated in such a way as to be comprehensive to everyday consumers and meaningful to people's lives. This can involve briefing papers or document summaries.

#### ***Formation of housing consumers***

Consumer representatives and leaders usually arise from formative processes. For example, health consumer leaders may emerge from locally based support groups or support services. In WA they are provided support and training by the Health Consumers' Council. If they are members to the Council, they receive ongoing information and access to other consumers. In some states, local or regional public and community tenant associations provide the entry point for consumer involvement. In the absence of similar ground roots consumer involvement opportunities in WA for housing consumers, there is

not the same natural pathways for consumer involvement in fairly broad and high level policy development.

*Implications for model development:* In the short term, this means that recruitment strategies need to be well thought out and targeted. It also accentuates the need for ongoing training and mentoring of members of a reference group. Without a consumer organisation behind them, or consumer network, the members of the group may become isolated and feel disconnected. In the long term, the challenge is for consumer involvement at more local areas or agency based levels to be encouraged and promoted. For example, increasing the consumer membership base of organisations that can nurture and feed consumer representatives into policy development processes.

### ***Identity of housing consumers***

Consumers become involved because they identify themselves as a consumer. It has been suggested by some people in discussions so far that people are more likely to identify as a 'health consumer' or 'mental health consumer' or 'person with a disability' than an 'affordable housing consumer'. The latter is ambiguous and potentially open to greater change over time. Also, as with the point discussed above, there is not a strong tradition in WA of public or community housing consumer identification or organisation in the same way there has been in some other states, let alone identification as an affordable housing consumer (a relatively new term).

*Implications for model development:* One way to counter this barrier may be to identify sub-sets of the affordable consumer housing continuum and seek people who identify and wish to represent a particular sub-set. For example, seek consumers who are housed in student accommodation, lodging houses, public housing, community housing, first home buyers, people getting rent assistance etc.

### ***Who is being advised and how will it operate?***

A consumer reference group acts to advise a particular organisation or individual (e.g. NGO, Department, Minister). At this point in the proposal development, it is not yet clear who the reference group would be reporting to. For example, will this be a consumer reference group of the WA Peaks Forum, or will it sit within the organisational structure of one of the Forum's member organisations? The advantage of the former is that it might allow for membership to come from Peaks Forum members themselves e.g. each Forum

member could provide a consumer representative. It would assist in a cross sector approach to housing which is so important. The disadvantage of this model is that the Forum is a network, rather than an organisation. It is a loose structure that can sometimes feel vague to current members let alone a group of consumers advising it. Also, because the Forum itself does not have a direct link to housing policy (although indirectly some members sit on policy advisory bodies), it may be difficult for consumers to see the connection between their participation and any tangible results.

*Implications for model development:* further proposal development needs to define where the reference group would sit, who it would advise and how it would operate. In the next section, this paper will pose questions for further model development and the final report of this project will put forward a draft terms of reference for the group based upon responses to the consultation questions.

### ***How will the group be resourced?***

There are a number of costs to be considered in establishing and maintaining a consumer reference group. Briefly, these costs relate to: recruitment, sitting fees, operational expenses, training, mentoring, travel and policy support. One challenge for funding such a group is that it does not sit neatly within any one portfolio area. For example, the proposal can be seen to cross the areas of responsibility covered by the Departments of Housing, Commerce, Child Protection, Health and the Disability Services Commission. From a positive perspective, this widens the possible avenues of funding available, from a challenge perspective, it can mean that potential funders 'pass the buck' suggesting that the project is better funded from another area.

There is the possibility that, if the group sits as an advisory group to the WA Peaks Forum as a whole, then the peaks themselves share the cost of resourcing the group from existing funds. However, given the pressure on peaks to meet increased operational costs (e.g. salaries) with what for some may be decreased resources (e.g. less donations and declining interest rates), the viability of this option is yet to be tested.

One possibility is that funding is sought from the Residential Accommodation Fund, a fund from which the interest in tenancy bonds is held and distributed for specific tenancy related purposes. However, consumer participation may or may not be seen to come within the parameters of the Fund, which tends to have an educational focus.

## 7 Questions For Further Model Development

This section details a number of questions that are being asked of WA Peak Forum members to further scope and develop the proposal to establish an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group.

There are two ways of responding to these questions:

1. Open the word document accompanying this paper, type your responses in and return via email to Christina Kadmos: [project@shelterwa.org.au](mailto:project@shelterwa.org.au); or
2. Copy the link below into your internet browser and it will direct you to a web based questionnaire with exactly the same questions:

[http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=uUaVY7XO5d2DluGKx3szfg\\_3d\\_3d](http://www.surveymonkey.com/s.aspx?sm=uUaVY7XO5d2DluGKx3szfg_3d_3d)

Either way, please have your responses in by **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> September**.

Your responses will be used to develop draft terms of reference and the final project report. If you wish to discuss this paper or any of the consultation questions, please contact Christina on 0434 901 128.

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1. **Name of organisation:**

2. **Person responding:**

3. **Contact telephone:**

4. To what extent do you think the formation of an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference Group is a high priority initiative for the WA Peaks Forum?

*1 is a low priority, 5 is a high priority*

             
1      2      3      4      5

*Comments*

5. What alternative strategies for housing consumer participation do you think the WA Peaks Forum should consider?

***If an Affordable Housing Consumer Reference group is formed...***

6. What should the objectives of the reference group be?
7. Who should the reference group advise and report to?
- |  |                          |
|--|--------------------------|
| The WA Peaks Forum as a whole                          | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| A specific organisational member of the WA Peaks Forum | <input type="checkbox"/> |
| Another body, external to the WA Peaks Forum           | <input type="checkbox"/> |
- If not the WA Peaks Forum as a whole, which specific member organisation or external body?*
8. How should matters be referred to the reference group for consideration?
9. Which organisation/s could be responsible for providing executive support, training and mentoring?
10. How could members be recruited? *e.g. consumer representatives from WA Peak Forum members (and members of the members in the case of organisational peaks); public advertisement etc.*
11. Where could funding for the group come from?
12. What particular issues would need to be considered in establishing such a group that have not been discussed in this paper?
13. What other comments would you like to make about the proposal or the ideas raised by the consultation paper?

## Appendix 1: Groups and people contacted for this project

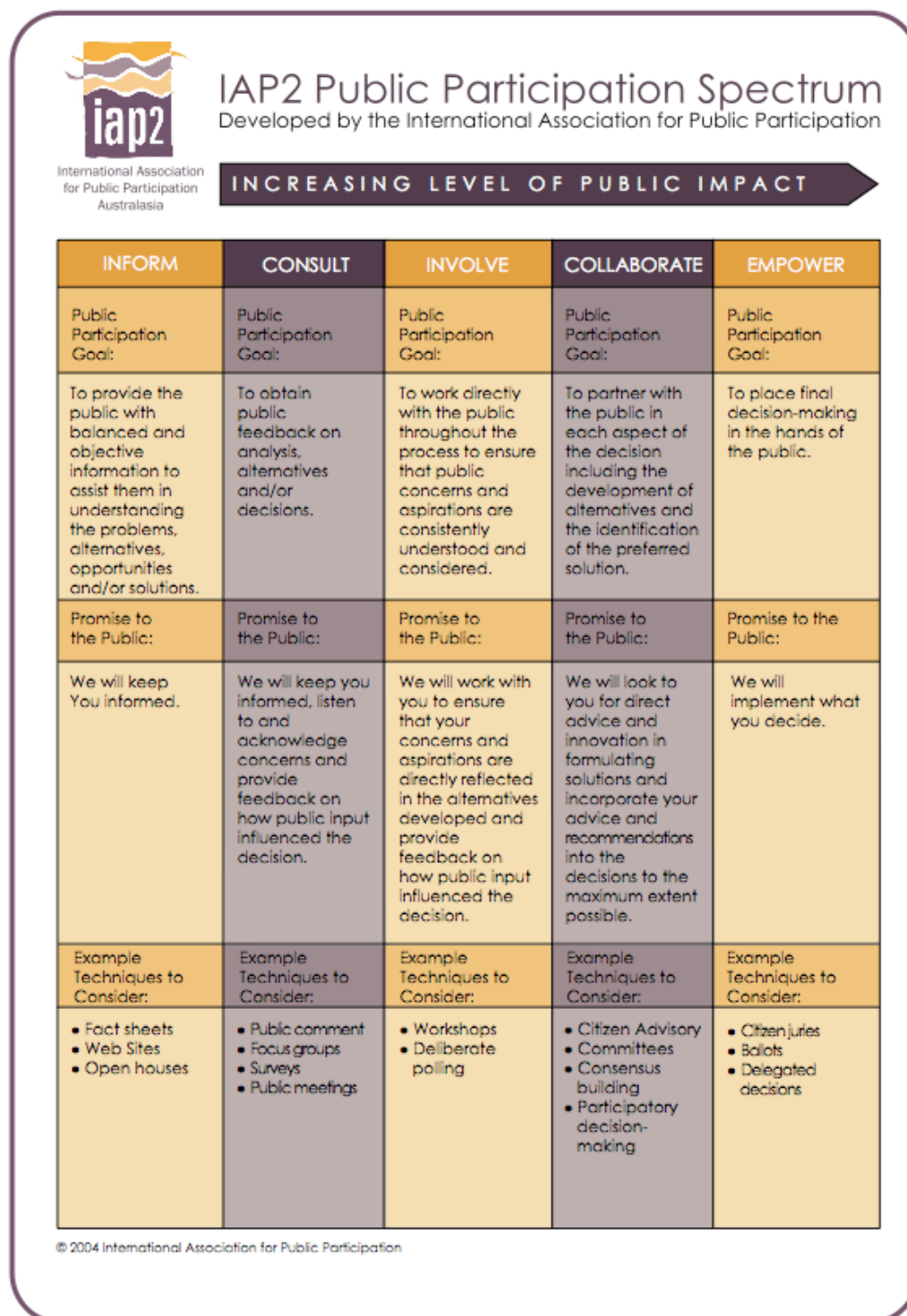
### Groups or people already contacted:

- Carol Scherret, Consumer Consultant, Mental Health Division
- Shelter in all states and territories
- Maxine Drake, Senior Advocate, Health Consumers' Council
- Kerrie Duff, Senior Systemic Advocate, People With Disabilities (WA)
- Gary Newcombe, Director Policy and Strategic Development, Department of Commerce
- Anna Paris, Executive Manager, Ruah
- Shane Hamilton, Executive Director, Housing Stimulus Package Taskforce, Department of Housing.
- Maxine Chi, Principal Policy Officer, Aboriginal Housing, Department of Housing
- Thomas Leeming, Economic Audit Committee
- Sandra Flannigan, Senior Project Officer, Department Child Protection
- Terryn Harvey, Disability Services Commission

### Groups or people yet to be contacted during this project

- Create WA
- Family Inclusion Network
- Mental Health Consumer Advisory Group of WA
- WA Network of Disabled Advocates
- Consumers of Mental Health WA Inc.

## Appendix 2: IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum



## **Appendix 3 Principles for effective consumer participation**

From: Consumer Participation Resource Kit, 2008, developed by HomeGround Services and Rural Housing Network Ltd.(page 15).

### **1. Make it timely**

Participation should not be so late in the life of an issue that it is tokenistic or merely confirms decisions already made. Consultation should occur when consumers have the best chance of influencing outcomes. People should be given enough time to express their views.

### **2. Make it inclusive**

Consumer participants should be selected in a way that is not open to manipulation and should include a cross-section of the organisation's consumer population. Random selection might be considered to achieve this.

### **3. Make it consumer focused**

Ask participants not what they want personally or what is in their self-interest, but to consider what is appropriate for all consumers.

### **4. Make it interactive and deliberative**

Avoid reducing questions to a simplistic either/or response. Allow consideration of the bigger picture, so people can become fully engaged.

### **5. Make it effective**

Be clear on how decisions will be made so that participants know and understand the impact of their involvement. Make sure all participants have time to become well-informed about and to understand material they are unlikely to have a prior familiarity with.

### **6. Make it matter**

It is important that there is a strong likelihood that any recommendations which emerge from the process will be adopted. If they are not, it is important that an explanation is provided. Faith in the process is important for both the power holders in the organisation and the consumers.

**7. Make it well facilitated**

A skilled and flexible facilitator with no vested interest in the outcome is essential in order to give the process credibility.

**8. Make it flexible, open and fair**

A variety of participation strategies exist. Choose those that best suit the circumstances, including the target group and the degree of participation offered. Think how to reach all your consumers, including those with special needs. Feedback to consumers afterwards is essential.

**9. Make it cost effective**

Costs will vary and are adaptable, but the process must be properly resourced.

**10. Make it subject to evaluation**

Decide how the 'success' of the strategy will be measured. Include factors beyond the adoption of the recommendations. Evaluation questions should be formulated in advance.

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