

Southern Homelessness Services Network

Engaging and Valuing Consumers

Consumer Participation Guide

January 2019



Based on the work of
the North and West
Metropolitan
Homelessness Local
Area Service Network.

The Vision of the Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) is an end to homelessness in Southern Region of Melbourne (comprising Bayside-Peninsula and Southern Melbourne Department of Human Services areas).

The Mission of the "Victorian Homelessness Networks is to facilitate, inform and support regional homelessness services and stakeholders to work together to co-ordinate services to people who are experiencing or who are at risk of homelessness."

The Network comprises all funded Specialist Homelessness Services in the Southern Region including services providing crisis, transitional, long term, family violence and youth support and accommodation. The Network also supports related services working in homelessness.

The key strategic SHSN objectives are:

1. To promote and support innovation, knowledge sharing and expertise in the best interests of consumers
2. To foster relationships and collaboration between service providers to ensure timely, coordinated and effective responses
3. To act as a conduit between the Department of Health and Human Services and the regional service sector homelessness related data, issues and trends to inform policy
4. Working together to end homelessness

SHSN MEMBER AGENICES

Emerge www.emergesupport.org.au

Fusion www.fusion.org.au

Launch Housing www.launchhousing.org.au

Melbourne City Mission www.melbournecitymission.org.au

Moira www.moira.org.au

Sacred Heart Mission www.sacredheartmission.org

South East Community Links www.secl.org.au

South Port Community Housing <http://www.spchg.org.au>

The Salvation Army – SalvoCare Eastern and Crisis Services www.salvationarmy.org.au

VincentCare www.vincentcare.org.au

wayss www.wayss.org.au

Windermere www.windermere.org.au

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The Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) thanks the North and West Metropolitan Homelessness Local Area Service Network for granting permission to use of the *Cared For Enough To Be Involved – Client Participation Guide, 2011* as a basis for this Guide.

This Guide has been revised with input from the Consumer Participation Working Group, with representation from the following agencies:

Emerge
 Fusion
 Launch Housing including the Lived Experience Advisory Group
 Mornington Peninsula Shire
 Sacred Heart Mission
 South Port Community Housing
 The Salvation Army – SalvoCare Eastern and Crisis Services
 WAYSS

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ACRONYMS

CHP	Council to Homeless Persons
DHHS	Department of Health and Human Services
HSS	Homelessness Service System
IAP	Initial Assessment and Planning
LEAG	Lived Experience Advisory Group
LASN	Local Area Service Network
PESP	Peer Education and Support Program
SHS	Specialist Homelessness Services
SHSN	Southern Homelessness Services

Introduction & Purpose

INTRODUCTION

The Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) convened a Consumer Participation Working Group commencing in April 2018. All member agencies were invited to participate in the Working Group. The Working Group included a person with lived experience of homelessness in the Southern Region and member of the Launch Housing Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG). In addition to SHSN members, a local council in the Southern Region, Mornington Peninsula Shire, were granted membership of this group given their strong interest in consumer participation.

The Working Group ran a Consumer Participation Mapping Survey in May/June 2018. The survey was designed to collect information about how our agencies were already involving consumers and to assess the gaps to guide the work of the Working Group. The survey found that member agencies currently use a range of consumer participation activities for a range of purposes. The survey found that having a consistent strategic approach to consumer participation was seen as important as well as resourcing consumer participation to enable effective engagement.

This Guide is based on the work of the North and West Metropolitan Homelessness Local Area Service Network which granted the SHSN permission to use the *Cared For Enough To Be Involved – Client Participation Guide, 2011*. The SHSN Consumer Participation Working Group has updated the guide with current practice and understandings to cover emerging consumer groups and to reflect the Southern Region context. In addition, the guide has been updated to refer to “consumer” participation rather than “client” participation to reflect currently accepted terminology. Consumers refer to people accessing/using specialist homelessness services.

Note that this guide is not intended to support the use of consumer participation for fundraising purposes for individual agencies.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this guide is to:

1. to demonstrate the commitment of the SHSN and member agencies to consumer participation and to show the strong value we place on involving consumers in all aspects of our work as people with lived experience and expertise in homelessness.
2. to provide a model of effective consumer participation practices in a range of settings and with different consumer groups
3. to encourage agencies to develop and improve their own consumer participation practices.

It is anticipated that this Guide will feed into the development of a Victorian consumer participation strategy and similar guide to be developed by Council to Homeless Persons as outlined in the Specialist Homelessness Sector Transition Plan (2018-22).

“We attempt to run focus groups but finding subjects that are not token and have some meaning for consumers is difficult. We feel consumers would like to raise their issues...but there is nowhere for them or us to take these issues.”

(SHSN Consumer Participation Mapping Survey 2018)

BACKGROUND

In preparing this document, the SHSN consulted with the Launch Housing Service Development Team which oversees the Lived Experience Advisory Group (LEAG) and the Northern and Western Homelessness Network Coordinators. Feedback on the draft Guide was also received from eight current consumers of member agencies and from the Launch Housing LEAG.

The SHSN Consumer Participation Working Group also conducted a Consumer Participation Mapping Survey 2018, designed to collect information about how our agencies were already involving consumers and to assess the gaps to assist in the reworking of this guide to reflect the context of the Southern Region. The results of the survey have informed the development of this guide.

The survey found that member agencies currently use a range of consumer participation activities for a number of purposes. The survey found that having a consistent strategic approach to consumer participation was seen as important as well as resourcing consumer participation to enable effective engagement.

Figure 1 shows that there are a range of consumer participation activities undertaken by SHSN agencies. 100% of responding agencies used consumer feedback forms. 91% of respondents used consumer surveys. 64% of respondents used consumer focus groups and consumer exit interviews to engage consumers. 36% of responding agencies (four in total) have a Consumer Advisory Group. No agencies used consumers for staff induction and only one agency had consumers on their board.

Other activities included an annual youth forum to gain further feedback outside of formal surveys and that informal feedback was recorded as a regular agenda item at team meetings. Another agency also involved consumers in program reviews, feedback on new tools and brochures, and in outcomes surveys as part of outcomes measurement and service feedback.

91% of respondents said that these consumer participation mechanisms are generally working well.

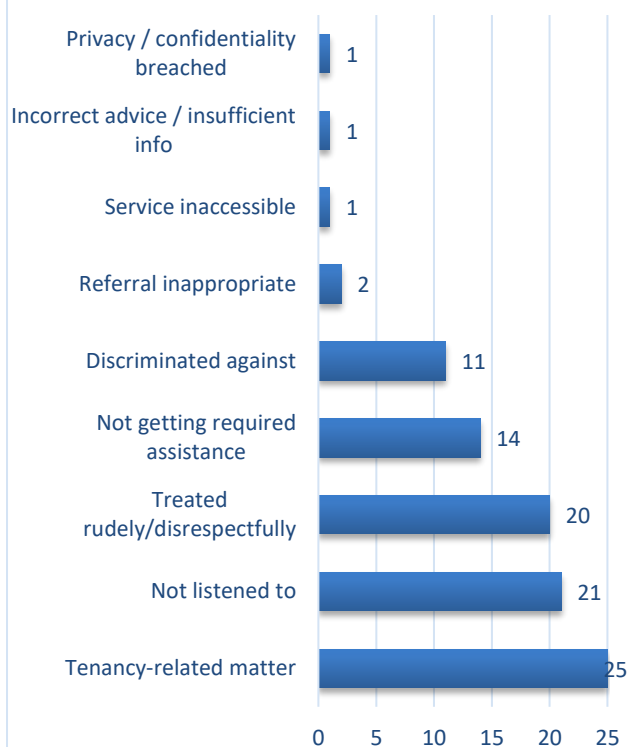
Organisational commitment, resources and valuing consumer participation were seen as factors contributing to the effectiveness of consumer participation.

In addition, information was sought from the Homelessness Advocacy Service (HAS) which is the key advice and information service for consumers seeking or receiving assistance from any Victorian community-managed homelessness assistance or social housing service. The statistics from HAS regarding the type of issues raised by consumers in the Southern Region in 2017/18 are presented in Figure 2. Of the 126 issues raised with HAS in the South, the most common issues were tenancy-related matters (25%), not listened to (21%) and treated rudely/disrespectfully (20%). This data can also inform the design of consumer participation processes to ensure these issues are addressed.

Figure 1. SHSN Consumer Participation Activities, % of Agencies



Figure 2. Issues raised with the Homeless Advocacy Service, Southern Region, 2017/18 (%)



WHAT IS CONSUMER PARTICIPATION?

Since the NW Consumer Participation Guide was developed in 2011, consumer participation approaches have been adopted more broadly. Council to Homeless Persons has included consumer participation as a core goal in its Industry Transition Plan. CHP's vision is:

- Strong participation across the SHS system by people with the lived experience of homelessness, including in service design, quality improvement, governance and service delivery
- Protocols, guides and resources to support organisations to embed consumer participation at all levels.

The NSW Homelessness Industry Partnership developed a toolkit for consumer participation homelessness services. The toolkit adapts participation principles for consumers of homelessness services (Figure 3) and provides examples of different types of participation (Figure 4).

Figure 3. PRINCIPLES FOR CONSUMER ENGAGEMENT

1. Perspectives of people with lived experience of homelessness are placed first and forefront

Ending homelessness demands changes to economic and social systems that address inequality and oppression. This will only happen when the perspectives of people with lived experience of homelessness are placed first.

2. People with lived experience of homelessness are included at all levels of an organisation

Seeing people with lived experience only as service recipients or research subjects won't transform systems to end homelessness. Policy, research and organisations need their insight and leadership at all levels.

3. The time of people with lived experience is valued and supported appropriately

Value a person with lived experience the same as any other worker. Appropriately compensate their time and expertise in payment (not token gift cards or honorariums); ensure barrier-free access, childcare and provide transit fare. Create a safe and welcoming environment. Avoid long meetings and processes that can be draining.

4. Stigma and oppression are challenged and dignity promoted

Oppressive ideas, attitudes and practices undermine the dignity of people facing homelessness. Provide social inclusiveness training to all staff; confront oppression where it occurs; educate around the intersectionality of inequity based on gender, race, age, dis/ability, sexual orientation, immigration status, poverty etc.

5. Expertise of people with lived experience is recognised through inclusion in decision-making

Consumer representation is more than sitting on a committee. Real participation requires space for the voices of people with lived experience, listening to their expertise and appointing them to decision-making roles.

6. People with lived experience enjoy equitable representation

Consumer advocates must have equal representation in decision-making, e.g. equal voting rights on boards and committees, staffing and other roles. This may require a gradual process of organisational change.

7. Services and people with lived experience engage in authentic relationships

Ending homelessness requires transforming unequal power relationships to ones that are authentic. People with lived experience should be equal partners on boards, committees and staffing. Cultivate an environment of caring, acceptance and openness, where everyone's contribution is acknowledged.

Source: Homelessness Industry Partnership, 2018

Figure 4. Level Of Consumer Engagement	Type Of Consumer Participation	Examples
HIGH	Consumers and workers jointly make decisions	Consumers are involved in planning meetings
		Consumers participate in developing their own care plans/treatment
		Consumers and workers design and produce a resource guide, e.g. for people sleeping rough
		Consumers regularly participate in staff or board meetings
		Consumer representatives participate in staff recruitment and staff performance appraisal
	Consumers make the decisions	Consumers direct the activities of their homelessness worker
		Consumers initiate and direct projects or programs with service workers involved in a supportive capacity
MID	Non decision-making roles	Consumers are involved in resource development
		Consumers are supported to conduct their own group activities
		Consumers give advice on projects or programs designed and run by service workers
		Consumers are involved in staff training
LOW	Information is provided to consumers	Resources and information sessions for consumers are available that include information about service structures and planning
	Information is sought from consumers	Consumer satisfaction surveys or forums are conducted
		Consumers have access to complaints procedures and suggestion box
		Consumers can give feedback via suggestion boxes
	Consumer rights in policy	Consumer participation is incorporated into an organisation's vision or mission statement; there is a consumer Charter of Rights
		Source: Homelessness Industry Partnership, 2018

Practice Principles

- 01** The SHSN values consumer participation as a method of continuous service improvement and quality monitoring. The SHSN values the contribution consumers make to our work.
- 02** An engaging and respectful relationship between consumers and staff underpins effective consumer participation. Effective consumer involvement has various benefits from improved service system responsiveness to increased feelings of inclusion and empowerment amongst consumers.
- 03** The SHSN values consumers and recognises their right to be self-determining and involved in service delivery.
- 04** Opportunities to be involved in homelessness services are available, accessible, regular, promoted and inclusive of all consumers and regularly reviewed by member agencies. Where appropriate, consumers should be paid for their time and reimbursed for participation costs such as travel and childcare.
- 05** Homelessness services offer a variety of ways for consumers to be involved including through informal feedback. Ensuring the availability and accessibility of consumer participation opportunities is more important than the specific strategies used.
- 06** Consumer participation strategies are purposeful and meaningful for consumers and services.
- 07** Consumers are actively encouraged and supported to be involved in homelessness services. Their participation is voluntary and will not affect their access to any part of the service system. This should be recognised in staff codes of conduct for member agencies
- 08** Homelessness agencies provide feedback to consumers (and staff) on the outcomes of consumer participation processes.
- 09** Homelessness services share their consumer participation strategies and learnings, to the benefit of other service providers and the service system, including through the SHSN.
- 10** Consumer participation and consumer voice is an effective way of informing homelessness policy and advocacy and should be utilised by member agencies and the SHSN as appropriate.

[Human Services Standards Policy, 2018](#)

All Specialist Homelessness Services are required to meet the following human services standards. Standards 1- 4 relate to service delivery and are relevant to this Guide.

Standard	Criterion
1. Empowerment People's rights are promoted and upheld.	1.1 People understand their rights and responsibilities 1.2 People exercise their rights and responsibilities
2. Access and Engagement People's right to access transparent, equitable and integrated services is promoted and upheld.	2.1 Services have a clear and accessible point of contact 2.2 Services are delivered in a fair, equitable and transparent manner 2.3 People access services most appropriate to their needs through timely, responsive service integration and referral
3. Wellbeing People's right to wellbeing and safety is promoted and upheld.	3.1 Services adopt a strengths-based and early intervention approach to service delivery that enhances people's wellbeing 3.2 People actively participate in an assessment of their strengths, risks, wants and needs 3.3 All people have a goal-oriented plan documented and implemented (this plan includes strategies to achieve stated goals) 3.4 Each person's assessments and plans are regularly reviewed, evaluated and updated. Exit/transition planning occurs as appropriate 3.5 Services are provided in a safe environment for all people, free from abuse, neglect, violence and/or preventable injury
4. Participation People's right to choice, decision making and to actively participate as a valued member of their chosen community is promoted and upheld.	4.1 People exercise choice and control in service delivery and life decisions 4.2 People actively participate in their community by identifying goals and pursuing opportunities including those related to health, education, training and employment 4.3 People maintain connections with family and friends, as appropriate 4.4 People maintain and strengthen connection to their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander culture and community 4.5 People maintain and strengthen their cultural, spiritual and language connections 4.6 People develop, sustain and strengthen independent life skills
5. Governance and Management Organisations must be effectively governed and managed at all times	5.1 The Organisation must be able to demonstrate that it is able to meet governance and management standards, as established by the Secretary to the Department of Health and Human Services

Challenges

There are a number of factors relating to the experience of homelessness and the nature of the service system that pose some particular challenges when attempting to involve consumers in homelessness service design, delivery or evaluation.

Coordination of the homelessness service system and active membership of the SHSN, means that agencies are better placed to carry consumer voices from individual homelessness services into the regional and state planning sphere. However, the great diversity amongst people who seek

homelessness assistance, and their experiences of crisis and social exclusion, can make it difficult to collect consumer perspectives in an appropriate and meaningful way.

Challenges commonly experienced by homelessness services in seeking to involve consumers, as well as potential practice responses, are outlined below.

Challenge	Practice Suggestion
Securing staff or organisational support for consumer participation initiatives	<p>High level organisational commitment to consumer participation drives practice across the organisation and supports the allocation of appropriate resourcing.</p> <p>Involve staff from across the organisation in the design and delivery of consumer participation strategies, so people are invested in the work.</p> <p>Engage consumers to speak to staff about what it means to them to be involved.</p> <p>Emphasise that consumer feedback enables more responsive and empowering service delivery.</p>
Resourcing consumer participation initiatives	<p>Undertake projects in partnership with other services. Use timesaving tools, like web surveys that auto- collate responses.</p> <p>Engage current or former consumers or students to assist with developing and delivering participation initiatives.</p>
Finding consumers who are willing and interested to be involved	<p>Consider ways that the activity can be beneficial to consumers, such as by offering remuneration, or creating opportunities for skill development.</p> <p>Advertise opportunities for involvement in multiple ways. Publicise the ways in which the service has meaningfully involved and responded to consumers in the past.</p> <p>Utilise existing consumer groups such as Launch Housing's LEAG or CHP's Peer Education and Support Program.</p>
Supporting consumers to be actively involved in the service	<p>Consider peer facilitation of consumer meetings or focus groups, and allow support persons to attend.</p> <p>Reassure prospective participants that their rights and confidentiality will be observed, and that the feedback they provide will not affect their access to services.</p>
Avoiding possible staff bias in seeking feedback	<p>Seek feedback from a range of consumers including those with negative feedback</p> <p>Educate staff about the importance of consumer feedback and ensure agency accountability for feedback processes to reduce staff bias.</p>

Challenge	Practice Suggestion
Ensuring that involvement from vulnerable consumers is ethical	<p>Develop plain English information and consent forms for each consumer participation activity. Act in accordance with these documents and translate them as necessary. Consider seeking guidance from a research institute about appropriate ways to gather the perspectives of vulnerable people.</p> <p>Ensure that participants are clear about how information will be shared and how personal information will be protected.</p>
Seeking feedback from consumers who have difficulty communicating	<p>Use plain English or translated documents, visual aids or interpreting services.</p> <p>Test surveys with current or former consumers to ensure that they are understood as you intended.</p>
Involving consumers who are currently in crisis or feel overwhelmed	<p>Use informal or instant feedback mechanisms, such as placing comment books, suggestion boxes or touch-screen surveys in waiting rooms, or create an informal feedback book that staff members regularly update with comments they've heard from consumers.</p> <p>Seek feedback or participation from consumers once their immediate crisis has been resolved or at the end of the support period.</p> <p>Develop intra- and inter-agency feedback mechanisms to seek feedback after crisis about the services received whilst in crisis (de-identified).</p>
Collecting feedback in a high-volume practice setting	<p>Use feedback mechanisms that are informal, instant or not resource intensive (as above). Provide a private space where consumers can complete feedback forms, etc.</p>
Completing the feedback loop with consumers	<p>When collecting consent, also collect the participant's contact details so that you can provide them with a copy of the activity's outcomes if they are interested. Publicise the learnings and outcomes of consumer participation initiatives through annual reports, newsletters or posters.</p>
Integrating feedback into service design and delivery	<p>When planning a consumer participation activity, decide on the level of authority that consumer perspectives will be given, and the mechanism for channelling these perspectives into service planning. Ensure that these decisions are supported by other relevant stakeholders.</p>
Being responsive to feedback that is beyond the scope of the initiative or service	<p>Consider other networks or colleagues who may be interested in, or able to act on, the feedback provided by consumers. This could include the SHSN, Council to Homeless Persons, Homelessness Network Coordinators, the Victorian Homelessness Network or the Victorian Government.</p> <p>Be honest and upfront with consumers about the scope of the activity and the type of feedback that you can realistically act upon.</p>

Case Planning For Agencies

OVERVIEW

Whilst homelessness services may have mechanisms in place to encourage and monitor consumer participation in individual case planning, there seems to be a lack of robust and formalised strategies to ensure that is upheld.

Consumer participation fits well with strengths-based case management approaches and as part of trauma informed care. Consumer participation should be seen as a core to every day case management practice.

“Excellent. Give employers and consumers good guidelines of positive consumer participation”

(Consumer Feedback)

Good practices include:

- The development of a consumer charter of rights and responsibilities which is tailored to the organisation and values consumers' agency:
- Vision and value statements which embed consumer- driven practice into the service culture:
- Formally identifying the importance of consumer centred case management and planning is critical for this to be upheld across the organisation, as part of a consumer participation strategy:
- Reviewing informational material to ensure that it is accessible to all consumer groups. This takes into account the design, language, physical placement and availability of these documents. These documents should be made widely available and well promoted to consumers.
- Seeking and responding to feedback on the extent to which consumers feel empowered throughout their support period (rather than through exit surveys only)
- Developing case plans in partnership with consumers. These document the consumer's preferences and responsibilities.

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

	Information	Partnership	Consumer Empowerment
Staff Contributions	<p>All consumers are made aware of their rights and the options that are available to them.</p> <p>Consumers have access to all information that relates to them.</p>	<p>All consumers are encouraged and supported to take up opportunities to provide feedback on their individual experience of service.</p> <p>Working relationships are respectful and consumers' wishes are heard.</p>	<p>Staff members adopt a strengths-based/inclusive practice approach.</p>
Organisational Contributions	<p>Information relating to rights and opportunities for involvement is made available to consumers in a number of formats.</p>	<p>The organisation develops and monitors individually focused feedback mechanisms such as feedback forms, exit interviews, or outcomes analyses.</p>	<p>Strengths-based practice is embedded as an organisational value in guiding documents.</p> <p>Templates for case management agreements are developed.</p>
SHSN Contributions	<p>Information about the regional homelessness service system and consumers' rights is produced and circulated.</p>	<p>The SHSN develops and monitors common questions to be included on feedback and exit forms.</p>	<p>Regional practice development opportunities align with a consumer-centric service approach.</p>

"It can be difficult to give just feedback about services without talking about my anger, past trauma and bad experiences."

(Consumer Feedback)

Service Delivery For Agencies

OVERVIEW

The Consumer Participation Mapping Survey found that a variety of strategies and tools are used by member agencies across the region to seek consumer participation in service planning, delivery and evaluation. These strategies range from consulting consumers to consumers working in partnership with the organisation and in one SHSN member agency, consumer participation on the agency's board of management. Most consumer participation mechanisms focus on consulting consumers for the purpose of service feedback. There are also opportunities to increase the level of consumer input into homelessness service design and delivery as well as staff induction. Consumer participation should be integrated into service delivery practice.

Good practices include:

- Tailoring consumer participation strategies to each program area within a large organisation.
- Including consumer participation in program manuals, staff induction processes and ongoing training for front line staff.
- Ensuring that exit surveys and feedback forms have a blank space available for consumers to freely write their own comments, rather than responding only to prescribed questions.
- Undertaking practice development with staff members to create a culture of consumer inclusive practice.
- Welcoming consumers to become members of the organisation or to sit on the board of management.
- Using a combination of regular, annual and ad hoc mechanisms to obtain consumer input into the organisation.
- Encouraging consumer participation that extends beyond contributions to program planning, delivery or evaluation. For example, consumers can provide peer support or contribute to staff inductions.

“Additional resourcing would improve ability to have consumer engagements extended deeper into areas such as recruitment of staff and consumer participation in paid work”

(SHSN Consumer Participation Mapping Survey 2018)

SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

	Information	Partnership	Consumer Empowerment
Staff Contributions	All consumers are made aware of their rights and the opportunities that are available to them to be involved.	Staff members support their consumers to become involved in the organisation or service system, by attending focus groups or helping them to articulate their experiences.	Staff members empower consumers to provide voluntary feedback through the appropriate channels. Staff members show a willingness to support consumer initiatives.
Organisational Contributions	The organisation provides opportunities for consumers to learn about and engage with the service, such as social events or forums. The organisation publicises the outcomes of consumer participation initiatives.	The organisation coordinates service- focused participation mechanisms such as focus groups, house meetings or consumer representative groups and has structures in place to meaningfully use the feedback provided. The organisation supports and resources former consumers to become employees, volunteers, peer advocates or board members.	The organisation actively encourages consumers to initiate activities or projects. This could occur by running consumer innovation challenges or competitions, and having small amounts of resources available to enact the ideas that are generated.
SHSN Contributions	Information about the regional homelessness service system and consumers' rights is produced and circulated.	The SHSN encourages use of existing consumer groups such as Launch Housing's LEAG or CHP's Peer Education and Support Program for use by member agencies in service development.	Broad and targeted consumer consultations drive SHSN planning and decision-making

Complaints For Agencies

OVERVIEW

Feedback from the Consumer Participation Working Group and Mapping Survey indicates that homelessness services treat negative consumer feedback with seriousness and respect. Grievance and complaints procedures are widely used and widely promoted including the options of accessing independent advocacy and advice from external agencies. Separation of feedback, complaints and compliments were also recommended as providing useful information for agencies to act on.

“A variety of meaningful peer roles that are embedded in services and add value. For example “meet and greet consumer” workers at entry points”.

(SHSN Consumer Participation Mapping Survey 2018).

Good practices that are currently in operation throughout the region include:

- Visually representing complaints and appeals processes for consumers, using a flow chart or diagram. This information includes the contact details for the relevant staff member or independent service that may be able to help at each phase of the grievance process.
- Recognising the value of negative feedback and actively welcoming it.
- Undertaking strategies to capture and action informal feedback.
- Mitigating the potentially intimidating nature of providing feedback or raising a complaint. One service has created a combined ‘compliments, comments and complaints’ form.
- Committing to respond to any issues raised within a nominated time frame eg three days.
- Commitment to having a senior manager address complaints demonstrates how serious these are considered by the agency.
- Publicly displaying the outcomes of complaints and feedback provided by consumers, by using a newsletter or regularly updated notice board.
- Asking consumers to propose solutions to the problem at the time of making the complaint.
- Having consumer advisory group members available to assist consumers throughout the complaints process.

Suggested strategies for receiving and responding to complaints should align with those for encouraging other forms of participation.

OVERVIEW

The *Opening Doors Framework* is underpinned by values of engagement and consumer-driven service delivery. Consumer participation in SHSN decision-making aligns with these values, and the Opening Doors Service Coordination Guide requires that all LASNs ‘build in regular consumer consultation on the operation of the local model’ (p.20).

The SHSN affirmed its commitment to consumer participation in the homelessness service system through the adoption of this guide. The SHSN Consumer Participation Working Group was established, in part, to develop mechanisms to channel consumer perspectives into sector developmental work and to support member agencies in improving consumer participation contribution to service system development.

CONSIDERATIONS

There are multiple reasons for seeking consumer participation systemically:

- to inform service system development
- to assist in the identification of service system strengths and gaps
- to facilitate knowledge-sharing between SHSN member agencies
- to strengthen advocacy and influence policy and other communications with the consumer voice
- to measure changes in consumers’ experiences of the service system over time
- to provide opportunities for consumers to share their experiences and suggestions.

Consumer consultations undertaken by the NW LASNs Consumer Feedback Group (and supported by the SHSN consultations) suggested that:

- consumers are very keen to offer their insights, especially on structural issues
- the means for seeking consumer participation is less important than the availability and accessibility of opportunities for consumers to be involved in the service system.

“It is a critical element of any forward thinking organisation. Appropriate policies should be in place to make this a priority”.

(SHSN Consumer Participation Mapping Survey 2018).

Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) Strategy

The Southern Homelessness Services Network (SHSN) adopted this guide and SHSN members (as participants in the Network) committed to undertake the following activities towards involving consumers more fully in regional homeless service system development.

Activity	Seek evidence of current practices across SHSN agencies through conducting a bi-annual SHSN mapping survey.	Provide practice development opportunities to the sector.
Purpose	To understand and share current consumer participation practices.	To document, share and enhance sector strategies to involve consumers, including through CHP's development of a consumer participation strategy under the SHS Transition Plan.
Desired Outcomes	Information about current practice to be distributed across the SHSN.	Enhanced understanding and enactment of strategies to support meaningful consumer involvement.
Feedback Loop	Provide information about current practices to SHSN members.	SHSN to inform members about this Guide.
Frequency	SHSN to prepare a brief annual report based on the annual mapping survey.	Review and update this guide in 2021
Level of Consumer Participation	LEAG member in Consumer Participation Working Group	Consumer consultation to inform SHSN amendments to the guide
Consumers Represented	LEAG member in Consumer Participation Working Group	Discussion by agencies with their own consumers. Feedback sought from approximately 15-20 consumers (total)
Resources Required	People and time to submit, collate and map current practices.	People and time to consult consumers and amend Guide.
Responsible Persons	SHSN agencies to submit. Consumer Participation Working Group to document and circulate.	SHSN to contribute to and endorse Guide. Consumer Participation Working Group to prepare Guide.

“Having agencies present at the SHSN how their consumer participation has/hasn't worked and ideas for implementation would be great!”

(SHSN Consumer Participation Mapping Survey 2018)

Activity	Support use of consumer groups such as Launch Housing's LEAG or CHP's Peer Education and Support Program.	Consult consumers regarding their experiences of the Homelessness Service System (HSS)
Purpose	To access existing consumer groups. Agencies are also encouraged to establish their own consumer advisory groups.	To understand consumer experiences of the regional HSS, to guide SHSN work and inform advocacy
Desired Outcomes	Linking to a group of consumers who are available to participate as opportunities arise.	Understanding of consumer experiences of the regional HSS over time.
Feedback Loop	Representatives to be informed of opportunities for, and outcomes of, their involvement.	Summary report to be forwarded to participants and SHSN
Frequency	SHSN members to put forward and support consumers to join these groups when there are vacancies.	Bi-annual – every two years – commencing in 2019
Level of Consumer Participation	Consultation	Consumer survey.
Consumers Represented	Encourage participation from a cross-section of consumers including experience of homelessness in the South.	Minimum 5 consumers from each program in each agency.
Resources Required	Network Coordinator to facilitate access to these groups for SHSN members where required.	Staff and time to develop, deliver, collate and report on survey.
Responsible Persons	SHSN agencies to encourage consumers to participate. SHSN and its members to consult with these groups as needed. Consider including a consumer representative on the SHSN Executive.	Sector staff to deliver survey. Consumer feedback group to analyse and circulate findings. SHSN to respond to findings

“We would like to have some lived experience roles funded, and funded in a way they are not token- so proper recruitment, training, support and real opportunities to contribute to internal and external advocacy etc”

(SHSN Consumer Participation Mapping Survey 2018)

Practice Considerations

Consumer Group	Special Considerations	Practice Suggestions
Children	Children have heightened vulnerability and may be experiencing grief, confusion or apprehension relating to their household breakdown and current situation. Each household member is considered a consumer.	Consider informal or creative ways of seeking children's perspectives on various service elements. For example, children could draw a picture or tell a story about how they experienced, or hoped to experience the service.
Young people	Young people may have experienced trauma associated with the loss of their childhood home. Young people may lack appropriate support networks, and be wary of adults or community services. Young people have particular needs when accessing and engaging with homelessness services.	Consider ways in which consumer involvement in the service could contribute to the consumer's development of skills and confidence. For example, consumers could be involved in managing the services' web content or designing promotional materials. Ask young people how they would best like to contribute to the service, offer them multiple opportunities to do so, or ensure that trusted adults or peers are facilitating the activity.
Elderly people	Elderly people may be vulnerable in terms of their health, finances and support networks and may feel very dependent on homelessness services. Elderly people are also at risk of elder abuse which may make them wary of participation opportunities.	Peer-based activities can provide positive social connections for older people. Where consumers are especially reliant upon a homelessness service, it is important to emphasise that providing honest feedback will not compromise their access to assistance.
People from culturally and linguistically diverse communities	Definitions of words and the concept of receiving assistance are culturally relative. This may lead to miscommunication or overly compliant / reluctant behaviour. Standard paper-based feedback tools may not be suitable for consumers whose second language is English, and it may be costly to translate and back-translate documents.	Involve consumers in improving the cultural safety of service provision. Explain consumers' rights in the service system and the reasons that the service welcomes honest feedback and involvement, using interpreters as necessary. Before commencing the activity, ensure that the service can afford to translate any feedback received, so that consumers' time and energy are well spent.
Aboriginal People	The experience of homelessness may have unique dynamics, meanings and effects for Aboriginal people. Aboriginal people may have specific privacy concerns because of the closeness of their community members, or because of previous experiences of institutionalised racism.	Involve consumers in improving the cultural safety of service provision. Emphasise the value of consumer feedback and the confidentiality of the process. Where consumers are wary of engaging with homelessness services, it may be helpful to consider undertaking informal, social or anonymous consumer involvement activities or those facilitated by trusted peers.

Consumer Group	Special Considerations	Practice Suggestions
Refugees or asylum seekers	These consumers may be eligible for very few government-funded services and have limited support networks and understanding of local culture. These consumers are likely to have experienced trauma and may be living with a great deal of uncertainty.	Where consumers are especially reliant upon a homelessness service, it is important to emphasise that providing honest feedback will not compromise their access to assistance. See suggestions for 'people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities.'
People with a disability	People with a disability may feel vulnerable to discrimination or exploitation. Consumers may have comprehension or communication difficulties.	Consider developing plain English or pictorial surveys etc. Ensure that meeting venues are accessible and provide/reimburse suitable transport. Allow for sufficient time for people with a disability to participate.
People with a chronic illness	Transience and low quality accommodation may have a detrimental effect on consumers' health; therefore they may feel especially reliant upon service providers.	Where consumers are especially reliant upon a homelessness service, it is important to emphasise that providing honest feedback will not compromise their access to assistance.
People with a mental health issue	As above. These consumers may also be vulnerable to discrimination or exploitation, especially in congregate settings.	If consumers feel vulnerable to discrimination by a service or other consumers, consider anonymous feedback mechanisms, or indirect ways for consumers to contribute.
People who use drugs or alcohol	These consumers may be experiencing social isolation or be vulnerable to discrimination.	As above. Consider partnering with a specialist service to better engage with, or source peer support for, these consumers.
People leaving a correctional facility	The consumer may be adjusting to life back in the community and have limited support networks. Consumers may have experienced institutionalised discrimination.	Consider partnering with a specialist service to better engage with, or source peer support for, these consumers. Where consumers are wary of engaging with homelessness services, it may be helpful to consider undertaking informal, social or anonymous consumer involvement activities or those facilitated by trusted peers.
Women and children who have experienced family violence	Feelings of fear and anxiety may be present long after episodes of violence. Women who have experienced family violence may be better able to contribute to structural reform once their immediate crisis is resolved.	Clearly articulate the consumer participation initiative's confidentiality processes and seek informed consent to use the information provided. Consider partnering with an integrated family violence service to better engage with, or source peer support for, these consumers.
People who have experienced chronic homelessness	These consumers are more likely to have had multiple traumatic experiences, and may be socially isolated or wary of government and community services. These consumers may have attempted to engage with the HSS on a number of occasions, and may have a rich understanding of opportunities for service development.	Consider how to consult on systemic issues, and demonstrate to them the value of their feedback. Where consumers are wary of engaging with homelessness services, consider undertaking informal, social or anonymous consumer involvement activities or those facilitated by trusted peers. Understand how trauma might affect sharing and make allowances and provide support.

Practice Considerations

Consumer Group	Special Considerations	Practice Suggestions
LGBTIQ and Gender Diverse People	LGBTIQ consumers may experience social isolation or be vulnerable to discrimination. LGBTIQ consumers may have experienced violence and trauma and be wary of services.	Use LGBTIQ friendly language, including asking their pronouns. Ensure data systems, surveys, etc can record their identity and status. Consider anonymous feedback mechanisms, or indirect ways for consumers to contribute. Be proactive in checking in with them to offer opportunities for input.
Forgotten Australians	These consumers may have experienced violence and trauma and be wary of services particularly those run by institutions that have been associated with abuse in the past. These consumers may have drug and alcohol, mental and physical health problems and a history of incarceration and chronic homelessness	Consider partnering with a specialist service to better engage with, or source peer support for, these consumers. Where consumers are wary of engaging with homelessness services, it may be helpful to consider undertaking informal, social or anonymous consumer involvement activities or those facilitated by trusted peers.
People with literacy issues	These consumers have problems accessing written information including feedback forms and may self-exclude from participation opportunities	Consider developing plain English or pictorial surveys etc. Use new technologies to allow video and audio feedback and participation.
Practice Setting	Special Considerations	Practice Suggestions
Initial Assessment and Planning (IAP)	Consumers may have urgent needs and may be distressed. Contacts are brief. High volume service. Diverse clientele.	Use quick or informal feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes, touch screen surveys, or informal feedback notepads. Advertise involvement opportunities and outcomes in the waiting area and in multiple languages. Seek feedback or participation from consumers once their immediate crisis has been resolved or at the end of the support period.
Crisis Supported Accommodation	Relatively brief support period, yet relatively high level of contact between consumers, and between consumers and service. Consumers may feel vulnerable to the service because secure accommodation is highly valued.	Use communication books and house meetings to embed consumer participation in the service culture. Consider ways in which consumers can or would like to be more involved in the household, as a means to increase independent living skills and social opportunities.
Transitional or Long Term Support	Greater opportunity to build rapport with consumers and to support consumers to become involved in service design, delivery or evaluation.	Seek and respond to consumer feedback at multiple points throughout the support relationship. Consider ways in which consumer involvement in the service could contribute to consumer's development of skills and confidence. Longer support periods provide an opportunity to commence consumer-driven initiatives.
Post-Service	Consumers often have useful reflections post-service that can inform service delivery and evaluation. This can be useful a way for engaging consumers for short term and crisis services such as IAP. It can be difficult to find consumers after they exit services.	On exit, ask consumers if they would like to be contacted and collect contact details. Consider collecting consumer feedback at different intervals after exit to assess longer term outcomes of service delivery and to provide consumers with time and perspective to reflect adequately on the services received.

Summary of Consumer Feedback

CONSUMER FEEDBACK

The consumer consultations held in the development of this Guide provided consumers with an opportunity to provide their perspective on the content of this Guide.

Consumers were very positive about the development of the Guide and supported the intentions. Some provided very specific feedback and others gave broader feedback. Amendments were made to the draft Guide to incorporate this feedback.

It's better to get feedback in person because written feedback may not always be truthful or honest".

"It's very good that services get feedback from consumers as we are the ones that know what it's like to be homeless".

"We're the ones using the facilities so it's important for us to have a say in how the service runs".

"I think it's really important for quality around what clients need".

"Consumer is the client and the business is client-focussed so without consumer participation you have no clue on what clients want or need"

"I'm surprised that homelessness services are interested in my feedback. I'm happy to give feedback as it makes me feel important and worth it".

"I found from the reading the guide and also from personal experience that most services only offer client participation in the form of survey or feedback from which I feel is an inadequate way to do so. This gives the services a way to be selective with what data they collect or even use".

"Consumer participation should be integrated with everyday practice".

"If services want feedback, they should use simple language and always get feedback not when the crisis was occurring but after the crisis had passed".

"A touchscreen for feedback in the waiting area would be a good way to get feedback. A service would more likely get instant feedback this way, although there was a lot of stressed angry people and that may not work in a crisis waiting area."

"Consumer Participation methods need to be inclusive for people with disabilities".

"I think it's a good idea for there to be such as guide so that there is some consistency".

"I personally feel the two best methods are open floor format to give the opportunity of collective intelligence or one on one feedback to give the opportunity to those less comfortable in social situations".

Resources

The following resources have informed the development of this document. They are useful resources for agencies to use in improving the involvement of consumers in homelessness services.

Barrow, McMullin, Tripp, & Tsemberis, 2007 *Consumer Integration and Self-determination in Homelessness Research, Policy, Planning and Services*
<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/barrow/report.pdf>

Black, C. 2014 *Homelessness, learning from those who've lived it: Evaluation of the Peer Education Support Program*. Council to Homeless Persons, Victoria.

Council to Homeless Persons 2018 *The Specialist Homelessness Sector Transition Plan (2018-2022)*
– Building a path to our future <http://chp.org.au/shs-transitionplan18/>

Council to Homeless Persons

'Giving Voice,' Parity, October 2004

'Homeless Voices,' Parity, August 2009

Department of Health and Human Services 2018 *Human Services Standards Policy 2018*
<https://providers.dhhs.vic.gov.au/human-services-standards-policy-word>

Department of Health and Human Services 2018 [Public participation framework](#)

European Federation of National Organisations Working to End Homelessness, 2013 *Participation Toolkit* https://www.feantsa.org/download/participation_toolkit_english_final_2013-2-17759063145615739680.pdf

HomeGround Services 2011 *Consumer Participation Strategy, January 2011*

Homelessness Advocacy Service <http://chp.org.au/services/has/>

Homelessness Industry Partnership, a partnership of Domestic Violence NSW, Homelessness NSW and Yfoundations, 2018 *Consumer Representation Resource Kit: For Services And People With Lived Experience Of Homelessness*.

North and West Metropolitan Homelessness Local Area Service Network 2011 *Cared For Enough To Be Involved – Client Participation Guide*.

Rural Housing Network and HomeGround Services (2008) *Consumer Participation Resource Kit for housing and homelessness services*. Council to Homeless Persons, Melbourne
https://www.lirata.com/assets/documents/HomeGround_RHN_ConsumerParticipationResourceKit.pdf