

# Cared For Enough To Be Involved

## Client Participation Guide

North and West Metropolitan Homelessness  
Local Area Service Network



December 2011

**"People in trouble still have the right to say what they think and feel."**



**"I really enjoy interviewing peers as it's inspirational to me to know that I'm not alone in what I've been through."**



**"Empowerment and participation make sense for consumers, because when you've experienced rejection you can see it. You're sensitive to it. It reminds you of stuff in the past. I'm not liked or loved, but I need to know that I'm cared for, cared for enough to be involved."**



**"I'm dedicated to making a difference for others so that they don't have to endure what I've been through."**



**"I had no energy. I had no purpose. Since I've been involved it's empowered me. It's energised me."**



This document was developed by a working party of the North and West Metropolitan Homelessness Local Area Service Network, the Client Feedback Group, which is comprised of representatives of the following services:

Australian Community Support Organisation  
Council to Homeless Persons  
Department of Human Services  
HomeGround Services  
Hope Street Youth and Family Services  
Salvation Army Social Housing Service  
Wombat Housing and Support Services  
Yarra Community Housing

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# Resources

The following resources have informed this document and may be useful in attempting to improve the involvement of clients in homelessness services.

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## Barrow, McMullin, Tripp, & Tsemberis

*Consumer Integration and Self-determination in Homelessness Research, Policy, Planning and Services*

<http://aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/homelessness/symposium07/barrow/report.pdf>

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## Council to Homeless Persons

*'Giving Voice,' Parity, October 2004*

*'Homeless Voices,' Parity, August 2009*

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## Department of Human Services Office of Housing

*Homelessness Assistance Service Standards*

<http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/homelessness-and-family-violence/homelessness/for-service-providers/standards-and-guidelines>

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## Department of Human Services Office of Housing Office of Housing

*Consumer Charter for Community-Managed Housing and Homelessness Services*

<http://www.housing.vic.gov.au/homelessness-and-family-violence/getting-help/consumer-charter>

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## European Federation of National Organisations Working to End Homelessness

*Participation Toolkit; Redistributing the Power!*

[http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=5&pk\\_id\\_publications=485](http://www.feantsa.org/code/en/pg.asp?Page=5&pk_id_publications=485)

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## HomeGround Services

*Consumer Participation Strategy, January 2011*

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## HomeGround Services & Rural Housing Network

*Consumer Participation Resource Kit*

<http://cpkit.chp.org.au>

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## Homeless Link

*Client Involvement*

<http://www.homeless.org.uk/client-involvement>

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## Homelessness Advocacy Service

<http://www.chp.org.au/has.shtml>

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## Manchester Sun User Network for Homeless People

*Barriers to the Meaningful Involvement of Homeless*

*Service Users* <http://handbooks.homeless.org.uk/hostels/environment/participation/sunparticipation.ppt>

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## Shelter Scotland

*Service User Involvement in Homelessness*

[http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/55572/Service\\_user\\_involvement.pdf](http://scotland.shelter.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/55572/Service_user_involvement.pdf)

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**BACKGROUND**

The North and West Metropolitan Region LASN Client Feedback Group was established to model good practice in relation to client feedback and participation processes for homelessness services, to develop mechanisms to channel client perspectives into LASN work, and to seek clients’ views on the regional implementation of the *Opening Doors Framework*.

In order to assist this, LASN members were asked to provide their client participation policies or tools to the Client Feedback Group in the latter part of 2010. This collation contributed to an understanding of the variety and efficacy of client participation strategies that are currently in operation across the region. Through the Client Feedback Group, regional homelessness services have also contributed to a case study project, two client focus groups (see appendix), a workshop on Client Inclusive Practice and discussions with the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, the Council to Homeless Persons and Housing Sector Capacity Building, Department of Human Services. This document is informed by each of these activities.

It’s evident that a variety of strategies to involve clients in all levels of service provision are in operation across the region. It also appears that many homelessness services take a multifaceted approach to client participation, recognising that no strategy is purposeful for, or accessible to, all clients. However, the client focus groups suggested that whilst clients of the regional homelessness service system are keen to be involved in decisions affecting them, the organisations with which they work and the broader service system, opportunities to do so aren’t always accessible or meaningful.

It seems that the level of participation that is currently available to clients of homelessness services ranges from receiving information that encourages involvement to acting in partnership with other stakeholders. There are opportunities for the service system and individual homelessness services to increase the extent and effectiveness of client involvement strategies.

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this guide is to document and share good client participation practices that are currently in place across the region, and to assist homelessness services to achieve such practices, taking into account relevant practice settings and service standards.

**FOCUS GROUP ONE**

The first client focus group, held in August 2010, found that clients of homelessness services in the North and West Metropolitan Region were not familiar with the concept of client participation in homelessness services, but were very supportive of the idea. The attendees stressed that participation strategies should not be tokenistic, and clients should not be penalised for speaking up about a service.

Discussions also revealed that, outside of individual case-planning conversations, clients could not remember being asked to contribute to the design, delivery or review of services.

All participants were interested in being involved to a greater extent in the homelessness services with which they were working.

**“I’d really like the opportunity to be able to use my experience to help others that are going through what I have been through.”**

**FOCUS GROUP TWO**

Participants in this session reiterated some of the findings from the first client focus group; generally clients are not aware of the ways in which they can be involved in homelessness services, but are willing to contribute to such organisations.

This session was intended to uncover practical and popular strategies for clients to increase their involvement in the homelessness service system. Whilst a number of suggestions were provided, participants were not terribly concerned about the mechanics of client participation strategies. Rather, they wanted to emphasise that it is important that such strategies are operational and accessible to all clients of homelessness services.

It was interesting that the participants almost unanimously agreed that they would most like to be consulted on systemic issues relating to homelessness. Participants felt that they had a level of expertise that could positively contribute to enhancing responses to people experiencing homelessness in a number of ways. However, it was suggested that some clients might only want to contribute to their own case plan whilst they were experiencing personal crises.

Participants’ responses to a number of questions affirmed the integral role that staff members play in shaping the engagement of clients at all levels of homelessness services. According to the participants, clients are more likely to engage with an organisation when staff members are perceived to be friendly, knowledgeable and genuinely interested in responding to clients’ desires, needs and concerns.

Practice Setting	Special Considerations	Practice Suggestions
Initial Assessment and Planning	<p>Clients may have urgent needs and be distressed</p> <p><b>Contacts are brief</b></p> <p>High volume service</p> <p><b>Diverse clientele</b></p>	<p>Use quick or informal feedback mechanisms, such as suggestion boxes, touch screen surveys, or informal feedback notepads that staff can fill in and collate later.</p> <p><b>Advertise involvement opportunities and outcomes in the waiting area, in multiple languages.</b></p> <p>Seek feedback or participation from clients once their immediate crisis has been resolved or at the end of the support period.</p>
Interim Response 2	<p>Task-based response</p> <p><b>Short support periods</b></p> <p>Congregate setting</p>	<p>Before referral, ask clients to decide which tasks or assistance they believe will be most helpful to them.</p> <p><b>Following assistance, record deliverables from the client’s perspective in the IR 2 data collection template.</b></p>
Crisis Supported Accommodation	<p>Relatively brief support period, yet relatively high level of contact between clients, and between clients and service</p> <p><b>Clients may feel particularly vulnerable to the service because secure accommodation is highly valued</b></p>	<p>Use communication books and house meetings to embed client participation in the service culture.</p> <p><b>Consider ways in which clients can or would like to be more involved in the household, as a means to increase independent living skills and social opportunities.</b></p>
Transitional or Long Term Support	<p>Greater opportunity to build rapport with clients and to support clients to become involved in service design, delivery or evaluation</p>	<p>Seek and respond to client feedback at multiple points throughout the support relationship.</p> <p><b>Consider ways in which client involvement in the service could contribute to client’s development of skills and confidence. Longer support periods provide an opportunity to commence client-driven initiatives.</b></p>

### FINDINGS FROM THE CLIENT FOCUS GROUPS AND COLLATION OF AGENCY STRATEGIES

Across the region there are a wide variety of strategies in place to seek client participation.

These strategies tend to focus on providing information to, or acting in partnership with, clients.

Clients are keen to be involved in homelessness services at both micro and macro levels, but often don’t know how, or aren’t adequately supported, to do so.

The strategy used to involve clients is less important than the availability and accessibility of opportunities to be involved.

An engaging and respectful relationship between clients and staff of homelessness services underpins effective client involvement.

Effective client involvement has a number of benefits, from improved service system responsiveness to increased feelings of inclusion and mastery amongst clients.

**“I’ve been involved in feedback processes for over sixteen months now...I’ve really quite enjoyed it. At first I was quite hesitant about it, but now I quite enjoy it. I’ve met people from all walks of life and it’s been just fascinating.”**

- 01** The regional homelessness service system values clients and recognises that it is their right to be self-determining and involved in service delivery.
- 02** Although fulsome client participation strategies may be difficult to implement, homelessness services are committed to making a start towards improved client participation.
- 03** Opportunities to be involved in homelessness services are available and accessible to all clients.
- 04** Homelessness services offer a variety of ways for clients to be involved.
- 05** Client participation strategies are purposeful and meaningful for clients and the service; tokenistic activities may be discouraging for clients and staff alike.
- 06** Clients are actively encouraged and supported to be involved in homelessness services, and are assured that their participation is voluntary and will not affect their access to any part of the service system.
- 07** Homelessness agencies feed back to clients the outcomes of their involvement.
- 08** Informal feedback is heard and addressed.
- 09** Opportunities for client involvement are ongoing and regularly reviewed.
- 10** Homelessness services share their client participation strategies and learnings, to the benefit of other service providers and the service system.

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

Client 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. <b>Each household member is considered a client.</b>	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. <b>Young people may lack appropriate support networks, and be wary of adults or community services.</b> Young people have particular needs when accessing and engaging with homelessness services.	Consider ways in which client involvement in the service could contribute to the client's development of skills and confidence. For example, clients could be involved in managing the services' web content or designing promotional materials. <b>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.</b>
Elderly people	Elderly people may be particularly vulnerable in terms of their health, finances and support networks and may feel very dependent on homelessness services.	Peer-based activities can provide positive social connections for older people. <b>Where clients are especially reliant upon a homelessness service, it is important to emphasise that providing honest feedback will not compromise their access to assistance.</b>
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. <b>Standard paper-based feedback tools may not be suitable for clients whose second language is English, and it may be costly to translate and back-translate documents.</b>	Involve clients in improving the cultural safety of service provision. <b>Explain clients' rights in the service system and the reasons that the service welcomes honest feedback and involvement, using interpreters as necessary.</b> Before commencing the activity, ensure that the service can afford to translate any feedback received, so that clients' time and energy are well spent.
Aboriginal People	The experience of homelessness may have unique dynamics, meanings and effects for Aboriginal people. <b>Aboriginal people may have specific privacy concerns because of the closeness of their community members, or because of previous experiences of institutionalised racism.</b>	Involve clients in improving the cultural safety of service provision. <b>Emphasise the value of client feedback and the confidentiality of the process.</b> Where clients are wary of engaging with homelessness services, it may be helpful to consider undertaking informal, social or anonymous client involvement activities or those facilitated by trusted peers.

<b>Homelessness Assistance Service Standards</b>	Each consumer has the opportunity to actively participate in an assessment planning process that is strengths-based and emphasises long-term solutions.  Consumers contribute to determining the way the organisation provides services.  Complaints and appeals are addressed promptly, respectfully and fairly without compromising services to the person complaining or appealing.
<b>Consumer Charter for Community-Managed Housing and Homelessness Services</b>	You have the right to make choices that will affect your future.  You have the right to participate in the decision making process of organisations providing services to you.  You have the right to make a complaint or appeal a decision you do not agree with and to receive an answer that makes sense to you.
<b>One DHS Standards (not currently in effect)</b>	People understand and exercise their rights and responsibilities.  People actively participate in an assessment of their strengths, risks, wants and needs.  People exercise choice and control in service delivery and life decisions.

**"I think it's good to hear from others who have the same problems."**

# 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 clients in homelessness service design, delivery or evaluation.

Recent changes in the organisation and coordination of the homelessness service system mean that we're better placed to carry client voices from individual homelessness services into the regional 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 garner client perspectives in an appropriate and meaningful way.

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

Challenge	Practice Suggestion
Resourcing client participation initiatives	Undertake projects in partnership with other services. <b>Use timesaving tools, like web surveys that auto-collate responses.</b> Engage current or former clients or students to assist with developing and delivering participation initiatives.
Securing staff or organisational support for client participation initiatives	Involve staff from across the organisation in the design and delivery of client participation strategies, so people are invested in the work. <b>Engage clients to speak to staff about what it means to them to be involved.</b> Emphasise that client feedback enables more responsive and empowering service delivery.
Finding clients who are willing and interested to be involved	Consider ways that the activity can be beneficial to clients, such as by offering remuneration, or creating opportunities for skill development. <b>Advertise opportunities for involvement in multiple ways.</b> Publicise the ways in which the service has meaningfully involved and responded to clients in the past.
Supporting clients to be actively involved in the service	Consider peer facilitation of client meetings or focus groups, and allow support persons to attend. <b>Reassure prospective participants that their rights and confidentiality will be observed, and that the feedback they provide will not affect their access to services.</b>

Develop register of client representatives.	Survey clients regarding their experiences of the HSS.	Undertake targeted client consultation (survey and focus group).
To easily identify clients who are interested in HSS participation & to provide a vehicle for these clients to be involved.	To understand client experiences of the regional HSS, to inform LASN work.	To understand client perspectives on specific aspects of the HSS.
Identification of a group of clients who are available to participate as opportunities arise.	Understanding of client experiences of the regional HSS over time.	Understanding of client perspectives of aspects of the HSS to provide direction to the LASN.
Representatives to be informed of opportunities for, and outcomes of, their involvement.	Summary report to be forwarded to participants and LASN.	Summary report to be forwarded to participants and LASN.
Ongoing. Seek new members annually.	Annual.	As necessary, suggest bi-annual.
Consultation.	Consultation.	Deciding in partnership (client perspectives inform action).
Self-nominated cross-section of clients.	Minimum 5 clients from each program.	Opportunistic sampling. Approximately 50 clients.
Person and time to coordinate list.	People and time to develop, deliver and collate survey.	Time to develop and deliver consultation. Payment to thank participants.
LASN agencies to seek representatives. Client feedback group to collate and maintain client register.	Sector staff to deliver survey. Client feedback group to analyse and circulate findings. LASN to respond to findings.	LASN to identify topics, Client Feedback Group to develop consultation. LASN to respond to findings.

In July 2011, the LASN committed to undertake the following activities, as a first step towards involving clients more fully in regional homelessness (HSS) service system development:

Activity	Seek evidence of current practices across LASN agencies.	Provide practice development opportunities to the sector (practice guide and workshop).
<b>Purpose</b>	To understand and share current client participation practices.	To document, share and enhance sector strategies to involve clients.
<b>Desired Outcomes</b>	Information about current practice to be distributed across the HSS.	Enhanced understanding and enactment of strategies to support meaningful client involvement.
<b>Feedback Loop</b>	Provide information about current practices to LASN members.	Workshop participants to be informed of session outcomes. LASN to inform and receive guide.
<b>Frequency</b>	Update annually.	Update guide annually. One workshop initially, but potential for further sessions.
<b>Level of Client Participation</b>	Not applicable.	Client consultation to inform guide and workshop. Some participation in workshop.
<b>Clients Represented</b>	Not applicable.	Opportunistic sampling. Approximately 50 clients.
<b>Resources Required</b>	People and time to submit, collate and map current practices.	People and time to consult clients, organise workshop & write guide. Infrastructure grant to consult clients and delivery workshop.
<b>Responsible Persons</b>	LASN agencies to submit. Client Feedback Group to document and circulate.	LASN to contribute to guide & workshop. Client Feedback Group to prepare guide & workshop.

Challenge	Practice Suggestion
Ensuring that involvement from vulnerable clients is ethical	Develop plain English information and consent forms for each client participation activity. Act in accordance with these documents and translate them as necessary. <b>Consider seeking guidance from a research institute about appropriate ways to gather the perspectives of vulnerable people.</b>
Seeking feedback from clients who have difficulty communicating	Use plain English or translated documents, visual aids or interpreting services. <b>Test surveys with current or former clients to ensure that they are understood as you intended.</b>
Involving clients who are currently in crisis or feel overwhelmed	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 clients. <b>Seek feedback or participation from clients once their immediate crisis has been resolved or at the end of the support period.</b>
Garnering feedback in a high-volume practice setting	Use feedback mechanisms that are informal, instant or not resource intensive (as above).
Completing the feedback loop with clients	When collecting consent, also collect the participant's contact details so that you can provide them with a copy of the activity's outcomes, which could be in the form of a focus group report, survey findings or research results. <b>Publicise the learnings and outcomes of client participation initiatives through annual reports, newsletters or posters.</b>
Integrating feedback into service design and delivery	When planning a client participation activity, decide on the level of authority that client perspectives will be given, and the mechanism for channelling these perspectives into service planning. Ensure that these decisions are supported by other relevant stakeholders.
Being responsive to feedback that is beyond the scope of the initiative or service	Consider other networks or colleagues who may be interested in, or able to act on, the feedback provided by clients. This could include the LASN or its sub-groups, the peak body or Homelessness Network Coordinators. <b>Be honest and upfront with clients about the scope of the activity and the type of feedback that you can realistically act upon.</b>

## OVERVIEW

The service standards relevant to this area of practice are:

- that each consumer has the opportunity to actively participate in an assessment planning process that is strengths-based and emphasises long term solutions (HASS)
- that consumers have the right to make choices that will affect their future (Consumer Charter)
- that people actively participate in an assessment of their strengths, risks, wants and needs (One DHS Standards).

Practice mapping undertaken in 2010 suggests that whilst a number of homelessness services have mechanisms in place to encourage and monitor client participation in individual case planning, across the sector there is a lack of robust and formalised strategies to ensure that this service standard is upheld.

**“I think you get to steer your ship to a degree.”**

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

- The development of a client charter of rights and responsibilities which is tailored to the organisation and values clients’ agency:  
**“You have the right to be involved in discussions about your assessment and support plan.”**
- Vision and value statements which embed client-driven practice into the service culture:  
**“Every person has the right to participate in decisions that affect them and to have power in shaping their lives. When people have a sense of personal power they are more motivated to act responsibly and to contribute to creative problem solving within organisations and communities.”**
- Formally identifying the importance of client centred case management and planning for this to be upheld across the organisation, as part of a client participation strategy:  
**“Case management is the fundamental mechanism for consumer participation and is key to its effectiveness. (The agency) takes a strengths based approach to case management, recognising consumers have the capacity, knowledge and skills to resolve their issues.”**
- Reviewing informational material to ensure that it is accessible to all client groups. This takes into account the design, language, physical placement and availability of these documents.
- Seeking and responding to feedback on the extent to which clients feel empowered throughout their support period (rather than through exit surveys only).  
**“Do program workers listen to you carefully? Do you feel supported to make the best choices for you? Are you involved in developing your case plan along with the worker?”**
- Developing case plans in partnership with clients. These document the client’s preferences and responsibilities.

## OVERVIEW

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

In February 2010, the North & West Metropolitan LASN affirmed its commitment to client participation in the homelessness service system. The LASN Client Feedback Group was established, in part, to develop mechanisms to channel client perspectives into sector developmental work.

**“I’d like to see a consultation process of how we can restructure the system and how we can change the current situation from a realistic voice.”**

## CONSIDERATIONS

There are multiple reasons for seeking client participation systemically:

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

Recent client consultations undertaken by the Client Feedback Group have suggested that:

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

**OVERVIEW**

The service standards relevant to this area of practice are:

- that complaints and appeals are addressed promptly, respectfully and fairly without compromising services to the person complaining or appealing (HASS)
- that consumers have the right to make a complaint or appeal a decision they do not agree with and to receive and answer that makes sense to them (Consumer Charter).

Regional practice mapping suggests that homelessness services treat negative client feedback with seriousness and respect. Most comments and complaints forms are designed in an encouraging and accessible manner, but tend to focus on clients' individual experiences of service delivery, rather than welcoming constructive feedback about any aspect of the organisation. Homelessness services tend to formally recognise the role that staff at all levels of the organisation play in collecting and responding to negative feedback.

**"If there were problems, I'd like to be in environments where we can discuss them, like open tables."**

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

- Visually representing complaints and appeals processes for clients, 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. One policy states: **"Complaints are viewed as opportunities for operational review and improvement."**
- Undertaking strategies to capture and action informal feedback.
- Mitigating the potentially intimidating nature of raising a complaint. One service has created a combined 'compliments, comments and complaints' form. Another's policy states: **"There may be a power differential between service providers and clients. In this context (the agency) is committed to redressing the imbalance as far as is possible by providing clients with an accessible complaints process that is transparent and fair."**
- Committing to respond to any issues raised within three days.
- Publicly displaying the outcomes of complaints and feedback provided by clients, by using a newsletter or regularly updated notice board, for example.
- Asking clients to propose solutions to the problem at the time of making the complaint.
- Having consumer advisory group members available to assist clients throughout the complaints process.

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

**SUGGESTED STRATEGIES**

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

**"I'd talk to anyone about my experiences. I think it's good to get it out."**

## OVERVIEW

The service standards relevant to this area of practice are:

- that consumers contribute to determining the way the organisation provides services (HASS)
- that consumers have the right to participate in the decision making process of organisations providing services to them (Consumer Charter)
- that people exercise choice and control in service delivery (One DHS Standards).

The regional collation of client participation strategies and tools suggested that there are a variety of mechanisms in place across the region to seek client participation in service planning, delivery and evaluation. The scope of client involvement that is offered by these strategies ranges from consulting clients to clients working in partnership with the organisation. Most client participation mechanisms focus on consulting clients for the purpose of program evaluation, however. There are opportunities to increase the level of client input into homelessness service design and delivery.

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

- Tailoring client participation strategies to each program area within a large organisation.
- Ensuring that exit surveys and feedback forms have a blank space available for clients to freely write their own comments, rather than responding only to prescribed questions.
- Undertaking practice development with staff members to create a culture of client inclusive practice.
- Welcoming clients to become members of the organisation or to sit on the board of management. One policy states: **“When a consumer joins the committee they are regarded as a representative of the community, rather than a consumer ‘representative.’ There is no expectation they will be the ‘consumer advocate,’ though of course their experience as a consumer of (the agency) and the Homelessness Service System will provide a valuable contribution to the organisation.”**
- Using a combination of regular, annual and ad hoc mechanisms to garner client input into the organisation.
- Encouraging client participation that extends beyond contributions to program planning, delivery or evaluation. For example, clients can provide peer support or contribute to staff inductions.

**“I’ve been involved in a consumer consultant role for a strategic plan where I helped facilitate focus groups and conducted interviews 1:1 with various peers.”**

## SUGGESTED STRATEGIES

	Information	Partnership	Client Empowerment
<b>Staff Contributions</b>	All clients are made aware of their rights and the opportunities that are available to them to be involved.	Staff members support their clients to become involved in the organisation or service system, by attending focus groups or helping them to articulate their experiences.	Staff members empower clients to provide voluntary feedback through the appropriate channels.  Staff members show a willingness to support client initiatives.
<b>Organisational Contributions</b>	The organisation provides opportunities for clients to learn about and engage with the service, such as social events or forums.  The organisation publicises the outcomes of client participation initiatives.	The organisation coordinates service-focused participation mechanisms such as focus groups, house meetings or client representative groups and has structures in place to meaningfully use the feedback that is provided by clients.  The organisation supports and resources former clients to become employees, volunteers, peer advocates or board members.	The organisation actively encourages clients to initiate activities or projects. This could occur by running client innovation challenges or competitions, and having small amounts of resources available to enact the ideas that are generated.
<b>LASN Contributions</b>	Information about the regional homelessness service system and clients’ rights therein is produced and circulated.	The LASN establishes a regional register of clients who are interested in having input on service development.	Broad and targeted client consultations drive LASN planning and decision-making.

**“I’ve got no problem telling them (homelessness services) what I think because things can always get better.”**