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# ‘Working ‘with’ homeless persons’

## Consumer participation and homelessness services in Australia

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# Research Summary

## Why was the research done?

Homelessness is a significant and increasing issue in Australia. Policy, advocacy, and research appear to agree that complex problems, like homelessness, need persons with lived experience of the issues to be involved in the development of solutions. This is typically referred to as 'consumer participation' within Australian health and human services. Despite consumer participation having a long history within health and human services in Australia, the ways in which it is best practiced within homelessness services is not well researched or understood. This research intended to contribute to a greater understanding of consumer participation as it currently stands, and to identify the emerging opportunities for lived experience to contribute to addressing homelessness in Australia.

## What were the key findings?

This study reviewed the ways in which consumer participation was represented in public documents (e.g. annual reports, web pages) by the member agencies of a homelessness services network in Victoria, Australia, over the ten years since the publication of its *Cared for enough to be involved: client participation guide* (2011). This study found that the homelessness services show commitments to meaningful consumer participation but that there do not yet appear to be standard practices or approaches. This study identified some of the concepts which might be tension points for including consumer participation within homelessness services and some of the ways in which services are putting the ideas of participation into practice.

## What does this mean for policy and practice?

This study provides an overview of some of the ways in which consumer participation is put into practice within homelessness services, and some of the concepts which might be difficult or up for debate. This research raises considerations for the development of consumer participation strategies for homelessness policy and practice. There is a need for further research into how lived experience might contribute to the end of homelessness in Australia.

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## Introduction

> Rather than … working 'for' or 'to' homeless persons, … [we are] working 'with' homeless persons on all issues around homelessness.
>
> (Council to Homeless Persons 2013, p. 6)

'Consumer participation'[1] refers to the involvement of service users in decision making processes related to service priorities, planning, and implementation. Consumer participation has an extensive history in health services, particularly in health education and promotion, and is generally regarded as resulting in better service outcomes with higher quality interventions and more engaged recipients (Anderson et al. 2006; Baum 2015; DHHS n.d.). Additionally, the value of consumer participation is framed around rights: specifically, the right for people to have a say in the decisions that affect their lives (Baum 2015; DHHS n.d.). The potential for consumer participation to contribute to the development of more effective interventions, as well as to the protection and promotion of civic rights, suggests great benefit for homelessness service delivery. Homelessness services provide interventions to some of the most marginalised members of society and there are evident barriers to achieving successful outcomes (Boland et al. 2018; UN Human Rights Council 2015; Walter et al. 2016). Despite this, consumer participation in homelessness service provision is not currently well understood or researched (Phillips & Kuyini 2018).

### *Homelessness in Australia*

Homelessness is a significant issue in Australia with over 122,000 people classified as homeless (defined as a lack of adequate or tenured housing) on census night in 2021 (ABS 2023). This figure represents an increase from the previous census in 2016 which was itself an increase from the 2011 count, including an increase in the number of people experiencing extreme forms of homelessness such as sleeping rough (ABS 2018). From a human rights perspective, homelessness is an 'extreme

[1] 'Consumer participation' is a term commonly used in relevant contemporary literature and Australian policy and practice documents. There are debates as to the usefulness of this term, particularly the implications of referring to people who need to access human services as 'consumers' (e.g. Baum 2015; Seal 2008). In consideration of these concerns, 'service user' is used throughout this article to refer to people who have a relationship with service providers as a recipient of services (see McLaughlin 2009 for further discussion about language choices).

violation of the rights to adequate housing' as well as affecting other rights such as health, security, and non-discrimination (UN Human Rights Council 2015, p.3). The experience of homelessness has been demonstrated to contribute to poor health outcomes and reduced life expectancy (Oppenheimer et al. 2016) along with having negative impacts on social inclusion and overall wellbeing (UN Human Rights Council 2015; Walter et al. 2016).

Homelessness is a complex issue, globally and within Australia, with the entry and exit points influenced by both individual characteristics and structural factors, and especially their interplay and cumulation (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2010; Institute of Global Homelessness 2019; Johnson et al. 2015; UN Human Rights Council 2015). Johnson et al. (2015) offers notable insights into these interactions within the Australian context through their comparative analysis of the homelessness status and housing outcomes for persons vulnerable to, or currently experiencing, homelessness. In this report, they identified structural factors, such as median market rent and local labour market conditions, as significant contributors as well as individual factors such as being male, over 45 years, having low education, and having experiences of unemployment, violence, and/or incarceration. However, these results contain more complexity than a simple reading would suggest. Differences were demonstrated concerning how the various identified factors correlated with 'entry to' versus 'exit from' homelessness and, critically, it was the interactions between the particular factors that were found to be significant. Simply put, homelessness is a serious and difficult issue with no simple explanations nor simple solutions.

*Addressing homelessness in Australia*

Preventing and addressing homelessness in Australia is primarily actioned through the National Homelessness and Housing Agreement (NHHA), a funding and strategic partnership between the Commonwealth and the states and territories. A network of Specialist Homelessness Services (SHS), funded under the NHHA and regulated by the states and territories, provide a range of interventions for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness, including crisis or longer-term accommodation, material aid supports, and information or referral assistances. During the 2021-22 financial year, the Victorian SHS network successfully prevented

homelessness for 90% of service users who presented at risk. Conversely, fewer than 30% of those who presented as homeless were assisted into housing. (AIHW 2023)

The proportionately greater success in the prevention of homelessness, compared with addressing current experiences, is likely to be influenced by a range of factors. This includes the possibility that the 'at risk' presentations are less complex, and more broadly less at risk, than those currently experiencing homelessness. A history of homelessness is a predictive factor for future incidences of homelessness (Johnson et al. 2015), which might have some influence on these differences in intervention success as many of those seeking preventative help might be experiencing risk for the first time. Additionally, experiences of homelessness are associated with further cumulative risk factors such as alcohol and other drug use, social isolation and stigmatisation, and mental and physical health issues, with the relationship between cause and effect in these not entirely clear (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2010). The complexity of the contributors to homelessness, as well as the individual complexities in the persons it affects, presents a challenge to the interventions designed to address it. Busch-Geertsema et al. (2010) note that '[w]hile all homeless people have a need for adequate, sustainable, and affordable housing, the extent to which they will require additional support varies considerably' (p. 7).

*A requirement for consumer participation?*

Some researchers and advocates have suggested that complex issues, such as homelessness, cannot be solved without the involvement of those with direct experience (Ife 2016; Philips & Kuyini 2018; Seal 2008; Whiteford 2011). Emerging evidence suggests that this position is echoed by homelessness service users wanting 'a more tangible role in the problem-solving process' (Davies et al. 2014, p. 126). In general, consumer participation has been consistently positioned as providing opportunities for the improvement of 'the quality, relevance and effectiveness' of services and additionally 'overcom[ing] community and individual powerlessness', allowing for active involvements in untangling complexities and realising improved outcomes (Baum 2015, p. 532-3). It has also been recognised as important on the basis that the participation itself is a basic right in a democratic society (Baum 2015; DHHS n.d.). Overall, the benefits of consumer participation have been considered as sufficiently established for participatory principles to be enshrined in Australian

health policy since 1973 (Baum 2015) and included in the standards for government funded human services, including those addressing homelessness (e.g. DHHS 2020).

Despite this apparent consensus that consumer participation is beneficial, even essential, in addressing homelessness there is a remarkable lack of formal guidance as to how this should be implemented, including the extent to which consumers should participate or the specific outcomes that can reasonably be expected (Phillips & Kuyini 2018). There is also a lack of research into the current practices of consumer participation or their effectiveness in homelessness service provision, particularly within Australia (Phillips & Kuyini 2018). The available evidence is primarily related to various health settings, including mental health, disability, and alcohol and other drug services (e.g. Anderson et al. 2006; Goodhew et al. 2019; Radermacher et al. 2010; Tobin et al. 2002), along with a few studies attending to the engagement of persons experiencing homelessness within these broader health intervention contexts (e.g. Buck et al. 2004; Davies & Gray 2017; Mullins et al. 2021). While aspects of this research might be generalisable to the homelessness services context, it is likely that this will be limited by distinct differences between the settings and the intended service outcomes.

*Service providers leading the way*

Considering the notable lack of research and policy guidance, informal resource guides may take on significance for consumer participation activities in homelessness service delivery. Australian service providers (e.g. HomeGround Services & Rural Housing Network 2008) and networks (e.g. NWHN 2011; SHSN 2019) have developed resources for consumer participation which are freely available online. Despite the development of these guides being at least partially funded through government grants, they appear to be largely independent projects designed to display possibilities and promote consumer participation in homelessness services, regardless of the regulatory and funding requirements. In particular, the Victorian North and West Metropolitan Homelessness Local Area Service Network's (2011) *Cared for enough to be involved: client participation guide* explicitly states that the network's consumer participation activities are, in part, intended to 'model good practice in relation to client feedback and participation processes for homelessness services' (p. 2). Again, given the lack of formal guidance, this statement

suggests a possible further purpose: that the network's activities are intended to *establish* a practice standard for consumer participation in the homelessness service sector.

This study takes the development of the consumer participation activities, processes, and possibilities of the Victorian North and West Metropolitan Homelessness Local Area Service Network as its starting point. It is anticipated that there will be thematic commonalities to these, allowing for analysis of how consumer participation is being conceptualised by the sector, including its intended purposes and scope, and how this integrates with objectives related to addressing homelessness. This research is intended to serve as an extension of Phillips and Kuyini's (2018) investigation into consumer participation within homelessness services in NSW, continuing their work to address the knowledge gap in Australia.

## Method

This study investigated the activities of the Victorian North and West Metropolitan Homelessness Local Area Service Network, and its member agencies, over the ten years since the publication of *Cared for enough to be involved: client participation guide* (2011). A qualitative textual analysis was undertaken of documents related to both agency and network consumer participation activities which had been made publicly available on their websites or in annual reports.

### *Utilising documentary data*

The present study utilised publicly available documentary data due to the relative ease in collecting suitable data from such sources, facilitating the examination of a broad range of data over a brief period of time. Documents are useful as a 'permanent record', albeit one that exists in time, and their availability for analysis of both explicit content and deeper meanings (Denscombe 2014). One identified disadvantage of documentary data is that they 'can owe more to the interpretations of those who produce them than to an objective picture of reality' (Denscombe 2014, p. 240) however this, in itself, can be useful when interrogating the representations of ideas across a particular discourse (Charmaz 2014). As Charmaz (2014) puts it, '[w]ritten texts not only serve as records, but also explore, explain, justify, and/or foretell actions' (p. 46). In the present study, where insight into the providers'

conceptualisations is sought, the inevitable subjectivity of documentary data will contribute to, rather than detract from, the research purpose.

*Purposive sampling and data collection*

Again, for the sake of convenience and effective data collection, the present study utilised purposive sampling to identify a suitable sample data pool before using keyword searches to identify relevant data from within this.

The data was collected from publicly available documents published by homelessness organisations that had already demonstrated commitment to consumer participation through their involvement in developing the resource *Cared for enough to be involved: client participation guide* (NWHN 2011). These organisations are: Australian Community Support Organisation (ACSO), Council to Homeless Persons (CHP), Launch Housing (Launch; referred to as 'HomeGround Services' in 2011), Hope Street Youth and Family Services (HSFYS), Salvation Army Social Housing Service (SASHS), Wombat Housing Support Services (WHSS), and Unison Housing (Unison; referred to as 'Yarra Community Housing' in 2011)[2]. This focus is not expected to represent the entirety of the current state of consumer participation, but it is anticipated to reveal pertinent data involving the opportunities available within the Victorian context.

Data was primarily collected during July and August 2021 using targeted searches on the network and member agency websites and within the annual reports for each organisation from 2011 to 2020. The documents were manually screened for relevance based on their reference to activities, current or proposed, that could reasonably be categorised as 'participation' or which the organisation appeared to be explicitly linking with consumer participation goals. Consumer participation activities which were not directly related to the organisation's homelessness service provision (e.g. Unison's tenant participation activities) were excluded. One organisation, SASHS, was excluded at the data collection stage as the website search was not productive and the annual reports (covering national and diverse organisational activities) were too broad to be of use.

[2] The Department of Human Services is also a listed contributor but is excluded from the present study as it is a government department, not within the homelessness service sector, and therefore not within scope.

*Data analysis process*

The data analysis process was guided by Bowen's (2009) discussion of 'document analysis as a qualitative research method', with a process of 'skimming (superficial examination), reading (thorough examination), and interpretation' (p. 32). While allowing for the emergence of unexpected themes and connections, data analysis was shaped by the initial research question focus points.

Specifically, following a superficial examination of the documents as part of the data collection and screening process, they were then read closely with attention to participation activities which appeared to be linked with consumer participation goals. Identified activities were categorised and logged according to the types of activities described, which were later grouped into four categories: influence over services, education and awareness raising activities, peer mentoring and education activities, and community development and social activities. Three conceptual dichotomies (expertise versus experience, living experience versus lived experience, and feedback versus influence) and three operational themes (peer work, education and awareness raising, and data collection) emerged from the data and are discussed further below.

*Challenges in conducting this research*

The decision to use publicly available documentary data in the current study presented challenges related to the availability of, and ready access to, relevant documents. While all the target providers had websites with search functions, not all of these were functional at the time of data collection. Additionally, all providers had annual reports available but not all of those that were required for the review. Where documents were obviously missing the provider was contacted by email and given the opportunity to provide the missing documents. Even so, the documents reviewed in this study were not complete and might not be the documents that the organisations would have submitted for review, had they known the purpose of the research.

Furthermore, the organisations who were the most active in publicly discussing consumer participation are also the most open to critique. This research is conducted

with the viewpoint that the ways in which consumer participation is being implemented and conceptualised within the homelessness services sector is worth interrogating, and often challenging, but the purpose of this research is to advance understandings, not evaluate the current activities or their representations.

Finally, the act of researching consumer participation without the direct involvement of service users has ethical implications. The way this research has been conducted has resulted in the service provider voice being foregrounded, and the service user voice inevitably backgrounded. This is an unfortunate but inevitable consequence of the data collection methodology and reflects the limitations noted, but it also points to a clear opportunity for a useful expansion of scope in further research.

## Results

A brief overview of the data sources is followed by a review of the consumer participation activities identified. The data is then framed in terms of three conceptual dichotomies and three operational themes which suggest ways in which consumer participation is being understood and utilised within the homelessness services sector.

### *Data overview*

In total, 165 documents from seven sample organisations were identified as relevant to the current study. These included articles in annual reports and web pages either mentioning or featuring consumer participation activities. To assist with the identification of relevant themes and trends, the sample organisations have been categorised according to their primary activities within the homelessness sector; that is whether the organisation is a *specialist homelessness service* (that provides direct services to address homelessness), a *homelessness peak body* (that focuses on education and advocacy activities) or a *homelessness network* (that provides opportunities for information sharing and coordinated service planning). Table 1 shows the categorisation of the sample organisations and the number of relevant documents identified.

**Table 1.**
Data sources.

| | All mentions or features in annual reports, 2011-2020 | Features articles in annual reports, 2011-2020 | Unique webpage results |
|---|---|---|---|
| ***Specialist Homelessness Services*** | | | |
| Australian Community Support Organisation (ACSO) | 13 (7 annual reports) | 10 (6 annual reports) | 4 |
| Hope Street Youth and Family Services (HSFYS) | 28 (10 annual reports) | 2 (2 annual reports) | 1 |
| Launch Housing (Launch) (HomeGround Services prior to 2015) | 16 (7 annual reports) | 6 (4 annual reports) | 11 |
| Wombat Housing Support Services (WHSS) | 9 (5 annual reports) | 2 (2 annual reports) | 0 |
| Unison Housing (Unison) (Yarra Community Housing prior to 2017) | 3 (1 annual report) | 1 (1 annual report) | 1 |
| ***Homelessness Peak Body*** | | | |
| Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) | 33 (10 annual reports) | 15 (10 annual reports) | 22 |
| ***Homelessness Network*** | | | |
| North & West Homelessness Networks (NWHN) | *No annual reports produced* | *No annual reports produced* | 24 |

*Consumer participation activities*

As expected, all included organisations described specific activities associated with consumer participation in their annual reports and/or website documents. Attention to consumer participation varied from brief mentions to feature articles to comprehensive reports. Many of the consumer participation activities were readily identifiable as such through their association with centralised formal ongoing consumer participation programs or projects. The level of detail in describing activities, and the degree of linkage to consumer participation aims, varied and researcher judgment was often required in the decision to include or exclude the activity during data analysis.

Broadly speaking, all the activities identified as being associated with consumer participation could be grouped into four categories: influence over services, education and awareness raising activities, peer mentoring and education activities, and community development and social activities. Table 2 shows examples of the activities as they have been identified and categorised in the analysis of the data set.

**Table 2.**
Consumer participation activities.

| *Category* | *Examples of activities included* |
|---|---|
| *Influence over services* | Complaints and feedback<br>Surveys<br>Involvement in focus group consultations<br>Coordination of feedback opportunities<br>Input and review of service materials<br>Input and review of service design<br>Participation in staff recruitment and induction<br>Board representation |
| *Education and awareness raising activities* | Sector education<br>Community education (including media representation)<br>Attendance at forums and conferences<br>Presentations at forums and conferences<br>School presentations |
| *Peer mentoring and education activities* | Development of resources for peers (e.g. magazines)<br>Peer education courses<br>Peer mentoring<br>Peer support |
| *Community development and social activities* | Art shows<br>Market stalls<br>Cultural events |

It should be noted that these categories demonstrate considerable overlap with each other, and the included activities regularly revealed aims beyond consumer

participation. For example, ACSO's Consumer Advisory Group coordinated the organisation's 2012 art show: a community development and social activity, which also served as an education and awareness raising activity, and would have further related to direct client interventions as well as organisation specific awareness raising and fundraising goals.

## Conceptualising consumer participation

Three conceptual dichotomies and three operational themes that suggest the conceptualisations of consumer participation within the homelessness services sector emerged from the data. The dichotomies and themes identified are not mutually exclusive but are suggested to represent trends or points of tension in the conceptualisation of consumer participation across the homelessness sector. These are summarised in Table 3.

**Table 3.**

Conceptual dichotomies and operational themes.

| *Conceptual dichotomies* | *Operational themes* |
|---:|---|
| Expertise/experience | Data collection |
| Living experience/lived experience | Education/awareness raising |
| Feedback/influence | Peer work |

*Expertise or experience?*

One conceptual dichotomy that emerged from the research was whether consumer participation contributions are valued as 'experience' or 'expertise'. While experience was more commonly referred to throughout the data there were some suggestions that this inevitably includes a relationship with expertise, for example:

> Appreciation and respect for the *expertise of people with lived experience* [emphasis added] … are in the very origins of ACSO … [the Lived Experience Advisory Panel] offers our organisation invaluable and *expert insight* [emphasis added] which ensures our services are beneficial to those accessing them. (ACSO 2020)

Similarly, CHP also suggests that expertise is being contributed. The Peer Education Support Program is described as 'ensuring that people with lived experience of homelessness have the opportunity to be heard, *to teach others* [emphasis added], and to have a role in shaping more effective responses to homelessness' (CHP 2021).

Launch appears to tease out the differences between the experience and expertise of their service users and staff with more intentionality. According to their Service Philosophy, services users are the 'experts on their own lives' but 'ending homelessness requires … the expertise, knowledge and specialist skills of our staff [and] being active and authentic in harnessing the creativity and knowledge of people with a lived experience of homelessness' (Launch 2017, p. 5).

Overall, it appears that both expertise and experience are considered relevant to consumer participation in the homelessness sector but the particulars, and the balance, of these are still being negotiated.

*Living experience or lived experience?*

Another conceptual dichotomy that emerged from the data was that of 'lived' as distinct from 'living' experience. There appears to be a trend, over the ten years reviewed, for formal consumer participation projects and programs to increasingly be named as 'lived experience' groups, rather than 'client' or 'consumer' groups. Of the five formal programs and projects identified across four organisations as currently active, three specifically name 'lived', but not 'current', homelessness or service user experience within their inclusion criteria. This contrasts with a snapshot of the formal programs in operation in 2014, for example, where four of the five programs clearly targeted current service users. This trend is particularly marked across the specialist homelessness services, with all their programs explicitly targeting current homelessness service users in 2014 but not in the most recent data.

A question that arises when analysing this data is whether this demonstrates a conceptual shift in the implementation of consumer participation initiatives within homelessness services or a shift away from attempting consumer participation, at least through formal programs. There are indications, however, that the inclusion of lived experience is still being used interchangeably with consumer participation aims, with both Launch and the CHP explicitly linking the two, as can be seen in the statements below:

> Strengthening consumer participation is key [emphasis removed]

> In addition to assisting people in crisis accommodation, Joal [a lived experience peer worker] has provided insight and feedback for a range of service delivery developments to end homelessness. This includes influencing policy in co-design, and getting involved in consultations, focus groups, forum, workshops and panels to contribute to discussions on how best to prevent and respond to homelessness. (Launch 2021a)

> The Peer Education and Support Program (PESP) is a consumer participation program that has been run by Council to Homeless Persons (Victoria) since 2005 for people with a lived experience of homelessness. (Black 2014, p. 1)

It should be noted, in reflecting on these statements, that these are not enacted to the complete exclusion of consumer participation activities available for current service users. As a minimum, all organisations described feedback mechanisms for current service users and some had lived experience participants additionally facilitating the implementation of these feedback opportunities (e.g. ACSO 2013; CHP 2016; Launch n.d.a).

*Feedback or influence?*

A critical consideration for consumer participation is the extent to which there are opportunities available for service users to influence how services are prioritised, planned, and implemented, and how policy is developed. Service user feedback was the only consumer participation activity identified as common to all organisations included in this study and appeared to be the primary consumer participation activity available to *current* service users.

Opportunities for feedback took a variety of forms including focus groups and surveys, as well as general invitations for feedback in service materials such as Unison's *Homelessness Services* brochure, which states:

> We welcome all types of feedback on the services we provide. You can provide feedback by contacting us online, in person, in writing or by phone. Our contact details are listed below. (Unison n.d.)

Some organisations extended this invitation to include a statement of their intention for this feedback to influence service improvement, for example:

> ACSO is committed to having a culture where feedback is welcomed, recorded and appropriately responded to … Feedback lets us know what we're doing well, what our

> gaps are and what we could do better. Feedback is used for ongoing evaluation to assist in formulating informed decisions relating to best practice for continuous improvement across ACSO, from local to executive level. (ACSO 2017)

There were, however, few examples identified of the specific ways in which feedback had influenced services or design, or even of being reported as anything other than an endorsement of the services provided, for example:

> Client feedback received this year confirmed that young people were very happy with the service they received. (HSFYS 2019, p. 8)

This was evident even when the purpose of the feedback was explicitly framed as a participation activity with implications for service improvement, and where the limitations of the feedback mechanisms themselves were acknowledged, for example:

> To ensure that our programs are responsive to the ever-changing needs of young people and young families – and to ensure the rights of young people are being met Hope Street draws upon a number of different methods to capture feedback from young people in our programs … The feedback from the client feedback forms was overwhelmingly positive with 86 per cent of respondents either agreeing or strongly agreeing they felt the staff listened to them and what they had to say. 93 per cent of respondents indicated that they agreed or strongly agreed that Hope Street staff treated them professionally, with respect and dignity, and upheld their right to privacy. 100 per cent of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that the quality of service provided to them from Hope Street was of a high standard. *In evaluating the data Hope Street also acknowledges that the formal process of capturing client data is an identified area for quality improvement given the low response rate to the survey requiring rethinking of different youth friendly methods* [emphasis added]. (HSFYS 2017, p. 10)

It is significant that the importance of feedback is so clearly linked with the success of the services even as the reliability of this feedback is being called into question. This raises questions about whether there are reasonable avenues for service users to provide critical, or constructive, feedback toward service change.

Overall, it appears that the relationship between feedback and influence might not be consistently realised in the ways that the homelessness services intend.

*Consumer participation as data collection*

Moving from the conceptual dichotomies to operational themes, while there were few examples of feedback influencing service design, there were a couple of notable

examples of feedback and consumer participation activities informing broader advocacy work. For example, CHP (2013) discussed the ways in which their Homelessness Advocacy Service, a secondary consultation and independent complaints resolution program, enables 'consumers [to] play an important role in helping CHP stay alert to the issues faced by people experiencing or at risk of experiencing homelessness … [and] directly inform[ing] CHP's advocacy' (p. 14).

Beyond this, the results of NWHN's Annual Consumer System Surveys culminated in broad actions being taken across the network to publicly boycott crisis accommodation options which had been identified by service users as unsafe and/or inadequate:

> As a sector we are no longer prepared to refer people to substandard crisis accommodation, nor are we willing to participate in continuing harm to vulnerable people seeking our assistance. (NWHN 2019)

In considering this strong position on service adequacy, it is worth noting that while NWHN has strong and direct links to its member homelessness service providers, as an entity it functions outside of direct service provision. It is possible that this positioning enables greater responsiveness to the feedback of service users due to having less concern about impacts on funding and resources. Previous research suggests this to be the case with Mosley's (2012) research in the US on the relationship between government funding and the advocacy decisions and strategies of homelessness services finding that 'having government funding is associated with managers being highly motivated to participate in advocacy *in the hopes of solidifying funding relationships* [emphasis added]. As a result, advocacy goals are focused primarily on brokering resources and promoting the organization rather than substantive policy change or client representation.' (p. 841). It might be that the more diffused relationship between funding and services for NWHN, as a network of organisations sharing goals and activities, enables stronger responses to service user feedback than would be possible for any one provider.

*Consumer participation as education / awareness raising*

In addition to data gathered through consumer participation *informing* advocacy work, consumer participation was recurrently discussed in terms of activities that operated to directly raise awareness of issues related to homelessness, including

possible solutions. Four of the seven organisations mentioned consumer participation activities related to community and sector education, including media appearances, presentations at forums and conferences, training sessions, and school or community group presentations.

This has been a central feature of CHP's Peer Education Support Program, 'a volunteer program that provides people who have experienced homelessness with the opportunity to improve the service system, promote consumer participation and help CHP achieve its mission of ending homelessness' (CHP 2013, p. 14). CHP's Peer Education and Support Program is significant within the Victorian homelessness sector. It appears to be the most active, and longest running, consumer participation program across the network. However, while the Peer Education and Support Program appears influential in the development of consumer participation strategies within the homelessness sector and is evidently active in taking up and creating opportunities for the presence of lived experience voice in the sector and community, the actual influence on policy and service design is less clear. In evaluating the Peer Education and Support Program, Black (2014) found that it had 'credibility and … access to high level decision makers and leaders in the homelessness sector' (p. 4) but also that it was 'more limited [in its impact] on the overall service system and on government policy [as] … governments have only provided limited opportunities for consumers to be consulted and engaged in policy or program discussions' (p. 5), despite their theoretical policy-based support for participation. That said, the Peer Education and Support Program continues to be notable for its sheer longevity as a consumer participation program, and its evident increase in activity and influence over time.

*Consumer participation as peer work*

Development of resources for peers, peer mentoring and support, and the facilitation of consumer participation activities such as consultation and feedback, were mentioned by three of the seven organisations.

Most of these activities are based on the voluntary contributions[3] of service users or people with lived experience but Launch, for example, appears to be increasingly blurring the line between staff and consumer participation. In addition to offering payments to the Lived Experience Consultants involved in the Lived Experience Advisory Program (Launch n.d.b), they have established paid Peer Support Worker positions 'offer[ing] a peer-led relationship that provides residents a safe space to be as they are' (Launch 2019, p. 6).

Both programs appear to target the involvement of people with historical, rather than current, experience of homelessness[4]. This purposeful selectiveness could be due to people with lived experience being considered easier to engage than those who are currently homeless; people experiencing homelessness have historically been identified as 'particularly hard to consult, because they may have chaotic lives, have other priorities, drop out of the service or leave it quickly' (Welsh Assembly 2004 cited in Seal 2008, p. 36). However, since both of these activities are also still explicitly linked to consumer participation aims (e.g. Launch 2021a), this raises an interesting question about when the service user, or person with a lived (i.e. past) experience of homelessness, stops being a 'consumer' within the homelessness service sector.

It is also possible that Launch is currently undergoing a transitional period in their development of consumer participation and that this apparent focus on lived, rather than living, experience is temporary. As noted by the organisation:

> In 2020, we refreshed our Lived Experience Participation Strategy, and expanded the structure from a Group to a Program. This means that many more people with lived experience of homelessness can contribute to our strategic aims, and rather than rely on a small group we instead seek to partner with and embed client voice in services directly. *Now, we will provide opportunities for many more services users to*

[3] Some of these activities included voucher-based compensations but are clearly still regarded as volunteer positions.

[4] This might not be exclusively or intentionally: 'Launch Housing clients may submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to join the Lived Experience Advisory Program' (Launch 2021b). However, all documents discuss the involvement of people with historical experiences of homelessness, and involvement does include the potentially prohibitive criterion for someone currently experiencing homelessness of '[a]vailability to participate in scheduled group meetings (currently working remotely, via Teams or Zoom video calls)' (Launch n.d.b).

> *contribute their unique lived expertise, learn new skills and be empowered* [emphasis added]. (Launch 2021b)

Whether by opportunity or by design, it could be, as implied in the above comment, that Launch has been focusing its energies on the 'easier' participation of lived experience engagement and are leveraging its successes in this to increase opportunities for *living* experience participation.

## Discussion

One striking challenge when imagining a best practice consumer participation approach within homelessness service provision is that, ideally, the service user's relationship with the homelessness service provider is so brief that extended participation during the period of service use is not feasible. Given this, it would be more appropriate and achievable for such service providers to focus on providing opportunities for people with previous experiences of homelessness and service use to contribute their lived experience expertise to influencing the ways in which services are prioritised, planned, and implemented, and how policy is developed. The greatest challenge in this respect might be whether people with past lived experience want to be involved once their housing crisis is resolved. As Lammers and Happell (2003) found, in their research into consumer participation within mental health services, 'not all consumers believed that their peers sought continued involvement with service delivery' (p. 388), with one research participant describing it as follows:

> I think there are lots of people, who once they have had a mental illness, they want to forget it, they want to put it away and return to a normal life and never think about it again. (p. 388-9)

Presumably a resolved period of homelessness would operate in much the same way, particularly if the intervention provided was brief and effective and prevented the further impacts of an experience of homelessness.

Unfortunately, however, homelessness service access does not appear to be brief and effective for people who are currently living without housing. As previously mentioned, recent data shows that while Victorian homelessness services prevent homelessness for over 90% of persons presenting at risk, fewer than 30% of those presenting as currently homeless are assisted into housing (AIHW 2023). While this might result in additional opportunities for participation during extended periods of

service use, ongoing experiences of homelessness are also associated with alcohol and other drug use, social isolation, stigmatisation, and mental and physical health issues (Busch-Geertsema et al. 2010), in addition to the challenges of meeting basic material needs without a home (Norman & Pauly 2013), and these might adversely affect the service users' capacity for participation. These are the complexities which might explain the general trend of recent consumer participation programs appearing to target persons with lived, but not necessarily current, experience of homelessness.

The factors identified above, and their impact on service user capacity for participation, might be genuine shaping factors but so might the *perception* of service users' capacity to participate. In their analysis of consumer participation within alcohol and other drug services, Goodhew et al. (2019) found that service users were perceived as having significant barriers to participation, including being unskilled and untrustworthy, and that this impacted on both the opportunities available and the access to them. A similar effect might be seen in homelessness service provision; the perception of service user capacity potentially shapes the types of consumer participation activities that are made available to current service users, and how the participation contributions then go on to influence service and policy. This might be what we are seeing in NWHN's (2015) report of service user feedback, and subsequent discussion and plan for action, in response to the question '[d]o you think the homeless service system is too complicated?'. As the report notes:

> This question was first asked in 2013 and an ideal answer would be 'No' or at the very least increases in this response over the years … With over half of support respondents saying the homelessness system is too complicated or they are unsure about it, there is room for improvement. It is also interesting that compared to Access Points [clients who are experiencing their first contact with homelessness services], Support respondents [receiving ongoing homelessness services] are more likely to report that the system is too complicated … The forum participants also again expressed some misgivings about this question, feeling that it was potentially poorly worded or misunderstood and that this should be revisited in future versions of the survey. Based on this year's results it was felt that there is still more work to do in explaining the coordinated homelessness service system. In particular to Access Point clients, a conclusion also reached in 2013. (p. 6)

In this, the service users appear to be saying that the *ongoing* support service system is too complicated while the forum participants, made up of service providers and consumer representatives, appear to be concluding that the service system *access points* require further explanation (a conclusion that had apparently already been reached by the group in prior years). Furthermore, the forum participants appear to be implying that the survey respondents have in fact responded *incorrectly*, and that this must be due to the question being 'poorly worded or misunderstood'. It is not possible to draw conclusions as to why this apparent reinterpretation occurred, but it might indicate unspoken assumptions about the reliability of service user feedback, particularly when it does not align with the service provider perspective.

Unfortunately, the service provider perspective is also potentially limited by the current realities of homelessness service provision. Service providers have concerns related to funding and resources which, as already discussed, could possibly affect their advocacy activities and thus limit their capacity to fully engage with any feedback received. Mosley (2012) theorises that the increased working and funding relationships between homelessness services and government in the US has altered the services' historical 'role in advocating on behalf of the vulnerable populations they serve' (p. 841). In Australia, government funding currently accounts for around 85% of homeless service resourcing (Flatau et al. 2017). The presumed difficulties in balancing funding and advocacy might contribute to Black's (2014) evaluation findings on the Council to Homeless Persons Peer Education and Support Program which indicated that, while the program was well networked and had good relationships with government and 'high level decision makers' (p. 4), the impact on the service system itself was limited.

Beyond this, homelessness service funding levels are not actually sufficient to meet client demand (Flatau et al. 2017) and this scarcity of resources is typically treated as inevitable (Clarke et al. 2022). In respect of this, services are increasingly expected to diversify their income streams and pursue a broad range of non-government funding opportunities (Flatau et al. 2017). While diversified funding could mean less reliance on government relationships, this would mean that homelessness services are additionally needing to balance their consumer participation and advocacy aims

against their appeal to philanthropic foundations and within the competitive market of individual donations.

*Consumer participation strategies and the end of homelessness*

The consumer participation strategies of the homelessness service sector for current service users appears to be primarily through feedback on their current service experience. These are not necessarily then linked to the 'end of homelessness', at either an individual or a systemic level.

However, the consumer participation activities which target people with lived, but not necessarily current, experiences of homelessness and service use *have* been linked with the end of homelessness. Launch, for example, makes explicit links between consumer participation and ending homelessness, as seen in the following quotes:

> We know homelessness in Australia is getting worse … We need to bring more compassion and humanity to solving this problem. To achieve this, we need to include those who have a lived experience of homelessness. (Launch 2019, p. 2)

> These lived experience engagements help raise public awareness of homelessness and generate the cultural and social change needed to end homelessness. (Launch 2020, p. 32)

These quotes, with their emphasis on changing attitudes towards homelessness, and possibly also towards the people who experience homelessness, might explain some of the apparent emphasis in consumer participation programs on lived, rather than current, experience of homelessness. That is, this might be a strategic choice of the sector – using consumer participation activities to increase awareness of the human impact of homelessness and promoting the idea that homelessness can be solved.

There is a risk, however, of consumer participation merely being used as a promotional tool for the services and the sector. The reporting of consumer participation feedback sometimes appears to be geared toward an endorsement of the services, rather than being associated with any sort of influence. Having said that, this study is limited to an analysis of the representations, not the processes, of consumer participation within homelessness service provision. There is nothing to say that this endorsement of homelessness services, and the promotional activities

bringing a human face to the experience of homelessness, has not been a partnership decision between the people impacted by the experience of homelessness and the services working to address this.

## Limitations and research implications

Focusing on the homelessness service sector rather than service users is somewhat counterintuitive in an exploration of consumer participation, and counter to the participatory activism slogan: "nothing about us without us!" This focus is a recognition that services do hold significant power in determining, and influencing the engagement with, opportunities available for consumer participation (e.g. Goodhew et al. 2019). Even so, the impact of this absence is likely to be substantial. Davies and Gray's (2017) research into the relationship between homelessness service user participation and evidence-based practice found that, even when researching hard evidence outcomes:

> [A] collaborative research approach in which researchers, policymakers and practitioners worked closely with service users to incorporate personal knowledge in the practice and policy-making decisions was seen as crucial … [and] academic or professional knowledge was not considered to be useful or accurate without some level of service-user input to inform and shape it. (p. 8)

This is a point well-made and, although it does not undermine the focus and findings of this study, it points to an essential design aspect of any further research into consumer participation within the homelessness service sector.

Additionally, this study has confined itself to utilising documentary data: the public documents from homelessness services discussing consumer participation found on their websites and in annual reports. These documents are usually designed to speak to the successes of the services and thus the failings, or learnings, of the services can only be inferred from changes over time in how organisational successes are discussed, or by information that appears to be missing. Consequently, there is likely much that will have been missed in a textual reading of document content. Moreover, and most notably, this study omits the voices of those who have tried to implement consumer participation strategies in homelessness services and have opinions, formed through experience, about what does and does not work, and why. The

absence of this service provider voice is also one which begs to be addressed in any further research.

## Conclusion

Overall, consumer participation does not appear to have reached any static conceptualisation within the Victorian homelessness service sector but is evidently still being actively explored and contested. There are a number of tension points across the sector, noted in this article as conceptual dichotomies, which might affect future conceptualisations: expertise versus experience, living experience versus lived experience, and feedback versus influence. Within these, it is not clear where or how service user participation will be granted opportunities in relation to effective intervention to address homelessness in Australia. There are, however, identifiable operational themes in the implementation of consumer participation with it taking forms, across the sector, of peer work, of broader societal education and awareness raising, and as a data collection resource. Homelessness services do appear to be actively aspiring to meaningful service user participation, and to the achievement of the end of homelessness, even as they navigate significant challenges on both those fronts.

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