



## Definitions and assumptions

**The assumptions and principles** that underlie an organisation's approach to consumer participation, and the terms used when discussing it, can be determined in consultation with the people involved: consumers, workers, management, and board members.

### 'Consumer'

The following definition of 'consumer' is used in this Kit. The definition was developed through consultation with consumers and service providers during this Project.

***A consumer is someone who uses, has used, or is eligible to use housing, homelessness and support services, including those refused services and those who have refused services. This may include carers and family members when relevant.***

### One word doesn't fit all

It is important to be aware that no one word fits well as a label for people who use housing and homelessness assistance services. Consumers expressed a preference to be called a client, service user or participant:<sup>1</sup>

*"A client is more one on one; consumer sounds like it's a mob."*

*"Consumer and client are biased, but we all participate."*

*"A consumer is someone who is buying a product, not getting help."*

While some had no problem with the term 'consumer', others felt a focus on the word was important.

*"Service recipients, people utilising homelessness services, are marginalised and isolated. The word (used to describe them) has to be welcoming."*

Consumers and service providers agreed that the range of consumers' voices must include carers and/or family members who support people receiving services. One service provider commented:

*"Carers and family members consume our time and resources"*.

The term 'consumer' can also include groups of consumers with shared experiences; consumer organisations including advocacy, self-help and consumer network organisations; and potential consumers such as

those with unmet needs or from population groups with particular needs or access issues.

Organisations may vary in the terminology they use to describe consumer participation; the important thing is to clearly define who is participating and why.

After discussing what sort of participation is desired, ask 'consumers' what term they prefer to use.

### 'Consumer participation'

The following definition of 'consumer participation' is used in this Kit:<sup>2</sup>

***Consumer participation refers to the process of involving consumers in decision-making about a particular service including components such as service planning, policy development, priority setting and addressing quality issues in the delivery of those services.***

According to the Victorian Consumer Charter for community-managed housing and homelessness services, consumers can expect to be informed about and given opportunities to contribute their views about the way services are provided and organisations are managed. This resonates with perspectives expressed by consumers:

*"I would like to have more voice. I have been through the system. I want a say in where and how funding is spent"*.

Participation can also be about clients / consumers contributing to the service and organisation in other ways. For example, volunteering their time:

*"Little things make you feel proud. For example, my job is to fix the fishing gear for the [Outreach group]. I enjoy doing this for others"*.

To consumers, participation means involvement, understanding, networking, being together and socialising. While decision-making is part of participation, the social aspect is also very important and should not be overlooked.

Opportunities for participation should be social and enjoyable.



## Rights-based approach to participation

This Kit is based on two core assumptions:

- That people have the right to be included in decision-making processes that affect their housing situation;
- That the contribution of consumers in planning, delivery and evaluation of housing and homelessness services will result in ongoing improvements to the service system.

The Victorian Homelessness Assistance Service Standards require organisations providing homelessness services to:

- Demonstrate a clear commitment to the rights of consumers
- Enable consumers to participate in the organisation's decision-making
- Make it easy for consumers to raise issues, make a complaint or appeal a decision
- Ensure that complaints and appeals are dealt with promptly, respectfully and fairly.

(See Information Sheet #5: Consumer Participation and the HAS Standards.)

While the primary purpose of consumer participation is to achieve better and more sustainable housing outcomes, the way the perspectives of consumers are incorporated can either empower or disempower, be inclusive or exclusive. Therefore, "participation strategies need to be underpinned by the principles of empowerment with consumers having greater control over their lives through purposeful engagements and in the context of social inclusion".<sup>3</sup>

The SAAP Act provides the legislative backing to ensure that principles of empowerment underlie organisations' consumer participation strategies:

*"Homeless people form one of the most powerless and marginalised groups in society. Responses to their needs should aim to empower them and to maximise their independence".*

(SAAP Act; 1994:1-2)

Collaboration, Commonwealth Department of Health and Aged Care, Canberra.

3. Youth Affairs Council of Victoria (2004). *Taking Young People Seriously: consulting young people about their ideas and opinions. A handbook for organisations working with young people*. Office of Youth Affairs, Department of Victorian Communities, Melbourne. p.1. Viewed December 2007 at [http://www.yacvic.org.au/includes/pdfs\\_wordfiles/TYPSbook1.pdf](http://www.yacvic.org.au/includes/pdfs_wordfiles/TYPSbook1.pdf)

## Endnotes

1. Unless otherwise noted, quotations in this section are from consumers who participated in focus groups during the course of the Consumer Participation Resource Kit project, 2007.
2. Enduring Solutions (2001). *Consumer participation in accreditation: Resource guide*. Consumer Focus