

**Opening Doors
Framework & Implementation
Sector Survey
September 2009**



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List of acronyms

CHP - Council to Homeless Persons

DHS – Department of Human Services

EFT – Effective Full Time

HEF – Housing Establishment Fund

IAP – Initial Assessment Point

LASN – Local Area Service Network

LGAs – Local Government Areas

OoH – Office of Housing

ODEWG – Opening Doors Evaluation Working Group

ODIRG – Opening Doors Implementation Reference Group

PESP – Peer Education Support Program

SAAP – Supported Accommodation Assistance Program

SHASP – Social Housing and Support Program

THM – Transitional Housing Management

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INTRODUCTION

Background

Established in 1972, the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is the peak Victorian body representing individuals and organisations with a stake or interest in homelessness.

Our mission is to work towards ending homelessness through leadership in policy, advocacy and sector development. We do this through:

Promoting individual and systemic advocacy;

Promoting consumer participation;

Developing strategic relationships, partnerships and alliances to ensure the interests and issues of homeless people are addressed across all sectors;

Educating the wider community on issues of homelessness;

Leading state and national policy development;

Representing and assisting organisations on sector-related issues; and

Promoting, facilitating and disseminating research, evaluation and continuous improvement in collaboration with others.

CHP has been involved in the development of the Opening Doors framework (the framework) in a number of ways. In particular our Peer Education and Support Program (PESP) members were directly consulted and also undertook consumer consultations on the development of the model. In addition, CHP is member of both the Opening Doors Implementation Reference Group (ODIRG) and the Opening Doors Evaluation Working Group (ODEWG).

In September 2009 CHP conducted an information-gathering exercise to ascertain specialist homelessness sector perspectives on the framework. In recognition of the diversity of views and experiences of engaging with the framework, the survey provided an opportunity for the sector to express both positive and negative observations and to make suggestions about how the framework could be operationalised to deliver the best outcomes for people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

This report provides a summary of the survey results. It includes as much as possible direct quotes from the survey participants. These provide a flavour of the significant engagement specialist homelessness workers have with the framework and the issues it raises for the sector, for the service system and for consumers.

The survey was informal and in no way exhaustive. Therefore, this report does not substitute for a formal evaluation of the Opening Doors pilot models or the implementation process. However, it does provide an insight into how the sector was working with the framework at the time of the survey, and identifies a range of design and implementation issues worthy of consideration.

The Opening Doors Framework

Opening Doors is a framework developed by the Office of Housing (OoH) that aims to 'deliver better coordination among homelessness services at the local level, so that people in crisis can quickly and simply access homelessness services, and get the help they need'.¹ The framework is underpinned by the following principles:

A consumer-focused and strengths-based approach;

Equity of access to the resources of the homelessness service system;

Support for skilled workers with training, supervision and efficient tools;

Collaboration and partnerships between agencies and the Department of Human Services (DHS);

Reasonable care to address the risks faced by each homeless person; and

Maximising the use of available homelessness resources'.²

Opening Doors is regionally specific and creates visible local entry points ('front doors') to streamline how people access and move through homelessness services. Although often referred to as single entry points, on the ground there are multiple entry points that are expected to work together (as if they are a single entity). There are 85 entry points currently operating in Victoria.

An 1800 statewide number is also provided to facilitate routing to the relevant local area and 24 hour access. However, this service is not free from mobile phones. In practice, it is expected that entry points will phone the person back.

Additionally, the framework's data collection system provides the capacity to track people through the system. This provides an opportunity to capture accurate and timely data in relation to those who are homeless in Victoria, on a regional basis. Potentially this data could be used to better plan and resource homelessness prevention and service system responses.

¹ <housing.vic.gov.au/homelessness-and-family-violence/homelessness/opening-doors> as at 8 April 2010

² Department of Human Services, *Opening Doors: Better access for homeless people to social housing and support services in Victoria Framework* (2008)

Entry points are staffed by initial assessment teams who undertake an assessment of:

Risks and any associated specialist support requirements;

Immediate needs for shelter, food and security;

Crisis housing and support;

Transitional housing and support;

Purchase of emergency accommodation (motels, rooming houses, caravans, board);

Outreach support (where crisis or transitional housing is not required or cannot be provided);

Brokerage and emergency relief;

Assistance required to access private rental; and

Assistance required to access long-term housing (applications for public housing or long-term community housing).³

Under the model, specialist initial assessment for young people, people experiencing family violence and Indigenous people 'can also occur at the entry point when required, either by the initial assessment worker or by a specialist worker called in for that purpose'.⁴

As part of the roll-out of the implementation framework, homelessness services formed into local area service networks (LASNs) who are responsible for local application of the Opening Doors framework. This means that localised approaches should be able to be incorporated into the broader framework. It also means that each region's application of the framework may look quite different.

The Opening Doors Framework was piloted in five areas from October 2006. Implementation began across the state in July 2008. At the time the survey was undertaken, Opening Doors was fully operational in one region. By April 2010 four more regions had 'gone live'.

Survey methodology

The survey (see Appendix One) contained six questions, which related to the strengths and weaknesses of the framework, suggestions for enhancing Opening

³ Ibid

⁴ Ibid

Doors, lessons from implementation and suggestions for improving the implementation process.

Sixty people returned a completed survey and the responses were thematically coded.

Survey participant profile

Fifty-eight respondents provided their region, with nearly 40% being from the North/West region (22 people). A breakdown of the regions is listed below.

Table 1. Respondents' region of work

Region	n (%)
Hume	1 (2%)
Northern/Western/Southern	2 (3%)
Gippsland	3 (5%)
Loddon Mallee	4 (7%)
Grampians	5 (9%)
Eastern	5 (9%)
Barwon	8 (14%)
Southern	8 (14%)
North/West	22 (38%)

N = 58

Fifty-two people listed their position, with 40% describing themselves as managers and 23% as workers. Almost three-quarters of respondents (72%) were in a leadership role (refer Table 2).

Table 2: Respondents' employment title (N = 52)

Region	n (%)
Project	1 (2%)
Worker	
Director	1 (2%)
Combination	2 (4%)
CEO	3 (6%)
Team Leader	6 (12%)
Coordinator	6 (12%)
Worker	12 (23%)
Manager	21 (40%)

Fifty-nine respondents noted their broad area of work, with some respondents noting multiple areas. Twenty-six respondents noted crisis accommodation was their main area of work. Table 3 shows the breakdown of respondents' broad work areas.

Table 3: Respondents' broad areas of work

Area of work	n (%)
Crisis Accommodation	28 (47%)
Other	28 (47%)
Transitional Support	26 (44%)
Housing Information and referral	22 (37%)
Domestic/Family Violence	13 (22%)
Tenancy worker	9 (15%)

N = 59 (NB Some respondents noted multiple areas of work)

Limitations of methodology

CHP wishes to acknowledge the following methodological issues which have impacted on the accuracy and reliability of this survey. Firstly, the survey was sent out prior to all regions having rolled out the framework. This may have resulted in a skewed response rate, making the survey not necessarily representative of the sector on all issues.

For example, 38% of survey participants were from the North West Metropolitan region, which at the time of the survey had not yet rolled out the framework. However, three local pilots had been undertaken in the Hume-Moreland; Yarra Central Business District and Brimbank Melton Local Government Areas (LGAs) prior to the roll-out of Opening Doors. In comparison some 9% of participants were from Eastern region, which, in 2006 rolled out a Front Door Homelessness Service System Development Project pilot across the region. This is now being modified to integrate with the Opening Doors Framework.

In analysing the survey responses, CHP had no information as to the nature of regional differences in the framework. This has meant that some responses appear to be contradictory. CHP acknowledges regional and individual differences in responses and has included all sector responses.

Additionally, we acknowledge that since the survey was undertaken some issues raised by the survey may have been resolved through LASN meetings, or by Government through the Opening Doors Implementation Reference Group (ODIRG) and other forums.

KEY FINDINGS

Despite the methodological limitations of this project, the survey did provide some clear messages regarding the design and implementation of the framework to date. These are detailed in the following chapters, but in summary:

Framework design

Respondents felt the Opening Doors framework has the potential to create a more transparent, accountable and professional service system. However, many felt the framework needs to be revisited and clarified by the OoH in order to get the best results.

Respondents noted the perceived benefits to consumers of a single Access Point and single assessment which would allow easier navigation of the system.

There was concern that although entry into the service system was being streamlined, there was not a requisite focus on exit points, in particular increased funding to provide crisis, Transitional Housing Management (THM) and long-term housing options.

Respondents requested assurances that specific client groups who needed specialised supports (specifically youth and women and children) would not be disadvantaged by the framework.

There was a concern that systems to respond to services which chose not to engage with the framework were not in place or had not been articulated to the sector.

Concerns were raised about a perceived ‘metro-centricity’ of the model and a failure to acknowledge specific regional/rural issues.

The potential benefits of agency collaboration were recognised, in relation to improved client outcomes and stronger networks. However, many reported a gap between theory and practice as collaboration was undermined by funding uncertainties and the potential for agency rivalry.

Capacity

Although respondents were generally positive about visible Access Points, they felt these were not adequately resourced and that workers did not necessarily have the expertise needed to assess clients with complex needs nor adequate knowledge of the range of services they were expected to provide access to.

There was a common call for investment in training and ongoing education for the sector, consumers and the community around the framework, including ongoing education for workers particularly at Access Points.

Implementation

Concern was raised around DHS leadership regarding communication strategies, implementation processes, evaluation, and future directions for the framework (including funding and framework development).

Additionally, there was concern that the framework was rolled out without adequate resources behind it, or an indication of how resources would change to meet need over time.

There was a sense that implementation occurred prior to some necessary processes and policies being agreed upon. This included a lack of understanding around the interim response, the role of statewide services, proper development of the resource register and the 1800 number being adequately tested.

Some respondents called for further consultation with consumers and workers, as they felt the initial consultations were targeted to management levels.

Evaluation and continuous improvement

The potential for the framework to capture data in a way the sector hadn't been able to before was seen as a benefit of the framework. Respondents sought clarification about how data on supply and demand would translate into improved services for consumers and resourcing of the model.

Respondents expressed desire for the development of a communication strategy to assist with top-down information flows from the Office of Housing (OoH), through to LASNs, managers and coordinators, and to workers and consumers.

Respondents indicated concern that Opening Doors was rolled out without a thorough evaluation of the pilot programs, and without addressing the successes and limitations of the model in the public sphere. In order to avoid this criticism in the future, the need for ongoing evaluation was highlighted repeatedly.

Lessons for the future

Opening Doors will be operational in all regions of Victoria by mid 2010. Therefore, it is important to support the sector in ongoing implementation of the framework. In response to the feedback gathered by the survey, CHP would suggest the following actions to support and improve Opening Doors so that it can meet its policy and practice objectives.

Getting results is dependent on enough housing and support to meet need

While Opening Doors will simplify navigation, it nonetheless risks funnelling people into a holding pattern; from which they cannot exit due to lack of support, housing and other human services.

The benefits of Opening Doors will never be fully realised in the absence of significantly increased resources for housing and support. Without these, Opening Doors risks being a demand management system only.

Data collection and evidence

Opening Doors provides an historic opportunity to shine a light on the sheer numbers of people seeking help from the specialist homeless and allied sectors. It therefore has the capacity to complement and build upon the existing evidence base around increasing demand and associated unmet need that has been shown year on year through Supported Accommodation and Assistance Program (SAAP) data.

For Opening Doors to move beyond a navigation and demand management system, into a comprehensive and responsive access system, the data collected by agencies need to be used to map existing and likely demand and to match resources to that need.

Further, data must be publicly available, alongside resources mapping to show how the need is being responded to by government budget settings across the human services system.

While it is still early days for Opening Doors, the thinking on how we use the evidence being developed to secure additional resources, and how it can meet regional priorities needs to begin sooner rather than later.

Mapping success

As a framework predicated on the assumption that localised practices work best, Opening Doors has the capacity to inform and promote new ways of working. However, it also risks fragmentation and disillusionment in the face of limited resources for stock and support.

While a formal evaluation of the framework will be completed in 2010–11, CHP sees value in continuous dialogue and assessment so that the momentum for innovation and leading practice in service delivery is maximised.

CHP would welcome the opportunity to partner with LASNs and the OoH to gain further information from regions about the local variations in the framework and map these out. We believe this will greatly assist us to provide support to the sector in

terms of understanding and advocating for region-specific issues, based on regional differences, and also provide valuable information about what is working and not working across the state.

Getting the most of the model – balancing generic and specialist approaches

The Victorian homelessness and allied service system is complex. It is this complexity and lack of navigability that drove the introduction of Opening Doors.

However, in streamlining navigation it is important to maintain a range of Access Points and options for specific population groups, including children and young people, Indigenous peoples and people experiencing family violence. Central to this is ensuring access via trusted services and places of cultural safety, so as to minimise the risk of ‘closed doors’.

CHP is aware of representations made by the youth sector to the DHS to improve access for young people, and in particular to lever in the value of the trust and special relationship that refuges have with their current and potential clients. At the time of writing the Department is undertaking further consultation and discussion with stakeholders as to how the concerns of the youth refuge network and their suggestions for maintaining an appropriate mix of specialist and general Access Points might be incorporated into the framework. CHP welcomes this dialogue and supports the following principles:

That each LASN should have *at least* one Indigenous, as well as youth and family violence specific Access Points.⁵ In practice many more will be needed to have an accessible system, this is acknowledged already in those regions that have adopted a mixed generalist/specialist approach;

That dedicated resources for youth, Indigenous and family violence responses should be preserved under the framework; and

Youth-specific initial assessment planning should be supported through the development of appropriate tools, learning and development and specialist staff across the visible Access Points.

Outcomes measurement

CHP would like to see an articulation of intended outcomes and outcomes measurement by the OoH. This includes, but is not limited to, the information

⁵ Unless the local Indigenous community, young people or family violence service indicate that this is not necessary.

regarding evaluation of the pilots, and how information collected on demand and supply issues will inform practice development and resourcing.

CHP believes OoH should provide further information about how the Homelessness 2020 strategy will align with Opening Doors, and how the framework will assist with the achievement of targets and outcomes.

Improving communication

CHP believes it is imperative to engage the sector and to ensure that smaller agencies, which cite limited resources to attend meetings, are particularly targeted. For example, through regular updates to the sector as to actions arising from the ODIRG.

CHP recommends the development of a comprehensive and well resourced communication strategy to facilitate the dissemination of information, policy, developments and innovations across the sector.

It is hoped that this would create bidirectional information flow between OoH and stakeholders (including the ODIRG, LASNs), agencies, workers, consumers and the broader community.

As a starting point, CHP will encourage OoH to provide clarification to the sector on issues which were unclear or of concern, such as free calls from the 1800 number, clarification on the roles and responsibilities of statewide services and clarification of appropriate interim response issues.

Further, the communication strategy should incorporate regular, ongoing consultation with the sector and consumers to be fed back to the OoH to inform decision-making. CHP would welcome the opportunity to partner with DHS in facilitating this dialogue.

DETAILED FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEY

Perceived strengths of Opening Doors

Transparency of service system

Respondents acknowledged that the Opening Doors framework had the potential to create a more transparent homelessness and housing support service system. Respondents noted the potential benefit of transparent resource allocation and practice, as well as transparency between and within agencies.

This entails agencies not ‘cherry-picking’ clients, employing transparent referral processes and transparent resource allocation (i.e. in the regional advertising of THM / Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) vacancies where, rather than creating service silos, the framework would allow for “matching available resources to available needs.”)

One respondent stated, “...in the past, there has been agenda, and power plays.... resources [were] allocated through no process, bad process, based on political needs or ‘who yells loudest’.”

Opening Doors was seen as having the potential to alter this.

Accountability of services

The framework was seen to have the potential to make the sector more accountable for the work it undertakes. Respondents felt Opening Doors may result in greater monitoring of clients and service response, which will result in individuals not falling through the cracks or becoming lost in the system.

This was described by one respondent as a means of taking “the responsibility for finding an appropriate service away from the client in crisis and placing it firmly back on the service system ... where it should clearly and logically sit.”

Service system development

There is awareness that Opening Doors could create a better service system for consumers by creating a “streamlined approach to service delivery and a standardisation of procedures.” The potential for common service delivery across Victoria was seen as an opportunity to further professionalise the sector, to create a more equitable service response to homelessness and to empower workers to see the changes they contribute to.

“Ultimately any service system that places clients’ needs and risks at the centre of it is welcomed... I have witnessed the ways in which the Opening Doors approach fulfils this.”

Additionally, the framework was seen as having the potential to “facilitate an improved response from DHS.”

Pathways through the service system

Simplifying the pathways through the homelessness system was highlighted by a number of respondents as beneficial for the sector and most importantly for consumers. This was articulated as an “ability to offer a continuum of care to those experiencing homelessness through providing a suite of service responses from the one location.”

Data

There was widespread agreement that the framework would allow the sector to capture “clear & irrefutable data on need in ways that were simply not possible before” which will show the full extent of the housing crisis, and be able to show demand by region. Responses highlighted the ability to record the number of clients waiting for support, the types of support required, resource deficits, and both housing and support vacancies which ensure “neither are under-utilised at a particular time.” This would improve service provision for consumers.

Appropriate data collection will also demonstrate how successful the framework is, as the “gap between need and resources is immediately clear and quantifiable as the length of the interim response / follow up list demonstrates.”

There was a view that the increased data collection capacity has the potential to have a direct flow-on effect to increase resources and funding across the system as it “can be used to inform government funding and... back up the anecdotal evidence that has been screamed from our sector for years.”

Single Access Points

Having a single entry point was highlighted by some respondents as a strength of the framework. These Access Points were seen as having the potential to allow consumers to more easily navigate the homelessness service system and potentially direct clients, more quickly, to appropriate support. One respondent compared the old system as a “homelessness lottery system that was neither efficient (nor) equitable nor rational.”

The single Access Points have the benefit of ensuring that clients only have to tell their story once. A consistent approach to assessments and the reduced capacity for clients to service shop were also highlighted by respondents.

“[Data] can be used to inform government funding and... back up the anecdotal evidence that has been screamed from our sector for years.”

Communication

A number of respondents stated that the framework had opened up communication lines within the sector. In some instances this was attributed to the LASN meetings. Others broadly acknowledged increased communication between services. One respondent referred to the opportunity for agencies to better understand each other: “prioritisation, unmet need, lack of exit points can be understood in minute detail from each perspective.”

Collaboration

Some respondents noted that increased collaboration occurring between agencies was a perceived strength of the framework with regions “working together rather than separately and in competition.” The potential networking opportunities and local cooperation was seen to be positive for consumer outcomes. Additionally, it was noted that a collaborative approach was broadly of benefit to the sector as a whole.

Client-focused system

A number of respondents pointed to the fact that Opening Doors framework created a client-focused service system, where “the client [is] the centre of the system.” It was also noted that clients who would otherwise have fallen through the cracks were better supported. The prioritisation of clients based on need was seen as creating better targeting along the spectrum of prevention, early intervention to those ‘most in need’.

Resources

A number of respondents thought that Opening Doors could result in a pooling of resources or the provision of additional resources, with potential, if unspecified, benefits to consumers.

Perceived weaknesses of Opening Doors

Access Points

The policy aim of the Access Point is to streamline access and maximise resources available for clients, to deliver the best response with available resources. However, respondents noted that the Access Points are serving to operate only as a “housing demand management response” or a crisis response, rather than creating a holistic approach to supporting those homeless or at risk.

Increased throughput at Access Points and increased workload on workers was reported to cause poor outcomes for consumers and worker-burnout. Additionally, with already stretched resources, Access Points must also provide an interim response for clients, which it was argued, further raises the resource deficit.

This reportedly made access to the homelessness service system particularly difficult for consumers with complex needs or who are otherwise vulnerable. It also follows, that if the response provided is inadequate, a client will not re-present to the service, increasing the risk of falling through the gaps.

Some respondents expressed concern with assessments at Access Points. For some, the level of assessment was seen as too intensive, while others believed, due to the workload at Access Points, that assessments were inadequate and incomplete.

There was concern that the power Access Points had to refer clients to support may not be matched to the requisite expertise or in-depth knowledge of the services.

The prioritisation grid was viewed as a challenge by some respondents, as concerns were held that prioritising some clients would result in others missing out. This is despite the fact that the framework has an aim of eliminating service exclusion practices, and creating transparent prioritisation policies for agencies and consumers.

Finally, a small number of respondents questioned whether reducing Access Points to a single location was in opposition to principles of social inclusion.

“...risk that some of the more dominant voices will ‘shout down’ a collaborative approach...”

Lack of adequate resources

Respondents expressed concern that Access Points did not have sufficient resources attached to them to meet the policy objectives of the framework. Overwhelmingly, they expressed concern that the framework was compromised by the lack of available housing and existing resource constraints. Resource issues centered around:

Staff / Effective Full Time (EFT) (particularly at Access Points);

Funded hours to maintain the resource register;

Housing Establishment Fund (HEF);

Access to crisis and THM stock;

Funded support hours for clients; and

Housing availability.

The following quote summarises the concerns: “We can achieve some efficiency in the system but it needs to be acknowledged that the underlying issues are increasing demand and limited or non-existent housing and support options.”

Lack of exits

Some respondents suggested that the framework did not provide clear exit options out of homelessness and housing support system. There was a sense that without making exit points and options clear, the Access Point was seriously compromised.

Lack of housing

There was a general feeling from the sector that the framework failed to acknowledge the lack of available housing. Respondents noted that without housing options as the end point, homelessness could not be properly addressed regardless of the level of support given to a client. The framework was seen as inadequate in the context of issues of affordability and housing access beyond transitional housing.

A participant noted: “Opening Doors does not recognise that the most pressing homelessness issue is the lack of affordable, equitable and appropriate housing for youth, singles and single parent families and women experiencing family violence.”

Alternatively some respondents stated that Opening Doors was too heavily focused on housing outcomes or a crisis response rather than taking into account the factors which led to and/or exacerbated homelessness.

Respondents highlighted the need for a focus on early intervention as well as prevention, rather than only finding safe and secure accommodation for those already experiencing homelessness.

Disadvantaged client groups

Respondents felt that the framework potentially created disadvantage for specific client groups and the wider homelessness population. This would be exacerbated by longer waiting lists and concern that those with lower-order needs would not receive any services.

Concern was also expressed that clients with complex needs may receive a generic assessment rather than one completed by a specialist worker.

There was a sense that the framework didn't allow for specialised responses to specific target groups such as young people, where in some regions a specific youth response had not been developed. One respondent noted that the framework failed to keep a young person in their local community.

Metro-centric framework

Some rural services found Opening Doors to be a model developed for metropolitan regions which did not take into account the specific needs and requirements of rural services and consumers. For rural regions, Access Points were identified as less visible and less accessible than in the city. This was seen to create gaps in service delivery where there was not an easy fit due to the very low level of service provision in the area. One respondent asked: "How do outpost / part-time services equate to Entry Points?"

Long journeys to access services particularly in regional areas were seen as an inherent weakness of the framework. Again respondents noted that currently resources are not matched to demand.

Need for further education

Some respondents suggested that despite roll-out having occurred in their region, some communities may not be aware of the new framework. Furthermore, a lack of commitment or articulation of ongoing education processes for agencies was seen as a weakness of the framework.

Need for further training

The lack of ongoing training for workers was seen as a weakness of the Opening Doors approach. Particular training gaps included a comprehensive understanding of referral pathways, referral criteria and services and agencies offerings.

Statewide services

The lack of clarity regarding how statewide services are coordinated in a regional approach was noted, with respondents highlighting the need for better coordination and access as well as better information on this issue from OoH.

1800 number

Respondents noted that the freecall #1800 was in practice a charged service from mobile phones. This was seen to be “discriminatory to many of those who access our service particularly our young homelessness population.”

IT

There was some criticism of the data collection system, with one respondent noting that the system does not communicate with other systems, allowing clients to continue to service-shop. Other IT weaknesses included the lack of development of the resource registry and IT systems required by the framework not being in place.

Workload

A number of respondents noted that the framework had increased their workload substantially. Further explanation of how this had occurred or by how much was not expanded on.

Agency relationships

Despite some people finding that the framework either did or had the potential to create better agency relations, some respondents felt that challenges existed when agencies didn't work collaboratively. Examples of this included specific agencies refusing to engage in the framework or share information.

Some respondents felt the framework was vulnerable to being dominated by larger agencies, which are seen as having more available resources to attend meetings and promote their views. One respondent noted a perceived “risk that some of the more dominant voices will ‘shout down’ a collaborative approach.”

Also highlighted was the potential that relationships between agencies may already have been damaged by the introduction of Opening Doors, as the sector feels the effect of competition for resources.

While resource allocation has always been an issue for services, the transparent processes required at LASNs may have brought this concern to the forefront.

There was a feeling that, despite the framework encouraging collaboration and partnership, it had not adequately recognised informal and existing relationships which had been developed over time within the sector and within regions, or the expertise of individual workers. Without acknowledgement of these factors, there is a risk of lack of ownership of the Opening Doors implementation processes.

DHS

Some respondents felt that DHS had not provided them with adequate direction in terms of articulating and outlining the long-term planning around the Opening Doors framework. Another criticism was that framework accountability had not been articulated to services – both for those who were and those who were not engaging with the framework.

Pilot

The lack of evaluation of the pilots before statewide implementation of the framework was highlighted as an issue. There was criticism that roll-out occurred before the evaluation had been undertaken, or before the information gathered was disseminated. This was seen as not allowing for any appraisal as to whether the framework was successful or where improvements could be made.

Suggested design enhancements to improve the framework

In addition to capturing views about current issues, the survey also provided an opportunity to make suggestions about the design of the Opening Doors framework.

Access Points

While a small number of people believed Access Points should be discarded, other people provided suggestions for improvements. These included changing the role of Access Points to housing-only assessments, leaving specialised assessments to housing support agencies, implementing Home Advice at Access Points and ensuring that access in rural areas is improved for clients.

Some respondents suggested Access Points must also focus on creating strategies to exit people out of homelessness, rather than just linking into support. Another suggested that Access Points become a place where the current homelessness crisis is addressed (including financial and accommodation assistance). From there, a collaborative case management approach, in which new referrals are taken to an “allocation group” made up of representatives from support services, should be used. Allocation of new referrals and monitoring of existing people on interim support should be done collaboratively from this point.

1800 number

Respondents noted that to ensure access and equity, the 1800 number should be a free call from mobile phones. Problems with the telecommunications industry in which the caller and the receiver have both been charged for calling 1800 numbers has previously been noted in consultation with CHP Peer Education Support Program (PESP) members. They have also noted that some pre-paid plans experience problems with accessing 1800 numbers operated by another telco.

Process improvements

Respondents felt that the framework needed to be articulated in a clearer way for clients and workers. This included clarification on intake procedures. It was suggested that crisis teams should be based at Access Points so workers can link in with clients at initial assessment.

Some respondents felt the prioritisation grids need to be re-examined. Further clarification was also requested around the role of LASNS and ODIRG, the role of agencies, the role of SAAP services and the role and function of intake workers. Additionally, it was felt that clarification was needed around a specialised response:

“More effort and emphasis needs to be placed on homelessness support responses... to ensure... early intervention and prevention strategies are engaged as quickly as possible.”

“... if there are no workers or housing to provide these services then it's futile.”

“Smaller agencies ... just cannot afford the staffing resources without taking away from service delivery.”

“more effort and emphasis needs to be placed on homelessness support responses that have the continued ability to ensure early intervention and prevention strategies are engaged as quickly as possible.”

Interim responses

A clearer definition and articulation of what constitutes an adequate interim response that is tailored to specific client groups and specific client needs was suggested by respondents.

Client-specific focus

The implementation process had highlighted the need for a more specialised client focus, as opposed to a one-size-fits all service delivery approach. Examples of this included suggestions that young people should be able to present at any refuge and specific Access Points for specific client groups. It was suggested that Opening Doors should be “focusing more on individual services rather than analysing whether this will work for the people who will be presenting.”

In terms of initial assessment, there was a suggestion from some respondents that assessment tools should be made specific to each target group (ie. youth).

Flexibility of response

The ability to provide a more flexible tailored response to clients was suggested by respondents as a framework improvement. This was to ensure a client-first approach. Respondents also suggested allowing the facilitation of informal local arrangements between providers, as well as existing relationships between clients and service providers.

Some respondents felt that the framework needed to allow clients to move to other areas where there were safety, security and affordability issues for the client. Another comment made was that agencies should retain “autonomy around client intake in relation to current dynamics in the facility and knowledge of complex clients.”

There was a call for flexibility in terms of the framework for metropolitan and regional responses. One regional respondent stated that in rural areas a single Access Point should be available in each town.

Some respondents suggested that clients be able to self-refer to SAAP rather than using Access Points.

Improved resources

Respondents suggested the framework could be improved and developed with additional resources. Improvements included increased staffing and remuneration, increased THM and HEF and resources for maintenance of the resource registry and IT facilities to allow clients to search the private rental market. Targeted funding for specific client groups was mentioned as a framework improvement as was the provision of appropriate housing for complex needs clients.

Training and education

A commitment to ongoing training was suggested as an improvement to the model. Specifically mentioned was the need for more Initial Assessment Point (IAP) worker training as well as the suggestion that IAP workers should visit the agencies they are referring to or be inducted into agency processes.

An ongoing commitment to education around the framework was seen as a potential development or improvement. Suggested education strategies included in-house education for agencies to promote the framework to staff, regional induction to the framework, senior management feeding down information in a more useful way and promotion outside the sector that the framework was being used.

Improved communication

Respondents suggested that improving communication processes around Opening Doors would help to secure better outcomes in the long term. It was noted that communication tends to occur between OoH and LASN/agency management rather than flowing down through the sector to workers. Improved communication systems between Access Points and SAAP services was encouraged: “there needs to be two-way open communication.”

Evaluation

Respondents would like to see a commitment to evaluation articulated in Opening Doors policies and procedures. This was seen as creating evidence-based practice which would acknowledge feedback received from service users and workers.

Lessons from implementation and suggested changes

The survey also provided an opportunity to reflect on the implementation process and suggest ideas for how the ongoing implementation of the framework might be improved.

Pilot

Because of the absence of evaluation, some felt the pilot process had failed to provide a sense of whether there has been any positive impact in the regions or an examination of the negative impacts of the framework. This was seen as a missed opportunity.

Consultation process

The consultation that occurred prior to implementation was seen as being limited to management level, and may not have adequately taken into account the voice of workers or consumers. While this essentially an internal agency issue, it appears to have created a perception that the process was not transparent, and that workers and consumers were not invited to feed into the final framework. Some respondents suggested that consultation should be ongoing and do more to involve smaller agencies, workers and consumers.

Adequate resources for implementation

For the majority of respondents the implementation process highlighted the need for increased resourcing of the framework, with one respondent saying the implementation process highlighted “that you can't get blood out of a stone - without money to support the process it won't work well.”

There was a sense that the framework was rolled out without the resources required to make it work effectively and this has compromised the process. The implementation process highlighted the need for additional staffing at entry points due to increased demand, the need for more crisis accommodation, THM and general stock, increased HEF funding, IT resources and funding for exit points. One respondent summed the resourcing issue up as: “it is well and good to have a central point where assessment and referrals can be made but if there are no workers or housing to provide these services then it's futile.”

Some respondents stated that LASNs also needed additional resources, including administration funding to adequately sustain the local planning environment that they are intended to be.

The implementation process highlighted fears that resource reallocation would take funding away from support services and be distributed to Access Points. This redistribution was seen as unsatisfactory and perhaps related to the lack of information provided about how demand would be met and managed.

Clarity of purpose and process

The implementation process was seen by some as drawn out, time and resource intensive and not transparent. Respondents felt there was a lack of clarity around timelines, roles and responsibilities, and no agreement on goals and outcomes. Some felt it was implemented without being adequately developed, including provision of the 1800 number, an early intervention framework and clarity around statewide services.

Some respondents felt that that the pressure to “go live” was more important than educating agencies and clients on the processes and benefits, without allowing time to consider all service components. It was suggested that there should have been “formalised sign-off on protocols and pathways between homelessness and partnership service prior to roll-out (so as) to enhance service capacity.”

Timing and pacing of implementation

There was a suggestion that the roll-out of the framework should have been slower, with one respondent saying, “perhaps a stepping stone or incremental approach to introducing change as currently there appears to be a lot of fear of jumping into what is a major reform.”

The additional stress on agencies operating as Access Points, the lack of ability to communicate issues occurring at Access Points and a failure to acknowledge clear Access Points in regions were highlighted in the implementation process. Some respondents felt the rush to “go live” compromised the development of effective processes relating to the interaction between services and Access Points.

Respondents also commented that there should have been a better coordinated approach to statewide implementation and more time given to this process. One respondent said it was unwise to “try to make too many structural changes all at once. It should be a gradual process of reorganising the sector.”

Communication issues

It was noted that there was a lack of effective communication prior to implementation commencing. Furthermore, it was felt that some groups, such as Indigenous groups, should have been engaged earlier in the process. There was a sense that

communication with the general public about Opening Doors needed to continue and be developed. Respondents highlighted the need for continued meetings and the development of long-term communication strategies to develop the framework further.

Need for more training

Increased training for workers, especially at Access Points was highlighted by respondents following implementation. Additionally, a lack of training was delaying the timeframe for roll-out: “training should have been in place months ago and certainly well before the proposed starting date of the entry points, which as a consequence just keeps getting put back.”

Building collaboration

For some respondents, agencies working together was seen as a positive of the framework during implementation (and beyond). It was recognised that this needed to continue and be developed further. Acknowledgement was given to the challenges in this process. It was viewed that better collaboration could enhance knowledge of the service system.

Improving relationships - the role of the LASN

The need for agencies to work more cooperatively, be more transparent and accountable to each other as well as to clients was highlighted by respondents as having the potential to further develop the framework.

“Smaller agencies ... just cannot afford the staffing resources without taking away from service delivery.”

A small number of respondents felt the LASN groups were well-attended and provided positive leadership during implementation. Criticism of the LASNs centred on the groups being tokenistic, one area not taking minutes at the meetings, and meetings spent debating and arguing over issues raised.

There was also concern that “information was presented back to the groups as discussion papers to be presented to LASNs for decisions. These included sensitive areas such as resource allocation, communications and access to the systems.”

Respondents noted the challenges that the LASN model creates for small, under-resourced agencies: “The big agencies have at least one representative at every LASN and working group meeting. Smaller agencies do not. We just cannot afford the staffing resources without taking away from service delivery.”

For some individuals the implementation process highlighted that agencies were not working together, that larger agencies had more impact than smaller agencies in the process with a sense that the framework has fragmented relationships and created

inter-agency competition and fear of funding loss. It was suggested that the benefits to agencies from using the framework needed to be demonstrated further – the benefits of Opening Doors needs to be more clearly articulated to agencies.

DHS role

Some respondents felt that implementation of Opening Doors was mandated by Government, rather than being a process which engaged the sector. It was felt that this highlighted a lack of understanding and acknowledgement of the sector by DHS in terms of existing relationships, detailed knowledge of clients and the work currently occurring. Some felt adequate consideration to the specific needs of regional and rural Victoria was not given.

Alternatively, some participants argued for a stronger role for DHS. Specific issues highlighted were around agency accountability and DHS' role in ensuring compliance. One participant noted:

“Opening Doors required Central DHS leadership around what are the non-negotiables in the framework implementation so LASN has a clear understanding of the extent of its decision-making capacity and change potential.”

It was suggested by a number of respondents that DHS move from a ‘facilitator’ role to actively providing leadership: “Leadership is key and ultimately DHS needs to set the tone for the further reforms (beyond Opening Doors) ... to get the outcomes we need”.

Further consultation

Respondents suggested that further and ongoing consultation, in particular with clients and coalface workers, would continue to feed into localised and statewide framework development and enhance implementation in areas where the framework has not yet rolled out.

“...training should have been in place months ago.”

Appendix One: Opening Doors Survey



Introduction

The development of a new Victorian Homelessness Strategy provides an opportunity to examine the current support and housing service delivery response in a number of areas.

In this context the Council to Homeless Persons (CHP) is examining the benefits and challenges the sector has found with the Opening Doors framework.

In 2008, the Victorian government began implementing the Opening Doors framework, an area-based service coordination, practice and systems approach to providing services for people experiencing homelessness.

The key features of the model are:

Local Service Area Networks (LASN): homelessness services responsible for the application of the Opening Doors framework

Visible entry points: service sites for initial assessment backed up by formally agreed protocols and procedures

Practice development: aimed at reducing multiple assessments and unsuccessful referrals

Interim response: a service continuity strategy aimed at eliminating 'run-around'

Service coordination and practice tools.

We invite you to take part in a short survey and to register your interest in attending further consultation.

The survey is an opportunity for service providers to inform CHP about the strengths of and improvements needed regarding the Opening Doors framework and implementation. It will provide information to assist CHP to record and represent the attitudes of the sector towards Opening Doors.

We are looking to obtain responses from all regions in Victorian to ensure policy is reflective of the experience of the sector.

CHP will treat any information provided confidentially.

If you would be interested in being part of further consultation regarding Opening Doors, please email: trish@chp.org.au with the subject line '*Consultation on Opening Doors*' and include your contact details.

Appendix One: Opening Doors Survey

In what DHS region is your service located:

- Barwon Eastern Metro Gippsland Grampians
 Hume Loddon Mallee North/West Metro Southern Metro

What is your position: _____

What is your broad area of work (tick more than one box where appropriate)

- Crisis Accommodation Transitional Support Tenancy Worker
 Domestic/Family Violence Housing Information and Referral
 Other (please specify)_____

What are the strengths of the Opening Doors approach?

What are the weaknesses of the Opening Doors approach?

What changes or improvements could be made to enhance or develop further the Opening Doors framework?

What have been the key issues or lessons from the implementation of Opening Doors in your region?

What changes or improvements could be made in the processes used to implement Opening Doors?

Please provide any further views, opinion and information about Opening Doors?

PLEASE RETURN COMPLETED EVALUATION FORM TO:

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