



TasCOSS response to DHHS'
*Your Care, Your Say: Consumer
and Community Engagement*
Consultation Paper

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TasCOSS welcomes the opportunity to comment on DHHS' *Your Care, Your Say Community Engagement* consultation paper. TasCOSS is the peak body for the community services sector in Tasmania and the principal voice for low income and disadvantaged Tasmanians. TasCOSS has long recognised the importance of consumer engagement and strongly supports the development of a DHHS consumer engagement strategy.

Effective consumer engagement practices can provide Tasmanians on low incomes and who are disadvantaged opportunities for active participation in decision making about the choice of care, type of services as well as opportunities for feedback on quality of services and areas for improvement. Comprehensive engagement practices also provide consumers with opportunities to influence the development and planning of service delivery and the policy and strategic direction of the services they use.

As the peak representative of the community services sector, this submission will focus on the concerns and issues raised by TasCOSS member organisations in response to DHHS' consultation paper. TasCOSS emphasises the importance of extensive consultation with the community service organisations that will be part of the strategy. If community service organisations are to play an important part in the strategy, it is crucial that the strategy is created in genuine partnership with Government, and that any policy outcomes are appropriate and desirable for community sector organisations.

TasCOSS members have raised the following issues:

1. Lack of acknowledgement Members were disappointed about the lack of acknowledgement of the work that community service organisations (CSOs) are already doing with consumers. Members said that if CSOs are to be involved in the strategy then a better understanding and acknowledgement of the work that is already being done by CSOs is required. It is important that the strategy makes clear how it is going to build upon the existing consumer and community engagement work that CSOs currently do with their clients.

2. Lack of clarity While the strategy is in its early stages, members expressed concern about the lack of clarity about the role community service organisations are to play. Members were concerned about the impact the strategy would have on the consumer consultation work that community services organisations are already doing through the course of their daily work and/or specific consumer consultation programs they are running. Member organisations wanted to know how DHHS intend to work with CSOs and how the strategy will influence existing policy and reporting requirements.

Members welcome the strategy in terms of the possibilities presented by an increased focus on consumer engagement but are also aware of the resource implications of good practice in this area. They are concerned that the strategy

may impose additional obligations in terms of consumer engagement but without the additional resourcing required to facilitate this practice.

3. Resourcing and support. Of concern to TasCOSS is the issue of appropriate resourcing and support for the strategy. Adequate resourcing and support are fundamental to the success of this consumer engagement strategy. These practical considerations include “the availability of resources such as time, funding, training, support, and infrastructure, and the quality and timing of information made available to consumers” (Gregory 2007).

Of particular concern is that there be sufficient resources to enable engagement of multiply disadvantaged consumers such as people with disabilities, people living in rural areas, people on low incomes, people with low literacy, young people and those who find themselves homeless. The experience of community service organisations is that these groups are much harder to engage and strategies to engage these groups require additional resourcing. One example provided by a community service organisation was that staff made home visits out of office hours to some clients for whom other methods of engagement were impractical.

In Lea McInerney’s background paper, issues relating to the role of staff development in successful consumer engagement practices are raised. These include:

- Having skilled, knowledgeable and enthusiastic staff, especially with good communication skills;
- Providing the opportunity for staff to reflect on their own values and beliefs and express their concerns;
- Opportunities for staff training and education; and
- Organisational support for this approach to practice (2008: 7).

TasCOSS agrees that a skilled workforce with the right skills, knowledge base and attitudes are essential to effective, consistent, responsive and sustainable consumer and community engagement. Staff training is one example of where additional resourcing will be required to make the strategy work. The time and resources required for the evaluation of the effectiveness of the strategy is another example.

TasCOSS understands that in the current financial climate that it will be difficult to attract significant funding for the implementation of this strategy, but in the absence of an appropriate level of resourcing it is difficult to see how the strategy can be effectively implemented.

4. Engaging the disengaged There needs to be a clear strategy on how and where to engage Tasmanians who experience deep disadvantage and who are 'hard to reach'. Data, such as that contained in recent reports by Dr Roscoe Taylor Tasmania's Director of Public Health (2008), indicates that those Tasmanians who are hardest to engage – due to disability, low literacy and low income for example – are also those Tasmanians with the poorest health and quality of life outcomes.

Chapter 7 of the consultation paper outlines engagement techniques for disadvantaged consumers. These techniques will only be effective with appropriate resourcing, training of staff and a commitment to persist in attempts to engage, listen to and respond to people who face multiple disadvantage. In the alternative there is a real danger that, despite the strategy, services will continue to be unaware of key issues that limit service effectiveness for those Tasmanians experiencing the poorest health and quality of life outcomes.

In a 2008 report by Swinburne University titled *Community Consultation and the Hard to Reach: Local Government, Social Profiling and Civic Infrastructure*, a number of problems and solutions with regards to engaging 'hard to reach' groups are outlined. Some of the issues raised include how identify 'hard to reach' groups, the need to adapt consultation methods to be more inclusive, choosing appropriate locations, the importance of community relations and trust and the need for service providers to overcome prejudice (2008: 17-29). The report states that "a positive, proactive approach to involving people through a combination of targeting public participation tools, reaching out to communities in ways in which they are likely to respond and providing support where needed are important to encourage certain segments of the population to become involved." (2008: 14)

5. A Consumer Peak TasCOSS have had a long interest in the issue of a Tasmanian consumer peak body. The proposal that a DHHS funded consumer peak be created has been recently raised in the context of the Review of DHHS-funded Peak Bodies and the development of the DHHS Consumer Engagement Strategy, but to date has been given little attention.

We believe that this issue requires a dedicated consultation process with peak bodies, community service organisations, DHHS agencies and consumers so that there is the opportunity to map existing consumer representation and explore the range of options in relation to a DHHS consumer peak.

6. Extended timeline for the next consultation phase TasCOSS requests that the project team extend the next phase of consultation from 3 weeks to 4-6 weeks to provide more time for CSOs to respond to the next important phase of the strategy.

We look forward to continue working with DHHS in the development of this consumer and community engagement strategy through TasCOSS' continued participation on the reference group.

References

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