

Community Sector Peak Bodies

What is a “Peak Body”

Peak bodies within the not-for-profit health and community sector are representative, non-government organisations whose membership predominantly consists of other (legally unrelated) organisations of allied interests and which are recognised by other peaks and their sectors generally as a representative of the whole of their sector. As such, peak bodies offer a strong voice and important integrative functions by undertaking key peak roles which normally include:

- Research, policy development, advice to government and their sector
- Advocacy and representation to government and other decision makers
- Information dissemination within their sector and to the community
- Sector consultation and coordination within their sector
- Sector capacity building to enable better service delivery and functioning of community organisations.

Each element of this definition is important, but the definition highlights the unique member-group representative structures of peak bodies and the mission-oriented roles that they fulfill. Such peaks are different from industry bodies who represent organisations within the sector (but not service users), and from consumer representative bodies (who do represent the whole sector). These other groups play important roles, but they are different from peak bodies.

The boundaries and categorisation of the “sectors” being represented by peaks are largely organic and historical rather than being a hard-and-fast categories (as any such attempted categorisations often miss important distinctions and overlaps). However, the organic nature of peak representation means that the recognition of peak body status by the other peaks and from the sector represented is even more essential in ensuring the legitimacy of peak bodies.

In addition to peak bodies organised around certain issues or population groups, each state or territory also has a Council of Social Service (as well as ACOSS at the national level) which are the ‘peak of peaks’ representing the broader health and community services sector.

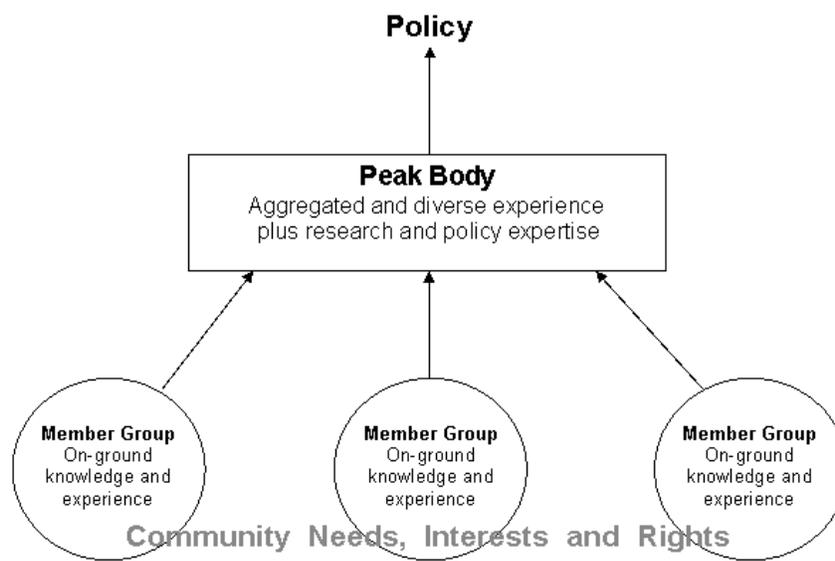
The roles of peak bodies

Research, policy development, advice to government and their sector

Peak bodies engage in a variety of research projects and policy analysis. This helps inform policy development in the sector and allows peaks to provide advice to government, including through:

- Participation on government reference groups and meetings
- Informal government consultation processes
- Formal policy submissions in parliamentary and departmental public consultation processes
- Publication of research reports and analysis of existing policies or issues.

Policy positions are developed through primary and secondary research, and through consultation with the sectors they represent. This gives peaks a unique role in policy development. The process is shown in the diagram below.



While groups based on individual members can consult their membership and do carry out effective policy advocacy, the consultation will inevitably be filtered through a prism of the culture, values and experience of that organisation. By aggregating the diverse experience of different member groups, peak bodies can better identify broad trends and filter out the particular organisational traits and issues. While there is not always the time and resources to go through this process on every issue, when it happens the result is policy and proposals which come from a broad perspective that truly represents the sector.

Advocacy and representation

The primary aim of peak body representation and advocacy work is to influence public or institutional policies and/or systems, rather than advocacy directly on behalf of any individuals.

Advocacy builds on peaks' research and policy development and can be wider and more proactive than simply advice to government. It may be directed to politicians, government departments, corporations, community leaders or the media, with key activities including lobbying, media releases and commentary, research publications and public information

material, public speaking, and organizing public and sector meetings and events to advance policy proposals.

Peak bodies often spend the largest proportion of their time on advocacy.

Information dissemination

The information dissemination/community education role of peaks is closely related to their advocacy functions, but is usually more generic. It may relate to raising the profile of people, groups or organisations, or raising awareness of issues in the community but without an explicit focus on policy change. This is usually done by newsletters, websites, resource centres, guides and toolkits, and sometimes formal targeted education kits or programs.

The other important aspect of information dissemination is that peaks play a key role in disseminating information to the sector on changes in policy, government programs or the broader environment which will impact on the sector and/or its clients. This provides a useful conduit for government and a filter and alert system for organisations in the sector.

Sector consultation and coordination

Consultation between peak organisations and their respective sectors is crucial to peaks representative function and to policy development and advocacy, but is a key function in itself and helps bring greater coordination within (and between) sectors. The goal is not to manage or control a sector, but to provide avenues of communication so that necessary coordination can occur and contribute to better outcomes for those who are supported by the sector. Consultative and coordination activities include:

- One-off round tables, workshops, conferences and meetings
- Member surveys
- Issue based policy/advocacy working groups or policy councils
- Representation by members on the governing boards
- Input by members into publications and e-bulletins
- Calls for comment and contribution in regards to any publications or actions taken
- Informal conversations and networking.

Sector capacity building

Stronger, more efficiently run organisations undoubtedly provide better community services in a more cost-effective manner so peak bodies have a key role in sector development – particularly where organisations are small and may not otherwise be able to access all the skills and resources required.

The sector development role of peak bodies includes the provision and sharing of information, referrals, training, leadership development, management support, and running/promoting conferences, forums and other events that provide opportunities for organisations to share knowledge and resources.

Sector capacity building also includes policy development and systemic advocacy on issues that relate to the sector itself: taxation, service contracts, funding and regulatory requirements, pay and workforce development issues, and the overall political relationship with government.



The peak body model

