

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:

- **Representation** – speaking in all matters as the peak body on behalf of the sector
- **Research, policy development, advice and advocacy** – giving voice to the interests of vulnerable and disadvantaged people;
- **Information dissemination to the sector** – filtering and prioritizing government information to ensure the sector is informed about changes and policies relevant to them;
- **Information dissemination to the community** – public education about poverty and disadvantage, and/or the role of sector in community development and supporting vulnerable and disadvantaged people;
- **Sector development and capacity building** – training, advocacy to improve the regulatory regime, sharing best practice and highlighting sector issues to enable the 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 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

Representation

To be a peak body is to be a representative of the sector. This entails both having a membership which is big enough and diverse enough to reflect the sector, and having mechanisms in place to ensure that the peak body consults the sector and is informed by the sector.

Research, policy development, advice and advocacy

Peak bodies engage in a variety of research projects and policy analysis, the aim of which is generally to inform sector advocacy to change legislation, policy or government, corporate or community attitudes on issues relevant to the sector. Policy advice and advocacy may be:

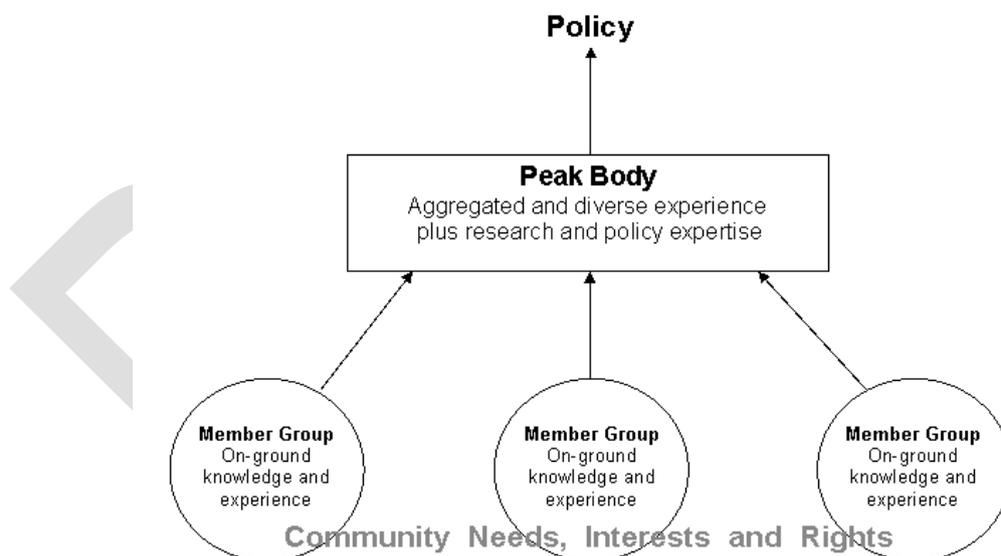
through formal advice to government, including:

- participation on government reference groups and meetings,
- informal government consultation processes,
- formal policy submissions in parliamentary and departmental public consultation processes;

or through broader processes including

- publication of research reports and analysis of existing policies or issues,
- media statements and public commentary,
- organising public meetings, events and lobbying.

A unique aspect of peak body policy development and advocacy is that, as well as traditional policy development through primary and secondary research, peaks can develop policy by virtue of their role as peak bodies. 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. Similarly, the power of

peak body advocacy derives at least in part from the legitimacy of being representatives of the sector as a whole.

Information dissemination to the sector

Governments regularly produce a mass of policy, regulation and legislation as well as running important programs and services and it is impossible, particularly for small organisations, to be aware of everything that may be relevant to them. Peak bodies play a key role in filtering this mass of information and disseminating it to the sector. This could be announcements of funding opportunities, changes in policy or government programs, or the broader changes in the 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.

Information dissemination to the community

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.

Sector development and 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.

