



**NATIONAL MENTAL HEALTH
CONSUMER & CARER FORUM**



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Dear Leanne

Response to the Draft Report of the *Scoping Study to Inform the Establishment of a New Peak National Mental Health Consumer Organisation. January 2010*

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the Draft Report of the *Scoping Study to Inform the Establishment of a New Peak National Mental Health Consumer Organisation*. This paper is a joint response from the National Mental Health Consumer and Carer Forum (NMHCCF) and the Mental Health Council of Australia (MHCA).

The Draft Report of the *Scoping Study to inform the establishment of a new peak national mental health consumer organisation* (Draft Report) provides a good broad foundation for a new national consumer organisation.

The Draft Report brings together a diverse range of views and proposes approaches to meet most of the diverse needs of the sector. It acknowledges the need for good governance and accountability mechanisms to be built in at the establishment phase, through such strategies as the identification of specific skill sets for the Chair and board members and the use of experts to guide the set up of the organisation and provide advice where needed.

There is appropriate emphasis on establishing training and performance management for the board as well as employees and a much needed focus on developing these for the sector more widely.

The nominated key priorities of the organisation are ambitious but appropriate for a national consumer body seeking to improve national mental health policy and practice in Australia in the 21st century.

Implementation Plan

While the recommendations of the Draft Report are appropriate they are still broad and lack the detail needed by the new organisation to guide its inauguration. It is therefore

proposed that a plan for setting up the new organisation be drafted outlining the specific initial and longer term goals of the organisation. This planning document would follow the broad provisions outlined in the Draft Report. This should be a recommendation of the ***Final Report of the Scoping study to inform the establishment of a new peak national mental health consumer organisation.***

The plan would include detail about the specific activities that need to be undertaken to put the aims of the Final Report into practice.

Leadership in collaboration and partnership

The NMHCCF and the MHCA are pleased that the new organisation has the capacity to select board members and staff who do not have a lived experience of mental illness, if suitably qualified consumers are not available. This inclusive approach will assist in demonstrating partnership in a way that is not always well understood nor demonstrated in the mental health sector. It is hoped that such an inclusive approach will continue to inform the organisation's direction as it grows and matures.

The NMHCCF and the MHCA do have some concern that the proposed model does not formally link the new national organisation to the existing or any potential state and territory based consumer representative structures apart from provision of membership if applicable. Many consumers (and carers) are concerned that by not formally establishing these relationships, the opportunity to coordinate a coherent national approach that includes the views of consumers in all states and territories will be lost and that the duplication of work amongst already busy organisations will continue.

We are encouraged that this potential drawback will be addressed through the implementation of annual member forums in each state and territory and that a National Convention will enable a larger cross section of members to meet and debate the organisation policy frameworks. However, it is not clear that this will effectively mitigate duplication of work already being undertaken at a national and state and territory level by consumers in other organisations.

To address the above potential issues, the NMHCCF and MHCA propose that the new national organisation implement mechanisms to ensure that information about the work of strategic partners is provided for the information of the membership and opportunities to capitalise on this work are considered in developing the work of the new national organisation. Such mechanisms could include the development of formal partnerships, supported by memoranda of understanding and the maintenance of active links and regular reporting on these via a newsletter.

Therefore the following addition to the recommendation should be made under "The new organisation's position" (p36):

That the new organisation demonstrate from its commencement a respect for the importance of the role of all key stakeholders and a commitment to working in

partnership and collaboration with all parties *and implements operational mechanisms to ensure that this occurs.*

Sector Development Leadership

The role of sector development leadership, “(to provide national leadership on mental health consumer organisation and service development” (p 23) should be described as two different roles with some overlap of work as these will both be significant projects with some differing objectives. For example, the scope of potential activities around developing and supporting the consumer and carer identified workforce is enormous. Activities around this issue will differ from assisting in the development of consumer advocacy organisations in the states and territories where they do not exist, which will also require significant input. Both of these projects need to be prioritised accordingly.

Getting the Work Done

The Legal Entity Section of the Report proposes that the membership of the board must include a “broad knowledge and skill base including.....an acknowledgement of individual wellness” (p41). It is not clear what role perceptions of individual wellness would have in organisational governance and this needs to be clarified.

As advised by the NMHCCF and MHCA in our previous submission, the new national organisation will need clear guidelines and policies around assisting board members to manage their performance including consideration of personal health issues.

It is proposed that the following recommendation on page 56 be amended to include:

“That human resource management policies of the new organisation demonstrate an emphasis on:

- recruitment of staff based on requisite skills, knowledge and experience and the appointment of the best qualified applicant;
- an organisational commitment to staff *and board* training and development review, *including the development of policies and the implementation of resources to support this*; and
- the proactive encouragement of *suitably qualified* mental health consumers to apply.”

It is proposed that the recommendation on page 37 under “Organisational Framework” is amended to include”

“The new organisation needs to develop and demonstrate best practice human resource management, financial management and administration in a challenging environment *and develop policies and guidelines to support these.*”

Funding

One issue that the Draft Report has not addressed is that of funding. Realistic funding for establishment and ongoing costs will be crucial for the new organisation to succeed. If this funding does not reflect the real costs of salaries and the required development initiatives and ongoing supports that are highlighted in the Draft Report, the organisation

will effectively be 'set up to fail'. Funding will need to include consideration of the development of an implementation plan and the provision of appropriate expertise to guide the establishment of the organisation.

Conclusion

The new national consumer organisation has exciting potential to provide significant guidance and leadership in the development of the mental health sector in Australia. The Draft Report indicates that a comprehensive range of activities and supports will be necessary to make sure that it can operate as an effective and dynamic organisation in a challenging environment. It is therefore imperative that governments provide support for adequate funding and make a commitment to working actively with the new national consumer organisation.

The NMHCCF and the MHCA are looking forward to contributing to the establishment phase of the new organisation if required and to developing an ongoing relationship with the new national consumer organisation to achieve consumer and carer directed, recovery focused support for mental health in Australia.

Yours sincerely



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