



FLOURISHING TOGETHER

WA Framework for
Support Group Sector Recovery



ConnectGroups
helping support groups & individuals

Acknowledgement of Country

ConnectGroups acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as the traditional custodians of country throughout Western Australia, and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and community. We pay our respects to them and their cultures; and to their Elders past, present, and emerging.

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ABOUT CONNECTGROUPS

ConnectGroups is the Peak body for Support Groups in Western Australia, empowering and sustaining community-based Support Groups and the wider community for over 37 years through sector development activities, capacity-building, resourcing, and advocacy.

Support Groups provide support on a broad range of issues including chronic and genetic conditions, trauma, mental distress, and social isolation. Peer Support Groups play a key role in the promotion of health and wellbeing, community inclusion, and the value of lived experience. ConnectGroups is a not-for-profit with a strong track record of responding to identified needs with collaborative practice and innovative service delivery. ConnectGroups is committed to building connected, thriving communities by advocating for an effective and sustainable Support Group sector.

“[The] system is not balanced, and grassroots Support Groups are disadvantaged. Funding is a constant issue needed to support volunteers in their roles.”

FOREWORD

The year 2020 has seen unprecedented changes in economies and communities worldwide due to COVID-19, and the Support Group sector in WA is no exception. Support Groups have become increasingly viewed as key safeguards against social isolation and mental distress during this time of abrupt change.

The vast majority of ConnectGroups' membership initiated a swift pivot to online engagement during COVID-19 restrictions. Support Groups experienced resourcing shortfalls during this transition, as well as an increase in the demand for services, and membership increases. Many Support Groups experienced significant reductions in revenue due to lack of fundraising opportunities, coupled with increasing costs related to online delivery (e.g. IT equipment and online subscriptions). The role of Support Group leaders and facilitators has become increasingly complex and time-consuming during 2020. These trends are expected to continue as ripples from the COVID-19 pandemic are felt across economies and communities beyond 2021.

Despite the difficulties faced during 2020, the increasing workloads and demands on the Support Group Sector, the stories we have heard from peer Support Groups is that the sector is rising to these challenges, and indeed, Support Groups are flourishing together in this 'new normal'. Support Group members report that they have become closer and more connected, while leadership teams have grown and become stronger through deliberation and crisis. Peer Support Groups are being turned to and are responding to an ever-widening community of people seeking connection and understanding through this model of participation. The challenges of COVID-19 have highlighted the importance of community-led support services and person-to-person connections.

These messages from the sector spark a hope that ConnectGroups' vision of connected, thriving communities may be closer than we think. Building trust and communication, listening to each other, and feeling heard, are essential parts of the human condition, and powerful antidotes to the social afflictions of loneliness and isolation. Now more than ever, the value of the Support Group sector in meeting our fundamental human needs for connection and belonging is being celebrated.

On behalf of the Board of Management, staff, and members, ConnectGroups is pleased to present the WA Framework for Support Group Sector Recovery (the Framework). The Framework aims to contribute to and inform government decision-making by ensuring that the voice of the Support Group sector is represented. ConnectGroups presents the following strategic recommendations to reflect what is most needed to help this community-led sector continue to flourish and expand.

Antonella Segre
Chief Executive Officer
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Pearl Proud
Chairperson, Board of Management
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THE SUPPORT GROUP SECTOR

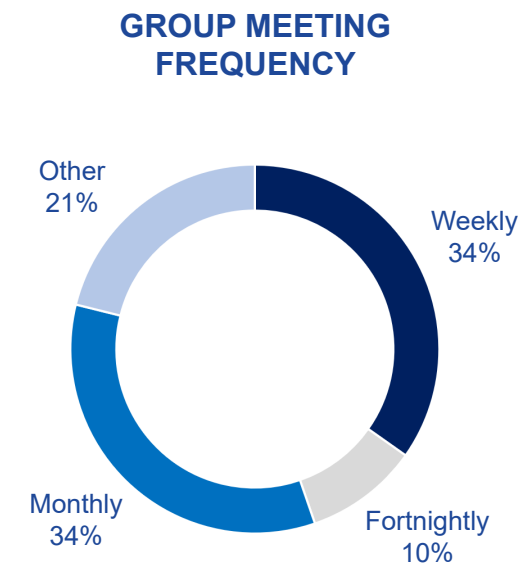
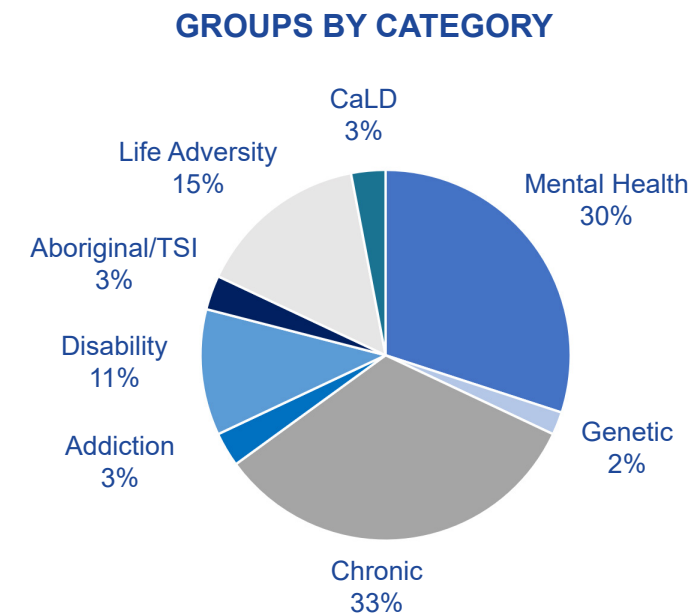
Support Groups arise in response to gaps in service provision, information, or community support. The year 2020 saw a rise in the establishment, provision, and growth of Support Groups across WA, indicating that the gap between what is available and what is needed is widening. Support Groups are unique in that they provide mutual support through trusting peer relationships around a common lived experience, such as a health condition or life adversity.

ConnectGroups provides Support Groups with the funding, training and information required to deliver quality community-led peer supports, referral networks and resources to their members. As a result of belonging to a Support Group, individuals, families, and carers build the knowledge, confidence, and skills to manage their wellbeing and recovery.

Support Groups have the following attributes:

- Support Group members share an adverse life condition, situation or circumstance that gives rise to shared perspectives and needs.
- Support Groups are primarily peer-led and managed by group members who are personally affected by a particular issue of concern.
- Support Groups provide an empowering model of mutual support where participants gain emotional and practical support in a confidential, non-clinical environment of mutual trust.
- Support Groups are largely run and facilitated in an unpaid capacity.

“Support Groups provide unspoken understandings through our shared lived experiences.”



CONSULTATION PROCESS

The WA Framework for Support Group Sector Recovery is informed by annual data collection and sector consultation. Throughout 2020 and during COVID-19 restrictions, ConnectGroups staff remained in close contact with member Support Groups, to ascertain and respond to immediate and emerging needs in the sector. ConnectGroups staff and volunteers conducted COVID Response and Recovery telephone surveys to keep track of the needs and operational status of member groups. COVID Response surveys commenced in March 2020 and COVID Recovery surveys began in August 2020. In September 2020, ConnectGroups conducted sector-wide consultation to further target the key challenges faced by Support Groups in Western Australia during 2020. The following strategic recommendations are the cumulative result of all consultation and engagement during 2020.





“Support Groups validate our experiences as a normal person and make us feel able to get through an experience, because we can see others doing it.”

Strategic Recommendations

- 1 **Sector Recognition and Impact Measurement**
Celebrating the Support Group sector by measuring what matters – i.e. establishing wellbeing indicators; calculating the Social Return on Investment (SROI) and economic value of the sector.
- 2 **Support Group Workforce Development**
Improving the quality of peer Support Groups through training, professional development and supervision of Group leaders and facilitators. Building the Care Economy and job readiness for the community services sector.
- 3 **Resourcing the Support Group sector to meet increasing demands**
Placing emphasis on community-led grassroots initiatives that provide holistic social supports beyond clinical services and the medical model, for social inclusion and mental wellbeing.
- 4 **Place-based partnerships for localised supports**
Collaborations between local government, community, and service providers to nurture and co-design localised peer support solutions in regional and metropolitan areas.
- 5 **Sector development – online capacity building**
Enabling the Support Group sector to thrive and maintain its relevancy, responsiveness and reach in the digital age, especially for socially and geographically isolated people.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION ONE

Sector Recognition and Impact Measurement

“[The state government can contribute to the sustainability and growth of the Support Group sector by] realising that the work done by [community] in most sectors is the foundation of change in many support areas especially in mental health support.”

Research has identified the essential role that Support Groups play in bringing people together, supporting individuals and communities toward full participation and self-determination.¹ There is growing evidence of the psychosocial benefits of Support Groups for individuals experiencing mental distress or adverse life experiences, including improvements to self-esteem, social connection, physical and emotional wellbeing, symptom abatement and symptom control.² Strong community peer supports can lead to decreases in relapse and rehospitalisation for people with mental health and substance use issues.³ Peer support is a cost-efficient and effective community treatment leading to reductions in hospital stays, improvements in quality of life, and increased participation.⁴

Community-based supports can help reduce social isolation, improve social cohesion, reduce visits to primary and secondary health services, provide a sense of hope, and give participants access to new skills and information for their mental and physical wellbeing.⁵ ConnectGroups has established partnerships with the WA Primary Health Alliance (WAPHA) and the Mental Health Commission in order to ensure access to community-based supports for individuals. Demonstrating the social and economic impacts of the Support Group sector builds recognition of the role of community-based peer support in mental health and suicide prevention, physical health and wellbeing, and recovery.

WE RECOMMEND

- 1.1 Recognising the Support Group sector’s established role as an adjunct to mental health and primary health care services
- 1.2 Ensuring representation of the Support Group sector in cross-sector collaborations and government advisory groups
- 1.3 Sharing stories from the Support Group sector about the transformative power of peer support opportunities for students enrolled in marketing, graphic design, media, video, and sound production.

¹ Literature Review: Effectiveness of Self Help and Support Groups in Health Promotion 2015
² Worrall, H., Schweizer, R., Marks, E., Yuan, L., Lloyd, C. & Ramjan, R. (2018) The effectiveness of support groups: a literature review. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 22 (2), 85-93.
³ Tellez, J.J., & Kidd, J. (2015) Peer support workers: an untapped resource in primary mental health care. *Journal of Primary Health Care*, 7, 84-87.
⁴ Repper, J., & Carter, T. (2011) A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services. *Journal of Mental Health*, 20, 392-411.
⁵ Chatterjee, H.J., Camic, P.M., Lockyer, B. & Thompson, L.J.M (2018) Non-clinical community interventions: a systematised review of social prescribing schemes. *Arts & Health*, 10 (2), 97-123.

“Government acknowledgement of role of community-based Peer Support Groups and their sector”



STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION TWO

Support Group Workforce Development

“Training up [Support Group facilitators] is training up a workforce of the future – government could see this as an advantage for them to invest in.”

“Providing funding to people who run Support Groups as they often give up paid work to be able to maintain their volunteer work.”

Due to increasing system demands and volunteer workloads, the Support Group Sector is calling for additional:

- training and professional development
- intensive support – e.g. governance and administration
- professional (paid) supervision role
- mentoring and debriefing.⁶

Workforce development is an ongoing challenge for the Support Group sector in WA, with many Support Groups citing a need for professional training and supervision of facilitators to cope with the increasing demands and complexities of the role, and advocating for remuneration of some paid peer support roles.⁷ These findings are consistent with research in the field, which has found barriers include adequate and ongoing funding of peer support services⁸ and the supervision and management of peer support workers.⁹

Paid Support Group facilitation roles provide social and economic benefits for service recipients, and are also demonstrated to improve recovery and relapse, quality of life, and employment outcomes for peer support workers across intrapersonal, social, spiritual, and professional domains.¹⁰ When combined with clinical and community services, paid peer support services enable reintegration and recovery of both support workers and service recipients, improving engagement and empowerment for all.¹¹

Support Groups constitute part of the Care Economy. The Care Economy represents 20% of Australia's workforce and is the largest and fastest growing industry in WA¹². Investment in the Care Economy generates more employment than investment in construction and can help redress the economic disparity among women and young people in the paid and unpaid workforce¹³. ConnectGroups contributes to the Care Economy by providing community services training scholarships to Support Group facilitators, leading to job readiness and participation in the sector.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 2.1 Continuing to upskill the Support Group sector through expansion of scholarships to enable Support Group facilitators to obtain nationally recognised qualifications.
- 2.2 Providing supplementary payments to Support Group facilitators in recognition of the budgetary savings and health service demand reductions delivered by the Support Group sector
- 2.3 Funding additional roles in the Support Group sector to provide professional supervision and mentoring of Support Group facilitators.

“Peer Support Group facilitation is a big responsibility and we do not want to take advantage of them.”

⁶ ConnectGroups Sector Consultation Report 2020

⁷ ConnectGroups Sector Consultation Report 2020

⁸ Tellez, J.J., & Kidd, J. (2015) Peer support workers: an untapped resource in primary mental health care. *Journal of Primary Health Care*, 7, 84-87.

⁹ Repper, J., & Carter, T. (2011) A review of the literature on peer support in mental health services. *Journal of Mental Health*, 20, 392-411.

¹⁰ Johnson, G., Magee, C., Maru, M., Furlong-Norman, K., Rogers, E.S., & Thompson, K. (2014) Personal and societal benefits of providing peer support: a survey of peer support specialists. *Psychiatric Services*, 65 (5), 678-680.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² <https://wacoss.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Investing-in-the-Care-Economy-Anglicare-WA.pdf>

¹³ De Henau, J. & Himmelweit, S. (2020) The gendered employment gains of investing in social vs. physical infrastructure: evidence from simulations across seven OECD countries. IKD Working Paper No.84. April 2020.

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION THREE

Resourcing the Support Group sector to meet increasing demands

“Facilitator/Support Group leadership burnout is a persistent risk because of the intense nature of the unpaid role. Government needs to better acknowledge the value of these unpaid roles”

“increased workload - more people needing support/emotional, mental, financial support with people/family members losing work”

“Because of combination of increased workload and increased personal stress because of pandemic, facilitator availability became challenged”

The Support Group sector in WA has experienced a significant increase in support needs and requests for service during 2020¹⁴. Peer Support Groups play a significant role in reducing social isolation and loneliness in the community¹⁵ - COVID has exacerbated social isolation and highlighted the need for more intentional community building activities to combat loneliness¹⁶.

Social isolation is a psychosocial risk factor for numerous health issues including mental illness, and emotional distress, suicide, dementia, risky behaviours, smoking, physical inactivity, poor sleep, and biological effects including high blood pressure and dampened immune function¹⁷. The risk of premature death associated with social isolation and loneliness is similar to the risk of premature death associated with well-known risk factors such as obesity, based on a meta-analysis of research in Europe, North American, Asia and Australia¹⁸.

Alarming, according to modelling, it is anticipated that suicide rates may rise by up to 25% in the five years following COVID, with youth suicide predicted to increase up to 30%.¹⁹ It is estimated that intentional investment in community-based interventions to address loneliness could decrease health spending by up to one-third²⁰.

Support Group sector consultations confirm that the people who are most in need of social support are also those who are most socially and digitally isolated²¹. People with complex lives, including financial difficulties, social exclusion, chronic conditions, care responsibilities or mental health concerns have more difficulty accessing resources than the general population.

Sector consultations indicated numerous system pressures felt across the Support Group sector during 2020, including:

- Increased complexity of leadership and facilitation roles
- Increased volunteer workload and subsequent burnout
- Increased running costs and decreased fundraising opportunities
- decreasing volunteer availability
- increasingly complex needs of members
- membership growth and demand for services.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 3.1 Resourcing the Peak body ConnectGroups to grow the sector in response to service demands
- 3.2 Funding the Support Group sector for suicide prevention and community-based mental health
- 3.3 Promoting the benefits of Support Groups for health, wellbeing, recovery, and social inclusion.

“There has been extra pressure on community supports who have been unable to meet everyone’s needs, which has led to individuals turning more to Support Groups for help.”

¹⁴ ConnectGroups Sector Consultation Report 2020

¹⁵ <https://www.vichealth.vic.gov.au/letter/articles/vh-letter-47-loneliness>

¹⁶ Australian Medical Association (2020) Joint Statement: COVID-19 Impact likely to lead to increased rates of suicide and mental illness

¹⁷ <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/australias-welfare/social-isolation-and-loneliness>

¹⁸ Holt-Lunstad J, Smith TB, Baker M, Harris T, Stephenson D. Loneliness and social isolation as risk factors for mortality: a meta-analytic review. *Perspect Psychol Sci*. 2015 Mar. 10(2):227-37.

¹⁹ Australian Medical Association (2020) Joint Statement: COVID-19 Impact likely to lead to increased rates of suicide and mental illness

²⁰ <https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/uncategorized/new-research-cost-effectiveness-loneliness-interventions/>

²¹ ConnectGroups Sector Consultation Report 2020

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION FOUR

Place-based Partnerships for Localised Supports

“Creating a networked model – events – for SGs with common client groups – many localised”

“Noticed a localising of services – smaller, more localised group”

“Something that would demonstrate investment into the Support Group sector would be the development of more venues suitable for Support Groups, for example community spaces with couches and kitchens.”

ConnectGroups has identified a need for networked innovation, coordination and collaboration for resource-sharing and information exchange across the Support Group sector.

The challenges of social distancing during COVID-19 have illuminated the importance of localised networks of support and highlighted a lack of mutual support services available in regional areas²². ConnectGroups believes that place-based partnerships can assist with expansion of the Support Group sector across WA, in both metropolitan and regional areas.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 4.1 Resourcing creation of peer Support Group networks for mutual assistance and capacity building
- 4.2 Funding ConnectGroups to address the deficit in supply of private rooms for community hire
- 4.3 Supporting place-based collaborations with local government and community services to strengthen and represent the Support Group sector in regional areas.

²² <https://www.ten20.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Funding-community-led-place-based-practice-report-ten20-May-2019.pdf>

STRATEGIC RECOMMENDATION FIVE

Support for Expansion and Continuation of Digital Services

“Members have felt more isolated and miss the face to face contact. Our priority is to meet with our members by whatever means possible to maintain support.”

“We recognise that to move into the future our members need to become familiar and to feel safe using IT equipment to converse.”

Since pivoting to online engagement during COVID-19 social restrictions, many Support Groups now provide a ‘hybrid’ model, incorporating digital services alongside traditional face-to-face support. This has improved the access and availability of support, and frequency of contact for many people seeking support²³. A significant proportion of Support Group participants now prefer online Support Group environments²⁴, especially those in regional locations, and people with conditions that make leaving the house challenging²⁵. Others, particularly older adults and those who are socially isolated, prefer face-to-face contact and struggle with online modes of engagement²⁶. For these reasons it is likely that hybrid models will remain, resulting in a permanently increased workload for facilitators²⁷.

Positive consequences of evolving to digital services are:

- the availability of guest speakers from other parts of the world
- membership expansion, including geographically isolated people
- decreased venue and transport costs
- increased operations and supports provided
- increased attendances in some groups.

Although hybrid models represent an example of sector and service improvement, they also require significant additional resourcing and funding, such as staffing, training, online subscriptions and equipment purchases to meet digital service demands.

WE RECOMMEND:

- 5.1 Supporting the creation of an online Support Group platform for ConnectGroups
- 5.2 Additional funding to the Support Group sector to help resource digital service provision, e.g. online subscriptions, and IT equipment
- 5.3 Funding for training in digital inclusion and digital facilitation for Support Group facilitators.

²³ ConnectGroups Sector Consultation Report 2020

²⁴ Worrall, H., Schweizer, R., Marks, E., Yuan, L., Lloyd, C. & Ramjan, R. (2018) The effectiveness of support groups: a literature review. *Mental Health and Social Inclusion*, 22 (2), 85-93.

²⁵ ConnectGroups Sector Consultation Report 2020.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.



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