

Thriving Groups, Connected Communities

Peer Support Group Sector
State Budget Submission
2024-2025




ConnectGroups
helping support groups & individuals



ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

ConnectGroups acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples 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.





About Us

ConnectGroups is the Peak body for Peer Support in Western Australia, empowering and sustaining community-based peer Support Groups and the wider community since 1983 through sector development activities, capacity-building, resourcing, and advocacy. We currently service over 780 peer Support Groups across the State.

01 Foreword

Setting the scene with a welcome and introduction from ConnectGroups' Chair, Brian O' Keefe, and Chief Executive Officer, Dr Vicky Vass.

02 At a Glance

Insights into the peer Support Group Sector, its reach and impact, and why it needs resourcing to continue to service the WA community.

03 Priority Areas

The key priorities for the peer Support Group Sector and recommended allocation in the 2024-2025 WA State Budget.

04 Beneath the Surface

Exploring the deeper issues faced by peer Support Group members which equally need to be addressed to support Sector sustainability and healthy communities.

05 Acknowledgements

Recognising key representatives from the peer Support Group Sector who informed the development of this State Budget Submission.



Foreword

FROM THE CHAIR & CEO

At ConnectGroups, this State Budget Submission acts as a critical element of our transparency and communication in assisting government budgeting. It provides a human touch to the otherwise technical and complex budget documents, making it accessible and relatable to communities and stakeholders. This acts as an opportunity for ConnectGroups to acknowledge the Peer Support Group sector and emphasise our commitment to improving services to the community.

We can see a bridge between our strategic plans and the financial allocation required to realise those plans. Ultimately, we encourage a collaborative spirit, urging the government and other stakeholders to work together with us in support of the organisation's mission and, by extension, the well-being of the Peer Support Group sector. In essence, we would like to showcase ConnectGroups' dedication to peer support and the betterment of the community we serve.



Brian O'Keefe
Chairperson



Dr. Vicky Vass
Chief Executive Officer

At a Glance

THE PEER SUPPORT GROUP SECTOR

Peer Support Groups arise in response to gaps in service provision, information, or community support.

They offer a unique level of support through shared experience, enabling individuals with a common condition or life adversity to offer emotional and practical support to one another. They provide support on a broad range of issues including chronic and genetic conditions, trauma, mental distress, and social isolation.

Peer Support Groups have the following attributes:

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

Peer Support Groups play a key role in the promotion of health and wellbeing,¹ community inclusion, and the value of lived experience. 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.

The peer Support Group Sector is contributing to reduced social isolation, improved social cohesion, reduction in visits to primary and secondary health services, providing a sense of hope, and giving participants access to new skills and information for their own mental and physical wellbeing.²

¹ Literature Review: Effectiveness of Self Help and Support Groups in Health Promotion 2015

² 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), 97-23.

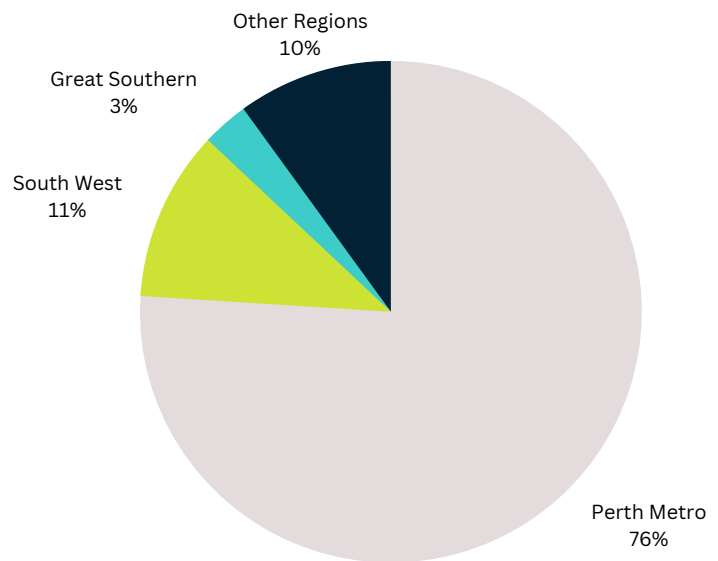
At a Glance

THE PEER SUPPORT GROUP SECTOR

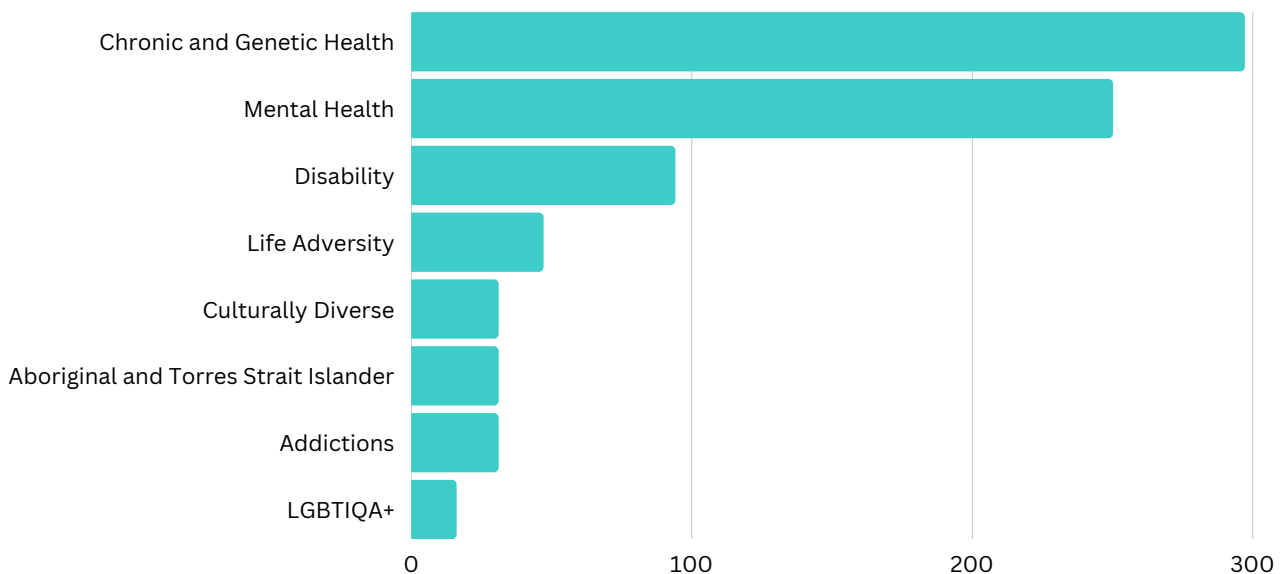


780 Support Groups
Supporting over
200,000
West Australians

Group Location



Target Groups



PRIORITY AREAS

- Resources-
- Capability-
- Demand-





RESOURCES

Peer Support Groups have the resources required to service the community.

CAPABILITY

Peer Support Groups have the capabilities to deliver quality services.



DEMAND

Peer Support Groups are recognised for their contribution and are valued.



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PRIORITY AREA 1

Peer Support Groups have the **resources** required to service the community



Peer Support Groups have the **resources** required to service the community.

The peer Support Group Sector continues to report being under-resourced, with group leaders and facilitators struggling to sustain their groups due to the high costs required to deliver their services. The Sector has reported higher pressures this year due to cost-of-living increases that have impacted on operational costs including venue hire, travel expenses, insurances, and catering. Additionally, groups have had significant difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers, which has contributed to the burden on group leaders who are also predominantly volunteers, and who have been forced to take on a larger workload to sustain their groups. As resource burdens rise, so too does the risk of group sustainability, with burn-out and lack of volunteers being strong contributing factors to group disbandment.

As a non-incorporated group, we are already disadvantaged by many restrictions that do not allow us to access funds to rent a space where we can meet more regularly. We are not visible within the community at all. If there was an opportunity for non-incorporated groups to apply for funding and have their own office space/shared space, it would make a difference.

Adelin Taylor - South West Migrant Women's Group



Solace WA is always on the lookout for volunteers. As all our members are grieving the loss of their partner, it's often difficult to find people who are ready, let alone willing to volunteer.

There are many costs involved in running a peer support group. It is a big challenge to find affordable meeting rooms that suit our needs and that have good public transport access and plenty of parking available.

Peter Francisco, Solace Grief Support Group WA

Peer Support Groups have the **resources** required to service the community.

RECOMMENDATION 1

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR NEIGHBOURHOOD AND COMMUNITY RESOURCE CENTRES

WA Neighbourhood and Community Resource Centres (Centres) are strong partners and supporters of the peer Support Group Sector, providing accessible and welcoming spaces at very low cost to groups delivering services within their local community. Most Centres are community managed not-for-profits and are not sustainably funded.⁴ This poses a risk to peer Support Groups currently utilising Centre spaces and to the communities they serve. Currently, approximately 24% of ConnectGroups' Support Group members are utilising Centre spaces for their group meetings, and ConnectGroups recommends ensuring the financial security of Centres by providing minimum baseline operational funding for all WA Centres to be able to operate, and providing adequate funding to Centres to enable peer Support Groups to use their facilities free of charge.

RECOMMENDATION 2

SUBSIDISED VENUE HIRE FOR LOCAL COUNCIL SPACES

Local Government Associations are another popular venue source for peer Support Groups, with approximately 10% of ConnectGroups' members currently utilising council-owned venues to host their regular meetings. However, the average cost of council-owned venues that are suitable for meeting spaces is approximately \$20 per hour at the community rate, which for groups meeting on a weekly basis (roughly 32% of ConnectGroups' members), equates to approximately \$2,080 per group, per year. It is also worth mentioning that groups meeting on a fortnightly or monthly basis who wish to provide more frequent support to their members may be unable to, due to venue hire expenses. ConnectGroups recommends Local Government Associations offer additional discounts or waived fees for peer Support Groups to support their continuation and reduce the burden on group leaders and facilitators to raise funds for vital activities.

⁴ Linkwest, State Budget Submission 2023-2024.

Peer Support Groups have the **resources** required to service the community.

RECOMMENDATION 3

INCREASED FUNDING FOR VOLUNTEER RECOGNITION AND CELEBRATION

There has been a significant and sustained fall in formal volunteering across Australia since 2014, and in WA this has resulted in a loss of over 150,000 volunteers over the 6 years to 2020⁵. Whilst volunteers give their time willingly, they thrive on recognition and validation of the positive difference they are making within the community, and it is essential that their contributions are celebrated and acknowledged regularly to ensure volunteer retention. Additionally, recognition campaigns and events provide an avenue for media publicity to promote the benefits of volunteering and volunteer opportunities, supporting community organisations, including peer Support Groups, to recruit and engage new volunteers. While funding is currently allocated to annual Thank a Volunteer Day grants, the allocation is not reflective of the number of volunteers and volunteer-involving organisations across WA, and ConnectGroups recommends increasing funding to ensure volunteers are sufficiently recognised, valued, and celebrated.

RECOMMENDATION 4

VOLUNTEER COUNSELLING SUBSIDIES

Peer Support Group facilitators often become ‘accidental’ counsellors in the group setting, having to manage complex discussions, and provide emotional support to group members who may be triggered and/or in crisis. As a result of this, facilitators report a need for debriefing to prevent feelings of overwhelm and burnout. While larger organisations have Employee Assistance Programs in place that volunteers can tap into, peer Support Groups as non-funded community supports do not have the resources to offer this support for their facilitators. ConnectGroups recommends introducing counselling subsidies for volunteers who engage with vulnerable community members as part of their role, to ensure they are supported, and to improve volunteer retention.

⁵ ACNC Australian Charities Report 7th Edition



PRIORITY AREA 2

Peer Support Groups
have the **capabilities**
to deliver quality
services

D.A.R.T.
Dialysis and Renal Transplant
Association



dialysisandrenaltransplant.org.au
www.facebook.com/DARTSGREY

D.A.R.T.
Dialysis and Renal Transplant
Association



Peer Support Groups have the **capabilities** to deliver quality services.

Peer Support Groups predominantly form when an individual, or small collection of individuals, establish their own initiative after failing to identify suitable support within their community. This often means that group founders have limited knowledge and skills relevant to group management and lack the capabilities to deliver effective groups. Specific capability needs reported by the peer Support Group Sector include high level governance, succession planning, strategic planning, marketing, and volunteer management. Peer Support Groups continue to report a need for nationally recognised qualifications for facilitators that will not only support the management of their groups, but will also elevate the group's reputation and support referral pathways. Without capabilities, peer Support Groups are limited in the level of support they can provide to their members and are delivering groups that do not have key governance systems in place, posing a risk to sustainability.

It's becoming rather evident from the positive impact of this year's ConnectGroups workshops, that continued training availability for group leaders would enable and encourage potential volunteers who would be more equipped and capable of helping those in need of support.

Julia McDonald, Trigeminal Neuralgia Support Group WA



As our organisation grows, we recognise the critical importance of providing more training opportunities for our group leaders, facilitators, and volunteers. We believe that access to nationally recognised qualifications for group facilitators would enhance our capabilities and improve the quality of support we provide to grandparents raising their grandchildren.

Alan Hoffman, Grandparents Raising Grandchildren WA

Peer Support Groups have the **capabilities** to deliver quality services.

RECOMMENDATION 5

SUSTAINABLE FUNDING FOR CONNECTGROUPS

While ConnectGroups is tasked with capability-building of WA peer Support Groups, the organisation's primary funding has seen minimal increase over the past four years, despite reporting a membership growth of 22% and a 29% growth in the regions. With this growth comes the need for ConnectGroups to increase its engagement to build trust and rapport with its membership base, to respond to member needs, and to ensure the Sector remains robust and sustainable in the long term; requirements that are difficult to achieve without resourcing that is reflective of the Sector's expansion. ConnectGroups recommends an increase in primary funding to allow the organisation to provide adequate support to the Sector, growth in key geographies, and to increase capability-building activities that will equip current and emerging group leaders and facilitators with the skills and knowledge to better manage their groups.

RECOMMENDATION 6

ACCESSIBLE NATIONALLY RECOGNISED QUALIFICATIONS

Certificate IV in Community Services scholarships for peer Support Group facilitators were historically offered through ConnectGroups in partnership with North Metro TAFE and supported by the Mental Health Commission. However, the program ended in 2022 due to format changes that would not suit the needs of ConnectGroups' members. Participation in this program resulted in Support Groups functioning more effectively, having greater impacts on their members, and experiencing increases in membership.⁶ ConnectGroups is seeking a partnership approach that allows for blended learning in a way that is accessible and meaningful to participants. Delivery in the original format of full scholarships is recommended, with minimised time commitments and small class environments. Having a nationally recognised qualification will not only increase the confidence and capability of peer Support Group facilitators, but will also reinforce the Sector's position as a reputable source of support, improve referral pathways and ensure better health and mental health outcomes for community members.

⁶ ConnectGroups' Certificate IV Programs Service Evaluation, 2020



PRIORITY AREA 3

Peer Support Groups
are **recognised** for
their contribution and
are **valued**



Peer Support Groups are **recognised** for their contribution and are **valued**.

Despite its significant contributions to community health and mental health outcomes, the peer Support Group Sector continues to be undervalued for its impact and lacks awareness within the wider community. The term 'peer support' is often mis-associated with outdated practices that don't resonate with modern society, and there is a strong need to promote peer support as an accessible, diverse, and reputable Sector. Peer Support Groups continue to report a lack of referral pathways, particularly through medical professionals, which is not only hindering group attendance rates, but is also detrimental to community members who are missing out on valuable peer supports that can support them emotionally and practically at the point of diagnosis when they are most isolated.



Every day of the year, on average 70 men are diagnosed with prostate cancer and 10 men die from it in Australia. And yet less than 5% of these men find the help they need at one of the incredible prostate cancer support groups available to them. We believe that either they simply do not know they exist, or they have misgivings about the functioning and inclusiveness of support groups.

Our medical professionals need to make more people aware of the services offered at support groups and to help break down the stigma of men not needing to reach out for help. Those who choose to attend prostate cancer support groups are amazed at the amount of information available to them and the incredible benefits of talking with a group of men, and their partners, who have been through the journey that they are facing.

Ken Bezant - PCaHELP

Peer Support Groups are **recognised** for their contribution and are **valued**.

RECOMMENDATION 7

FUNDING FOR A REFERRAL PATHWAYS PROGRAM

There is sufficient data to demonstrate that when individuals, families, and carers are supported by community groups and services, there is a decrease in the number of hospital re-admissions⁷. While WA Government has been allocating more resources, staffing, and funding to support public hospitals; creating referral pathways into the peer Support Group Sector would help to lower re-admission rates by linking individuals to community supports and services where they can learn to self-manage their conditions and avoid hospitalisation, reducing the burden on the hospital system and improving outcomes for community members. ConnectGroups recommends allocating funding towards a referral pathways ‘social prescribing’ program that will support patients, families, and carers to connect to peer Support Groups at the point of diagnosis/discharge. This will, in turn, free up time and, ultimately, funds from primary health care sources.

RECOMMENDATION 8

FUNDING TO EXPAND THE SUPPORT GROUPS AWARENESS WEEK CAMPAIGN

ConnectGroups currently delivers an annual Support Groups Awareness Week campaign, including an organic social media campaign, and several small-scale awareness activities funded via local community grants, which by nature of the size of activities can only have a limited impact. With larger substantial and sustainable funding, the campaign could support larger-scale events, including small grants to enable peer Support Groups to deliver their own campaign-aligned activities, and wider promotion to the community. The awareness campaign provides an opportunity to promote the existence and value of peer support and, with sufficient funding, can support community members to link into groups where they can access information and support that is closely aligned with their health and mental health needs.

⁷ Health System Sustainability, NHMRC Partnership Centre (n.d.). Social Prescribing: a rapid literature review to inform primary care policy in Australia.

Beneath the Surface

ACKNOWLEDGING KEY CONTRIBUTING ISSUES

While ConnectGroups advocates for the needs of Peer Support Groups, it is also essential to acknowledge key issues faced by group members and the wider community that equally contribute to the struggles of the Sector and act as barriers to community connection and healing. ConnectGroups represents groups across a range of target conditions and populations, and the below highlights just some of the issues captured in 2023 Sector consultations.

COST OF LIVING

The ongoing cost of living pressures continue to impact WA communities, with increasing rental prices, lack of rental properties and affordable housing, and energy costs burdening our most vulnerable community members. The community sector continues to see unprecedented demand for emergency relief, demonstrating a significant need for Government support. Peer Support Groups have reported lower rates of volunteering, increased crisis support for members, and struggles to cover group operational costs due to the cost of living increases.

IN THE REGIONS

Regional peer Support Groups report that their members have issues accessing health and mental health services, often needing to travel to Perth for specific services and procedures. In remote areas, people with specific conditions or disabilities report feeling more isolated due to lack of peers and services in their local community. Additionally, those in remote communities face issues of stigma and confidentiality as a result of living in small and close-knit communities. Digital accessibility is also a significant issue, acting as a barrier for online support and connection.

HEALTH

Health-related peer Support Groups report that their members struggle with access and affordability of medications, access to bulk-billing services, and wait-lists for key health services and medical procedures. The rare, genetic, and undiagnosed conditions community specifically face issues with isolation due to limited numbers of people in WA with the same or similar conditions, a lack of community understanding, and limited access to services and support due to either a lack of diagnosis of their condition and/or gaps in health practitioners' knowledge due to the rarity of conditions.

Beneath the Surface

ACKNOWLEDGING KEY CONTRIBUTING ISSUES

-  **MENTAL HEALTH**

Mental health-related peer Support Groups report that their members continue to be impacted by stigma and discrimination within the community. Wait lists and access to psychologists and mental health specialists are a significant issue, as well as access to NDIS which continues to be too difficult to navigate and not tailored to the needs of people with mental health conditions.
-  **DISABILITY**

Disability-related peer Support Groups report a lack of community understanding of disabilities, and a strong need for Government and NGOs to consult more regularly with the disability sector to ensure services are inclusive and accessible. They report that the NDIS continues to be complex to navigate and that there are still individuals who are falling through the gaps and failing to access the disability supports that they need.
-  **FIRST NATIONS PEOPLES**

First Nations Australians continue to face disadvantage in areas of health, education, employment, justice, and safety. There continues to be discrimination and racism towards Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and a lack of community understanding and empathy of the issues they face. Following the disappointing referendum outcome for a First Nations Voice to Parliament, there is a significant need to increase efforts towards reconciliation and closing the gap, and to increase the number of services and programs designed for and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities to improve outcomes.
-  **LGBTIQA+ PEOPLE**

LGBTIQA+ peer Support Groups report that their members continue to face stigma and discrimination, not only from the community, but also from medical professionals. There is a lack of access to appropriate healthcare and mental health services, particularly for the transgender community, and there is a strong need for education and awareness around LGBTIQA+ issues and promotion of accessible and inclusive LGBTIQA+ services.

Acknowledgements

ConnectGroups would like to acknowledge the below peer Support Groups and organisations who informed and contributed to this State Budget Submission.

4LifeSkills
Activate Mental Health
Australian Breastfeeding Association
Be My Koorda Aboriginal Corporation
Busselton Dunsborough Volunteer
Resource Centre
Busselton Hospice Care Inc.
Catholic Deaf and Hard of Hearing
Chronically Inspired - Life.Beyond.Disability
City of Busselton
City of Mandurah
Community's Refuge
Developmental Disability WA
Dialysis and Renal Transplant (DART)
Fire Seeds
Goldfields Pride
Grandparents Rearing Grandchildren WA
Greenbushes Acoustic
Health Consumers' Council WA
Hearing Voices WA
Holyoake
IDEAL
Investing in our Youth
Invisible Illnesses Inc.
Lamp Incorporated
Linkwest
Macular Disease Foundation Australia
Make It Special
Mandurah Angels Breast Cancer Social
Support Group
Mankind Project
Margaret River Regional Environment
Centre
Men's Health and Wellbeing WA
Mindful Margaret River
Miracle Babies Foundation
Neami National
Ngulla Koort Youth Group
Ngulla Koort Aboriginal Corporation
On My Feet
PCaHELP
Peel ADHD Parent Support
Peel Grief Support
People with Disabilities WA (PWdWA)
Prost! Exercise 4 Prostate Cancer Inc.
PTSD West
Scleroderma Australia
Sex Workers Education, Advocacy, and Rights
WA (SWEAR WA)
Shire of Augusta Margaret River
Solace Grief Support Group WA
Southsiders Prostate Cancer Support Group
South West Migrant Women's Group
Synapse
Syndromes Without a Name (SWAN)
The Compassionate Friends Mandurah
The Men's Wellness Wagon
The Recovery Collective
The Spiers Centre
Transplant Australia WA
Trigeminal Neuralgia Support Group
WA Aids Council
WA Council of Social Services
WA Peer Supporters Network
Western Australian Insulin Takers (WAIT)
Volunteering WA
XYY Syndrome Association Australia Inc.
Zonta Club of Dunsborough

References

1. Literature Review: Effectiveness of Self Help and Support Groups in Health Promotion 2015
2. 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), 97-23.
3. WA Council of Social Service, Cost of Living Report 2022
4. Linkwest, State Budget Submission 2023-2024.
5. ACNC Australian Charities Report 7th Edition
6. ConnectGroups' Certificate IV Programs Service Evaluation, 2020
7. Health System Sustainability, NHMRC Partnership Centre (n.d.). Social Prescribing: a rapid literature review to inform primary care policy in Australia.

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