

# PEAKS IN TRANSITION: COVID-19 AND THE FUTURE OF THE NGO SECTOR

## WHAT DID WE DO?

The research process was conducted over the period of May to November 2021, which involved:

- 22 interviews with CEOs and senior executive leads from 20 peaks and NGOs
- 30 survey responses
- Analysis of published reports and other public documents

**Note:** Participating NGOs had peak-like functions i.e. were national, had coordination and advocacy roles. They also had multiple sites of service provision or member organisations that were service providers. These NGOs are referred to as 'peaks' in this report. An alliance is a group of NGOs and peaks.

## FINDINGS FROM THE INTERVIEWS

A majority of interviewees reported on the pre-existing challenges between peak bodies and government. Many described issues of power imbalance, threats to funding and a decline in meaningful engagement, despite the language of partnership and collaboration being used.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, the nature of these relationships improved with many interviewees reporting a higher level of engagement with government counterparts becoming more frequent, respectful and less tokenistic. Embrace of technology meant that communication among government and frontline workers was easier, with advocacy by peaks resulting in a flow of funds to frontline services. Peak bodies also proved valuable partners of government in bringing real time data about on-the-ground COVID-19 experiences and service distribution. This resulted in more collaboration and solutions-focused approaches from collaborative work between government and peaks, as government officials opened themselves up to working directly with peaks to broker solutions to respond to immediate threats and systemic problems. Where this was at its best, there was diminishment in bureaucracy as peaks worked directly with government personnel who were authorised to make decisions with peaks.

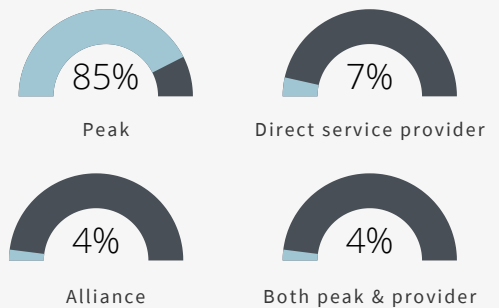
On the other hand, peak bodies faced additional challenges as COVID-19 measures thrust their roles into sharp relief. Interviewees reported issues of intensive work schedules, staff burnout and lack of funding for peak coordination and functions. Peaks also observed gaps within their internal structures and social services sectors to meet these new challenges. This coincided with a lack of capacity within the bureaucracy to implement effective solutions – often resulting in government applying a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to their initiatives.

## WHAT IS THE RESEARCH ABOUT?

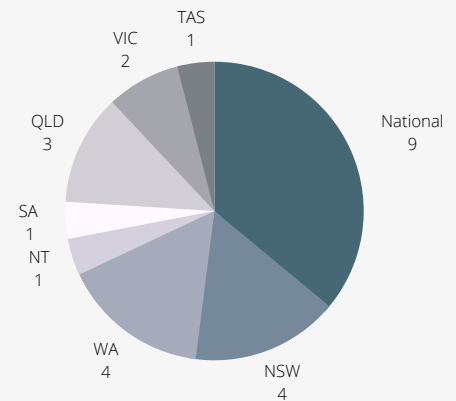
Led by A/Prof Wendy Foote (University of Newcastle) with Dr Jenny Mason and A/Prof Amy Conley Wright (The University of Sydney), this research aims to capture the experiences of peak bodies and large non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Australia during the COVID-19 crisis. This summary captures some of the preliminary findings that relate to Government/Peak collaboration alongside insights raised during the stakeholder consultation meeting that discussed the preliminary findings.

## FINDINGS FROM THE SURVEYS

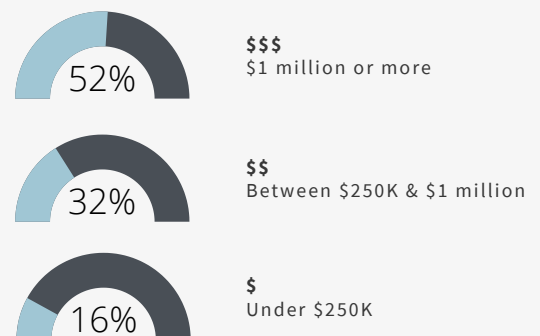
### How does your organisation define itself? (n=27)



### Number of national and state organisations (n=25)



### Funding base of organisations (n=25)



**WHAT ARE SOME STRATEGIES USED BY PEAKS TO ENGAGE WITH GOVERNMENT?**

Range of engagement (relationships with people in power)				
<b>Attributes</b>	Collective leadership	Partnership	Advocacy to influence	Advocacy designed for public pressure
<b>Environment</b>	Clear authorising environment	Clear authorising environment	No agreement on issues	No agreement on issues/agreement but no action
<b>Relationships</b>	Shared leadership - Directly reporting to minister: problem solving and sharing data from the emerging situation re: immediate needs	Joint messaging - Shared forums, direct and immediate communication from Government to service provider through peak membership networks	External influence - Advocacy behind closed doors, in meetings, lobbying. Member letter writing, emailing Ministers.	Public challenge - After attempts to influence fail and critical issues
<b>Communication</b>	Frequent and informal communications	Frequent and formal - in organised forums	Information sharing from the organisation to the person in power	Critical of government

**WHAT DID WE LEARN TO INFORM FUTURE APPROACHES?**

Many of the interviewees shared various opportunities for their organisations and the sector in a post-COVID environment. This was expanded upon during the stakeholder consultation meeting, on the question of ‘What is the future for peaks?’. These include:

- Strengthening relationships with government as a pre-planning measure to respond to future crises
- Establishing networks and collaborating with other peak bodies to advocate on sector issues
- Restructuring internal staffing and operational models for organisations to be better equipped for crisis responses
- Implementing active processes to gather and feed sector intelligence from a grassroots level into decision making spaces
- Building partnerships with community groups and leaders to harness their local expertise for place-based initiatives
- Implementing the innovations of online meetings as a tool for staff and clients, as well as maintaining flexibility of staff ‘working-from-home’
- Leveraging government expectations to include emergency management planning as part of core business for peak bodies
- Formalising the role of the community sector in federal and state emergency management responses
- Embedding various learnings from COVID-19 pandemic to inform long-term proactive emergency responses, rather than being short-term and reactive

**WHAT DOES THIS RESEARCH SHOW ABOUT THE ROLE OF PEAKS?**

In summary, the role of peak bodies during the COVID-19 response can be described in four elements:

1. Brokering solutions
2. Bringing parties together
3. Having direct access to senior bureaucrats
4. Having direct access to Ministers, to understand the political process

Through diverse methods of research, advocacy and service provision, peak bodies play a distinct role in the social services sector. This research highlights the significant contributions of these organisational bodies in supporting vulnerable populations during the COVID-19 emergency management crisis. Looking ahead to a post-COVID environment, it is important to consider how the roles, responsibilities and relationships of peak bodies will grow and evolve in Australia’s social and political climate.

**NEXT STEPS**

The research team will publish a journal article, based on these data findings. If you have further questions or suggestions, please do not hesitate to contact our research team on [peaksproject@newcastle.edu.au](mailto:peaksproject@newcastle.edu.au). We thank you for your insights and participation in this research.