



## Moving From Engagement to Partnership

Following years of public hearings and written submissions, Victoria's Royal Commission into Mental Health handed down sixty-five recommendations in February 2022. These recommendations cited a broken and fragmented system, which tended to operate from a place of crisis and failed to provide holistic, adequate and timely support to those experiencing mental distress and/or addiction and their families/supporters/carers/kin.

The need for the mental health system to undergo a complete rebuild was recognised, and a new way of engaging and collaborating with all stakeholders within the sector was required. As a result, the Victorian Department of Health (The Department) sought out recommendations on how the mental health system can move from an engagement to a partnership approach.

This document summarises the findings regarding the **Foundations for Partnership** from fourteen community conversations inviting perspectives from people with lived experience of mental distress (LE) and/or alcohol and other substance addiction (AOD); families, supporters, and carers of those directly experiencing these challenges (FSC); and people working within the sector (Lived Experience Department, Community Peaks and Agencies). Some conversation participants additionally identified as a Young Person (YP), as part of the LGBTQ community, or having a Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) background. The framework for discussion and analysis was developed by First Nations people, using a First Nations partnership lens.

### Foundations for Partnership

#### **Groundwork ('Doing the work', understanding the why/context, Understanding power and privilege, racism, colonisation):**

How partnership is negotiated and established from the start is critical. Partnership happens when two or more people come together as equals. It is not about one person's opinions winning over another. Everyone must be willing to learn from each other and to cooperatively lay the foundations for it to work.

*Good partnership feels like having a shared home base and being able to explore out and take risks with the backing of the group. (LEDep)*

*The more effort in groundwork, the more hope the partnership has of being a strong one. (FSC AOD)*

*A lot of groundwork needs to be done first before entering a partnership. (FSC AOD)*



All voices, even radical voices, not just the ones that are easiest to hear or sit easily alongside pre-existing perspectives, need to be welcomed. Successful partnerships require organisational readiness, ensuring that policies and procedures uphold and sustain partnerships.

*Cannot just change the word from engagement to partnership – there needs to be meaningful action. (FSC)*

*Always an absence of radical voices... not a safe space to voice those perspectives. (LE)*

Partnership is a relationship, with clear shared understandings and common goals, shared work and shared possibilities, shared responsibilities. Partners come alongside each other equally, “walking side-by-side” (FSC AOD), feeling valued and being valued. Partnership should achieve something better for everyone (more than the sum of its parts). It’s about “working together to achieve the same overall goal or create an overarching pathway or plan to achieve an outcome” (LE). Partnerships are “driven by the collective why – strong vision and purpose, joint equal stake...” (LEDep).

*Partnership is involvement from beginning to end with equal voice and power in decision making. (FSC)*

*...working together as equals, equal say, all cards on the table, all players in the room, coming up with a plan and running with it. (LE)*

### Equality, equity, power and privilege

How are equality and equity negotiated? Transparent conversations around barriers to equality and equity in partnership are essential. This includes people recognising their own privilege and actively working to rectify power imbalances. In partnership, everyone needs to be willing to identify and check their own privilege (e.g., gender, class, race, and culture). With power and privilege – people who have it often don’t realise it.

Power differentials need to be acknowledged up front and equity needs to be built in, and this can only happen if power and privilege are recognised and owned. Simply having access to resources equals privilege.

*Stripping away the layers of power in the room... you are just there to get the best outcome for the problem. (FSC)*

*[Power]...shows through in the way people speak... valuing and acknowledging the existence of stigma and discrimination and that it’s ongoing - aiming for spaces free from discrimination while acknowledging the ableist environment. (LGBTQ)*



Power-sharing requires acknowledgement of power differentials, “give and take” (FSC), asking and listening. It is essentially about an equal relationship, an “equal playing field” (YP), creating an “authentic and collaborative” (YP) space.

In one conversation (FSC), the word ‘power’ evoked some complex and negative associations.

*For me power-sharing feels like vulnerability, because often, when I’m going in trying to get things done, it feels like vulnerability to ‘give up’ some of my power. (FSC).*

*I don’t want to have power; I want respect and responsibility. (FSC).*

*Understanding power as more systemic and the layers under that and affected by this. (FSC).*

This group also identified that power “evokes a sense of war”, “us versus them”, and “negativity” (FSC). The same group additionally noted that “power does need to be talked about” and “made explicit” (FSC).

Power-sharing was seen as a powerful concept necessary for successful partnership.

### Inclusivity

Partnership requires the conscious and intentional practice of inclusivity while challenging ideas and practices that are not inclusive.

*Addressing access barriers, how does that get negotiated? Space to talk about how spaces and conversations are created and set up [for] a partnership at the get go. What do people need to show up as themselves and in a way that is meaningful to them? (LE)*

### Indicators of partnership

There are many ways to partner and “lots of different types of partnerships” (CPA). While partnership is not a singular thing there are some common indicators of true partnership including; payment, equal influence, learning from each other, and being involved in decision-making from the start.

### **Recognising and embracing multiple views/perspectives:**

Ensuring, valuing and respecting diversity is critical to partnership. Acknowledging that groups (e.g., young people, culturally diverse people) are not homogenous – that they are “diverse and valuable” (YP) – and that “different perspectives are [as valuable] as traditional ones” (CPA).

*I think it's about respecting differences and similarities, respecting different perspectives and someone else's experience or world, and I think that's what it comes*



*down to, recognising and hearing. Whilst you may have differences, different experiences or different opinions or different takes on things. There's a level of understanding and respect for those differences. (LEDep)*

*Not about normativity but diversity. (CALD)*

It is important to acknowledge who is and who is not in the room and to make space for the voices of those who are often excluded; both “ensuring no-one is left behind” (YP) and recognising the wealth of knowledge present.

*Diverse voices elevated and listened to. (YP)*

*Intersectionality is seen as a strength. (CPA)*

Opportunities must exist for “our voices [of lived experience] to be heard by everyone... not just each other” (LE). Lived expertise needs to be equal to professional expertise at all levels, including high-level decision-making bodies.

*Different but equal. (FSC)*

Good partnership facilitates the sharing of information and layered, dynamic perspectives. And it respects those different perspectives.

*Approaching all ideas with an open mind, trying to understand other people's views and why you disagree with them, and what leads to you to disagree with them. (YP)*

Recognising and embracing multiple perspectives requires an open mind and honest, open communication. Listening to understand each other and moving away from ideas of the “ideal lived experience [representative]” (CPA) are essential. There is a need to be able to engage in healthy, robust debate, and to be able to disagree.

Explicitly recognising and acknowledging the skills, expertise, strengths that everyone brings to the partnership is also important.

*Embracing that we are different, and we bring different things to the table. (LE AOD)*

*I think there's an opportunity for leaders to facilitate, highlight individuals' unique strengths acknowledging that each person has different but equally important value to bring in partnerships. (LEDep)*

## Access

Allowances and adjustments are essential to enable equal involvement in partnerships.



Accessibility for marginalised groups may include financial support, emotional support, accessible language services, technological assistance etc.

Necessary adjustments must be developed through effective communication with marginalised groups and aim to provide “...inclusivity across the board” (LGBTQ)

*Diversity is needed. A level of accommodation to support culturally and linguistically diverse, indigenous population to partner and for white/non-indigenous people to work equitably with these groups. (LE AOD)*

*Using a critical lens and being aware of gaps in the system as well as missed opportunities and audience – for example young carers being missed and falling through the gaps. (FSC)*

### **(Broader) relationship building and trust. Understanding of who is best placed to participate and in what decision-making capacity:**

Change needs to start at the top, with change agents at all levels from the top down (so that resources are advocated for, funded adequately and designed appropriately in partnership with those impacted).

*Would need some big shifts in how people think and work. For example, an organisation has people looking at a new logo; their idea of consulting is sending out a bunch of logos that professionals have developed. [Equal] partnership would be having people co-create and have a say in the meaning and look! Not having people tweak around the edges. So it's also about who's involved and at what point. (LE)*

Equitable partnerships need to be more relational, providing enough time and being safe enough for everyone to speak up. Trust building, relationship building, and building a shared vision are all critical. Partnership implies a longer-term, ongoing relationship, which means that time is required for rapport and building meaningful, negotiated relationships. Partnerships need to find common ground and create the space to do things differently (without feeling threatened by this).

*Partnership is having equal 'stake' in a project/task - it is joint problem solving towards one shared vision. (LEDep)*

*Often projects have an 'engagement process built in'... but then it's 'done'... but for it to be relevant... [it] needs to be ongoing. (LGBTQ)*

*Engagement is where you collaborate with people because they have to be in the room. Partnership is where you work because people want to be in the room. (YP)*



*If the ground work and scene setting can be done... that can be an investment in smoother sailing and processes will save time in the long run. (LGBTQ)*

All partners need to be recognised as essential and equal partners in their own right, as experts, regardless of seniority or titles. Everyone has different experiences; people need to talk with and listen to a range of people rather than having one token representative. More work needs to be done through and with community leaders and community events, utilising everyone's skills and knowledge.

*Partnership implies multiple people or organisations working together, can't have a partnership with one person in it. (FSC)*

Partnerships need more lived experience and peer roles built in, and people need open invitations to participate (*"rather than an EOI (Expression of Interest) that questions worthiness"*).

*People from minority backgrounds represented by people who are from their community. (CPA)*

Connection with communities is crucial to ensuring people are aware of opportunities to partner.

*Some people, the communities, there is a connection between representing the community... and also thinking about Aboriginal communities where it is collective. (CPA)*

## Foundations for Partnership - First Nations perspectives

Partnerships are fundamentally a relational commitment that need the flexibility and formal and informal focus to support one another, to grow and evolve over time, and that often, funding cycles, change to key personnel, and the changing nature of government priorities is at times not conducive to this. Also, that overall, more time is needed to get to know each other.

*Building relationships and trust is paramount, touch base with us, get to know us and our why, break down barriers and this will make people feel comfortable to participate.*

*You feel culturally safe when you don't have to explain yourself. You feel understood, and you know you, your culture, Lore, and knowledge systems will be respected.*



*My experience has been like talking to a brick wall. I feel that I get shoved away into the too hard basket. There has been no understanding for many years. None of my mental health practitioners could understand why I would be upset. I would leave feeling so open and raw. It made feel worse and I would be back out in the big, wild, and scary world. It was terrifying.*

*The foundation of a good partnership between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people is respect. That's where you will see real change that will last for generations.*

Government and mainstream services must understand the historical, social, community and political context of First Nations communities, including the ongoing impact of colonisation, racism, power, and privilege and for this to be seen as essential, and not an optional add on. It is important that governments not only develop an understanding but begin to develop an appreciation, and celebration of the uniqueness, wisdom and diversity of varying First Nation nations, clans, families, and communities, particularly considering Treaty conversations occurring in 2023.

*Understanding the differences in communities, we are diverse. Australia is a big country we have different dialects and different ways. When you tick the box saying you are Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, I find many people make assumptions. They need to reflect on how to be culturally sensitive. If you are culturally unsafe it can trigger people. Any doctor just needs to be aware of the things they say and the impact.*