



## 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 **Governance** and **Cultural Governance** of the 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.

### Governance – Terms of Reference / “Rule Book”

#### Context - set the scene:

##### Purpose

Shared goals, shared values, and clear outcomes are considered critical to clarifying the purpose of a partnership. A clearly defined purpose additionally supports the other components of governance (people, culture, use of resources, etc) and sets the scene for an agreed pathway forward together.

*Partnership needs to be a clearly defined, mutually beneficial arrangement with shared goals. (FSC)*

*Work needs to be done before hand - setting the scene. (LE AOD)*

*Level of congruency needs to be there in relation to setting expectations and values. (LE AOD)*



## People

Lived experience leadership and clinical leadership need to operate as a bridge, doing the work together as allies. The onus cannot be on people with lived experience to do the work; it requires the presence of allies and leaders and champions in non-lived experience roles. All partners need to be recognised as essential and equal partners in their own right, as experts, regardless of seniority or titles.

*Should have a balance between participants and each other to understand roles within the group. (LE)*

*Partnerships listen to the voice of the small and the large and hear from more than one type of voice; it means agreeing after talking together to see what might be the greatest good... (FSC)*

It is additionally critical to recognise “*the intersectional needs of all involved and that mental health/AOD occurs in a context of other lived experience e.g., trauma*” (FSC AOD).

## Culture

The culture of the partnership will be built upon the purpose and influenced by the people involved. Critical factors contributing to an ideal culture for partnership include transparency, facilitated power sharing, flexibility, and equity (of time, space, pay).

*Intrinsic part of partnership is relationship. (FSC)*

*To facilitate power sharing there must be transparency on the ‘rules of engagement’. (FSC)  
... a safe and accessible sharing environment, respect and transparency from all parties, equal opportunity for input and balance of power. (LE)*

Consistently, both time & power are identified as important factors in partnership. Both need to be discussed and negotiated for the good of the partnership.

The nature of the partnership culture needs to be open and inclusive of diverse perspectives, experiences, and knowledge. It is important that everyone is comfortable and supported to contribute.

*Interplay of unique sets of expertise, and perspectives. (FCS)*

*All participants should feel comfortable to present, add to and confront/oppose ideas made by each other, within reasons and in goal of creating equitable environment. (LE)*

*Opening up conversation spaces, more dialogue. (LE)*



*Equity accounts for the disadvantage and challenges for people who are participating from lived experience. (LGBTQ)*

*Housekeeping at the beginning to reach agreement then checking in. (LGBTQ)*

### The wider environment

*Support and focus on community support. (LE AOD)*

*[It is important to also...] focus on friends and family as part of partnership. (LE AOD)*

*Importance of families/carers where appropriate also. (LE)*

### Timeframes

Flexibility and the need for the real amount of time required for partnerships to succeed was stressed. There is a concern that time is limited and that timeframes are locked in. But ensuring space for the relationships and dialogue identified as critical to building the right culture requires time – and just how much may be an unknown:

*What about timeframes? Who decides the time - is it time-limited, what if we need more?  
Can we agree on a time? (LGBTQ)*

*May need to change the time frames. (LGBTQ)*

*Time - it takes time to partner with people. (FSC)*

### Resources

Time is just one of the resources identified critical to the governance of a partnership.

*Time...partnering with people takes time, and other resources, as well as money. (FSC)*

Adequate funding for all aspects of the partnership is essential, as is the “accountable use of funds” (LE AOD) and “using funding (together)” (FSC).

*Partnership would mean discussing and agreeing on how to use funding to create the greatest good, including work and preventative (supports / care), as well as active treatment. (FSC)*

Ensuring the resourcing of partnership participants was also noted, with references to removing financial barriers and facilitating digital access where needed.



*Multiple methods of communication and dialogue to increase capacity to contribute. (LE)*

### **Content - 'what you do':**

Conversation participants were not directly asked to comment on how the partnership might be governed and have thus not provided any direct guidance or opinion about what structure might be best for this process (e.g., representative, advisory, decision making, engagement). However, discussion points raised that are relevant to the governance of the partnership are collected here to add to the information gathered in the literature review.

### Structure

The notion of 'engagement' was contrasted with 'partnership' in a number of conversations. Engagement was considered to be "a bit more impersonal" and "tokenistic", with partnership emphasising a more "collaborative" and "empowering" approach, involving considerable "power sharing" (LGBTQ).

*Engagement can be just about having a say – people are not involved in the whole process. (FSC)*

*In engagement the discussion points are usually set or defined by the organisers. (FSC)*

*Engagement means you're at the table, your opinions are heard, but there's no responsibility of the decision maker to use what you bring. (LE)*

*Engagement: being 'engaged' with – as if it's a task and duty to 'engage' with the other. Like the other is a problem that you have to engage with. (LE)*

### Strategy

Important principles that need to underpin the partnership governance strategy include a shared approach to agenda-setting and decision-making, shared power, agreed end goals and value-based actions, overarching collaboration, and acknowledgement of the time required for transformation.

### Rules

A number of areas pertaining to governance rules were referenced in the conversations, covering key considerations such as the need for defined roles and responsibilities, decision-making and dispute resolution processes, and accountability.



### **Defined roles and responsibilities**

Clearly defined roles (LE AOD, LE), negotiated responsibilities and clear boundaries (FSC) and defined outcomes (LE) were all identified as critical for establishing a good partnership.

### **Decision-making**

Emphasis is placed on shared decision-making, where all partners are considered equal, and have the time, information, and power to contribute to the decision-making process.

*That nobody can have decisions executed without agreement from all partners. (FSC AOD)*

*Decision balance as a touchstone - decision doesn't rest on one person and consensus can be achieved. (LE AOD)*

*Partnership would mean discussing and agreeing on how to use funding to create the greatest good. (FSC)*

*[Partners] should be able to come with ideas, but not have an outcome set in stone. Then together can build iterative processes (conversations) that use a variety of feedback / techniques strategies to go back and check meaning with community, continuous checking in, not just hearing from people once. (LE)*

*In a partnership, decisions are not made to favour one group, rather compromise to fit the best interests of all involved in a specific environment/situation/scenario. (LGBTQ)*

### **Dispute resolution**

The need for a clear dispute resolution process, agreed and accepted by all parties, (FSC) was referenced.

### **Accountability**

Accountability was recognised as an important part of partnership. Ensuring accountability for use of funds (LE AOD), follow through on promises made (LE AOD), and review “of the rules (agreements) of the partnership and that they are fair and being applied (fairly)” (FSC) were stressed.



## Resources

Critical resources required to facilitate partnership governance included suitable financial resourcing, facilitated access to information, and relevant training. The importance of considering how resources are shared was also noted (LE AOD).

### **Financial resourcing**

Participants noted the necessity of equitable pay and “valuing our time and expertise with adequate financial reimbursement.” (LE)

### **Information and communication**

*Multiple methods of communication and dialogue [are required] to increase capacity to contribute. (LE)*

*Reasonable adjustments [must be made]. Whether for modes of giving and sharing and documenting information. (LGBTQ)*

*Continuity and consistency, both in engagement and communication. Regular updates, providing understanding of timelines and outcomes and working together towards a common goal. (LE)*

### **Training**

*Co-design training should be a must within systems that engage in quality or service improvement/development. (LE)*

*Paid training and development for Lived Experience [workers]. (FSC)*

*More peer support training that is easily accessible and financially accessible would be beneficial. (LE)*

*....opportunities to upskill and learn those [partnering] processes. (LE)*

### **Import for partnership principles to impact greater organisational governance (beyond just any formal partnerships):**

Conversation participants raised an additional implication for authentic partnerships: the principles upon which they are based should permeate the organisations that are involved in the partnership, and not solely be evident within the governance of the partnership only.

*Ensuring it's [partnership] ingrained in organisational policies. (FSC)*



*Clinical services and community services need greater partnership, collaboration, and coordination. (FSC)*

*Culture is one of the hardest things to change! Health care services built up of teams and tribes, have culture that is not accepting of power sharing and partnership. (FSC)*

*Organisational key performance indicators and quality measures need to reflect actual values of partnership, power sharing and people, which it isn't currently. (FSC)*

### **Accessibility and reasonable adjustments:**

Ensuring equity of access to partnership opportunities and participation in partnership processes, including reasonable adjustments, supports people's right to participate. Key points were:

*To be able to have one's access needs listened to and respected - a good. (LGBTQ)*

*Reasonable adjustments for accessibility - information provided not just in written form, ahead of time, listening to the needs and doing the work to accommodate them. (LGBTQ)*

*Consider the extent of measures that are needed for all to be able to engage equally, regardless of needs. (LGBTQ)*

*What's the 'bottom line'? (LGBTQ)*

*What each individual needs to have equal partnership. (LGBTQ)*

*Not having to navigate their own needs PLUS the actual subject of the partnership. (LGBTQ)*

*Essentially, if everyone has equal opportunity, participation isn't equitable - start with the individual and what they need to partner - navigating those needs. (LGBTQ)*

*The emotional labour of asking for one's needs. (LGBTQ)*

*How exhausting it can be to reach a point where can participate on an equal basis, hard to sustain. (LGBTQ)*

*Exhausting to do all the extra to be 'okay' or to access that opportunity.... so exhausted form trying to be 'on the level'. (LGBTQ)*

### **Recognising identity**

*This goes the same for gender identity and pronouns. Gender is fluid and can change over time. And such changes should be embraced as positive growth. (LGBTQ)*



## Governance – First Nations perspectives

For a partnership to achieve mutually agreed outcomes, it must dedicate sufficient time and care to develop a framework to make decisions using shared language, commonly referred to as a Terms of Reference.

Almost all First Nations people interviewed felt strongly about having the time and space to jointly plan the rule book and terms of reference stating how without this, there is unclear scope, and engagement principles broadly. However, one person offered a contrary solution, which is that organisations don't necessarily have to wait to do this with governments, they can get clarity on what's important to them, and develop predetermined engagement principles.

It was widely agreed that this partnership tool was a non-negotiable and helps to prevent government assumptions about the nature and capacity in which a First Nations person participates in partnership, recognising that a First Nations person is not to be treated as a monolithic stakeholder, meaning one view, does not widely reflect, all First Nations people.

By spending time understand this, the partnership can understand which diverse views, perspectives, and interested are being represented. And that at times, governments might need to have multiple First Nations people participate in its partnership.

Within this context, developing a Terms of Reference and understanding cultural governance, must be viewed in relation to another. See also Cultural Governance.

*We need the time and space to develop a shared rule book or way of working.*

*A jointly developed terms of reference helps with shared decision making and accountability'*

## Cultural Governance

**The structures created to make decisions about how First Nations' knowledge and concepts are recognised, maintained, and promoted, working together for collective/community-based health, and the definition of good health, which is more than the absence of disease or illness; it is a holistic concept that includes physical, social, emotional, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing, for both the individual and the community.**

*Engagement can be tokenistic, a means to an end; and can be developed by outsiders e.g., non-Aboriginal people developing engagement with Aboriginal people could be misinformed. (LE)*





Historically, cultural governance has not been widely understood or honoured by government in project timelines, and assumptions about First Nations communities, its membership, its governance, and who can represent its views are overlooked.

First Nations communities have a long history of working together. Cultural governance is about understanding the rules and norms and cultural protocols, which exist prior to the partnership being established.

Cultural governance is also about providing realistic time for collective community decision making. A genuine partnership must allow time and space for First Nations people to talk amongst themselves, their families, nations, clans, and groups, to make collective decisions before going back to the broader group.

### Cultural Governance – First Nations perspectives

All participants talked to elements of cultural governance and pointed to the importance of governments and mainstream services understanding and accounting for Aboriginal two-way governance in project timelines.

*Timelines are a big issue as they are not fit for meaningful consultation. These processes must be led by First Nations Elders or you won't get buy in. These things take time.*

This insight affirmed the idea that when governments work alongside community and cultural governance is valued and incorporated into decision-making structures and project timelines it achieves better outcomes for community. It was also heard that cultural awareness training would build the understanding of the diversity and kinship networks of Aboriginal people which is important context to have when forming a partnership.

While some participants didn't talk to cultural governance explicitly, it was often implied through examples of where cultural governance has not been honoured by government in project timelines and the need to allow realistic time for community decision making was emphasised. It was suggested that cultural governance was about providing time and space for Aboriginal people to talk amongst themselves to make decisions before going back to the broader group. The Indigenous Governance Toolkit is a practical framework for any partnership between the government and Aboriginal communities and should form the basis of a partnership model.

*It's important we have time to develop informal relationships, as well as a shared understanding of how to achieve shared goals.*