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 **Achieving Shared Goals** 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.

Achieving Shared Goals

Clear rule book, adequate resourcing, and time to develop the working relationships:
Partnership is working together to a common cause giving users power of input, negotiated into a jointly considered outcome. It has an increased level of formality and needs clear expectations and accepted norms.

Partnership is something you could not do on your own and aims to achieve shared goals by having a shared understanding, ensuring all partners are wanting the same outcomes. The same investment and resources need to be put in by all partners, with everyone working from the same platform and putting heads together to be goal focussed about coming up with solutions.

Access to all information and resources is essential, so that relevant questions can be asked and all partners can be in the conversation. To be an equal partner, a shared language is needed such as an understanding of pronouns, interpreters, understanding jargon and acronyms.

> *Making things clear before you enter the room is important and the reduction of bureaucratic 'goop'; for example, acronyms infrequently used, regular, easy to understand language the gold standard as opposed to academic language. (LE)*

…if you don't understand what is being said you're behind before you even start, and much harder to speak up & to speak truth to power. (LE)

For me, the feeling of empowerment [in a partnership] can be exhilarating when you know you've made a positive difference. (FSC AOD)

There is evidence of integrity, authenticity, mutual respect and giving and receiving towards a goal in good partnering. Responsibilities need to be clear and working together with equal status, less formal and more fluid, collaboration, and unity of purpose (AOD LE). Partnerships need regular collaborative conversations along the way to reassess the goals and timelines because these will change, i.e., collaborative flexibility (LGBTQ).

Environments for coproduction need to be established within services with people who are committed to partnerships and service transformation. It might mean changing procedures so that people with lived experience have sign off on decisions.

It is recognised that there will always be more to be done - it will be a process but must make small steps. Partnership needs to be individualised (not everyone fits the one box), and have all partners collaborate on small, agreed steps - not even always looking at the larger goals, but keeping an eye on the steppingstones along the way. *"To come alongside each other, sharing and respecting each other's resources and knowledge, with all parties feeling heard, and trusting that each person's contribution will form part of the result"* (FSC).

Two-way governance and decision making:

Partnership is about equal buy in and equal desire for the best outcome, mutually understood goals and arriving at a mutual understanding. There is a need to agree on the problem and the desired outcome. It is also about being aware of one's own and one's partners' limitations and helping each other to overcome them. True power sharing involves genuine decision making. Decision-making is done together making collaborative decisions (power with) and creating new understandings together (CPA). People need to have equal decision-making rights.

Partnership is a two-way highway. (LEDep)

It comes down to the final decisions - that there's an equal partnership and not just the development of a project - but that the outcome, the final decisions are not then handballed to someone else who has the final say or makes changes (LEDep). Partnering with people with lived experience from beginning to end is critical. What is needed is sustained involvement (not just at the start), listening to the voices continuously, and ongoing reflection on how to take on board lived expertise.

Shared understanding [is important] and share division of what we are trying to achieve and how we are going to get there. (FSC AOD)

Shared responsibilities, shared understanding, shared respect. (LEDep)

Putting young people in positions of power and giving decision making opportunities. (YP)

Addressing work cultures:

It is acknowledged that changing work cultures and frameworks to address issues related to equity, diversity and intersectional oppression is required for culturally competent partnerships. The involvement of lived expertise in partnerships needs to be recognised and supported by continuing to create lived experience paid jobs and a platform provided for ongoing support. The value of lived experience needs to be a part of training curriculums and supported at an education level, and all partners need to be educated about the lived experience workforce and the value add it brings.

Providing relevant professional development requirements can assist everyone involved in partnerships to re-examine their potentially rigid beliefs, values, and filters through which they look at the situation. However, the responsibility for educating partners can't always lie with people with lived experience. The need to 'educate up' too often sits with lived experience workers. It raises the question of whose responsibility it is to educate for partnership. Adequate allocation of time, funds, and capacity to build meaningful participation for all involved is fundamental.

Achieving Shared Goals – First Nations perspectives

Almost all spoke about how government processes were too onerous, rigid, and pre-defined and didn't allow for agility and community responsiveness, despite reporting against such measurables. Working together in an equal and effective partnership requires mutual understanding, reciprocity, and both parties need to be equally resourced.

Funding and reporting were raised respectively as key barriers to effective partnerships, by almost all sector workers. The overarching sentiment being that the administrative component of running a partnership interfered with the delivery of the partnership activities.

Many of the First Nations sector workers shared how they are expected to report on 'widgets' and almost all program dollar expenditure, but in written form, 'which is contrary to how our people view experience'. Some spoke about the notion of data sovereignty, suggesting 'why can't reporting be visual. Reporting could be a 15–20-minute compilation of stories/videos/photos and show the outcomes better then line items and budgets.'

When it came to funding, one person made very insightful and practical suggestions around extending funding to 10-year cycles to empower community organisations to create long-term and

sustainable solutions to social & emotional wellbeing and intergenerational trauma impacting communities. Asserting that long-term change requires a long-term commitment.

> *Embed cultural safety through all work. Work with us, train us up. And we will give you the cultural knowledge you need for successful mainstream service delivery.*
>
> *Two-way relationships that uphold respect, relationship, reciprocity and responsibility, that prioritise Aboriginal knowledge and ways of doing and knowing and being.*
>
> *The difference between engagement and partnerships is there is more time. Rather than just dropping in, there is more responsibility to walk alongside each other. Taking that time to make the connections and understand each other. More commitment. Working together. More beneficial for everyone. All parties. Building trust. Being in that long term game with more education and understanding. Working to come up with solutions together. More sustainable.*