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 **Building Partnerships** 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.

Building Partnerships

Values led partnerships with clear parameters, that also seek to build trust, listening, reciprocity and critical reflexivity:

Key values identified for building strong, meaningful, long-term partnerships included mutual respect and trust, the importance of genuine, active listening and feeling heard, and of equality and mutuality.

> *Humility foundations are so important……that is where we start. (FSC AOD)*
>
> *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 end result. (FSC)*
>
> *In a partnership, each has more voice and say, feels more supportive and closer, being heard…partnership means that both people get something out of it. (LE)*
>
> *Partnership is a longer-term agreement between two people or groups where both give and receive and work together towards a goal. (LE AOD)*
>
> *Deeper and more trusting relationships are needed and an openness to change. (LE)*



Figure 1. Word cloud capturing values identified as critical to partnerships

The process of building the partnership requires attention to the experiences of each of the partners and ensuring that everyone feels safe in an environment that is inclusive, accepting, supportive, non-judgemental, collaborative and diverse. A commitment to understanding one another is critical.

> *Partnerships build trust and takes the time to build relationships. This contrasts with the stringent timeframes and pre-determined questions of engagement. (LE)*
>
> *A lot of understanding is key - providing information and communication. Providing information and explain[ing] that information that is accessible and digestible and acknowledging the power imbalance between disciplines. (LE)*
>
> *Partnership is about sharing problems, accountability, being aware of partners limitations and then being aware of how to overcome. It is ok to question in a trusted partnership. (FSC AOD)*
>
> *The opportunity to share intentions and values which can lead to conversations about structural barriers which affect all of us in different ways, which can really help bring us onto the same side being our whole human selves. (LEDep)*
>
> *Patience [is important] when you are creating the partnership and be[ing] respectful of differences and commonalities. (LE AOD)*

Equality and equity are crucial values to embed in the partnership from the start. Equal opportunities, equal voices, equal pay and recognition, shared power.

Partnership is equal, alongside, genuine, collaborative, mutually beneficial, equal parts give and take on both sides. (YP)

Equal payment is important – people with lived experience are paid the same for their contribution as professionals. (LGBTQ)

Partnership is no different between lived experience workers and their colleagues than it is in any partnered relationship – negotiation, fairness, respect, and safety must be felt by each partner, not just one. (LE)

An equal valuing of perspectives. (FSC)

Equality and respect and inclusion at every level and every step. (LE)

Clear parameters - regarding expectations, roles, responsibilities, and boundaries – are considered foundational for the partnership to achieve shared power and create an equal and equitable environment.

Partnership {rather than engagement} has more shared values, people knowing exactly what they're getting into. (LE)

Clarity about roles and expectations, highlighting the purpose of the partnership and developing mutual understandings of what everyone's role is in that partnership. (LEDep)

A level of understanding going into the partnership and making sure that both parties are aware of what is expected of each other and that these expectations are realistic. (LE AOD)

Transparency and being clear about the scope and limitations of the partnership, having clear understandings of what's being asked for you in the partnership. (LEDep)

Many of the values identified as fundamental within a mental health and AOD context specifically might be summed up by the principle of *"genuine positive regard"* (LE). Truly valuing lived experience, the absence of *"tokenism"*, being *"taken seriously",* engaging in *"respectful interactions", "listening deeply"*, and ensuring people feel *"valued", "loved"* and *"appreciated"*.

Working hand in hand, equally, to achieve an outcome that benefits all partners or stakeholders. (YP)

The significance of mutual positive regard and respect cannot be overstated.

Negotiation and agreement-making:

Mutual agreement in negotiations and decisions-making is a critical component of genuine and effective partnerships. Shared purpose, interest, and understanding; unity and alignment; equal decision making; and agreed outcomes must be present (FSC).

….partnership feels more like a conversation that is two ways. (LE)

Partnership suggests there is a mutual conversation, shared commitment, shared decision-making power. (FSC)

For me it's [power sharing] clear communication and being part of decision making. It feels empowering and like there is a genuine connection. (FSC)

Need to have equal input from all parties (FSC AOD)

Hear "let's…" "...what if we…" - the language used, the 'we' rather than the 'I'. (FSC AOD)

Introducing equal and shared processes at the beginning and continuing to maintain them throughout all stages of a project (or the life of the partnership) is essential. There must be a commitment to *"define the partnership together"* and to *"share the role of creating the outcome"* (FSC). These processes will assist with *"congruence"* and *"working seamlessly together"* (FSC).

[people with lived experience must be] included in decision making processes from the start. (LE)

Power sharing needs to start at the very beginning of a project and continued and monitored through to project completion- (planning, design, implementation, and evaluation. (LE)

It means working from start to finish, including people with lived experience of mental distress, sharing power, working side-by-side, with people rather than for them. Transparency about what we can't do. (LE)

The importance of honest communication and information sharing cannot be overlooked. All partners have an interest in accessing and understanding "*all of the information available to make informed decisions*" (LE). Ideally, all agreements will be appropriately recorded to ensure mutual accountability (CPA).

Good communication - being transparent, and being included with all the details, everything matters. (LE)

I do not want other people to decide what information I need. (LE)

All sides listening to understand each other. (FSC AOD)

Everything is on the table. (LE AOD)

Practical processes to provide initial input, ongoing "*opportunity for honest (anonymous) feedback*" (LGBTQ), and contributions to final evaluations can facilitate increased mutuality within the partnership.

Pre-session questionnaires for opportunit[ies] to give info[mation] about what is going to be helpful. (LGBTQ)

Open dialogue and opportunity for feedback and evaluation. (LE)

Building Partnerships - First Nations perspectives

In all interviews with First Nations people, Blak Wattle heard that education and cultural awareness is a critical first step for government and mental health workers to take to ensure partnerships are safe and inclusive, with almost all talking about a range of personal and professional interactions, where they have worked with partners who had no depth of understanding of the social and historical context of Aboriginal and Torres Strait islander communities. This led to a range of unsafe interactions, such as those from a sector perspective who relayed their experiences of attending meetings with departmental staff who were not operating in a culturally safe way and using demeaning language, being spoken over, and having meetings cancelled.

One person even highlighted that due to this they now screen prospective trainees in their cultural competency and bias *before* they even deliver cultural safety to help the facilitator from having to carry vicarious trauma. And in instances when the trainee scored low, her organisation advises its client its needs to work with its staff to bring them up to a sufficient baseline to ensure they are culturally competent to participate in training sessions.

Many highlighted that government processes are rigid and defined, but don't take into consideration what skills and training a partner might need. Another participant talked to this same sense of lacking cultural competency and highlighted an impact of this is that there is more pressure and burden placed on the Aboriginal organisation who are involved in educating and holding space for government workers.

> *There often seems to be a lack of respect to even know the basics and a view that* their way *is right.*
>
> *A true partnership is respectful and both parties have the ability to engage in hard conversations and dialogue. It will be uncomfortable and that is ok. There needs to be a willingness to learn from one another.*

While others spoke of their direct experience as consumers when engaging in mainstream health services that were culturally unsafe. With another interviewee stating, 'I left 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.' When describing what culturally safe healthcare would look like they said, 'we need to be able to go somewhere where you feel accepted, understood, feel safe and receive the right plan or care.'

One person who also has a lived mental health experience suggested that cultural safety is important, but having access to First Nations counsellors, healers, and helpers is of the utmost importance.

> *I have a psychotherapist who is Aboriginal, and I feel more openness with them. I have more trust and faith that they would know where to refer me; who to contact; and how to go about it.*
>
> *Relationships are so important, government work to ridiculous timelines. Take the time to do the work you need to do. Work to community timelines. There is a 'false urgency' with government and some NGOs.*