Moving from Engagement to Partnership

Findings from community conversations about partnership

"Meaningful and sustainable partnerships take time to build, establish and maintain."

Self-determination

For partnership to be equitable, self-determination and autonomy of each of the parties is critical and necessitates trust, flexibility and openness to alternative knowledges and ways of doing and thinking.

Self-determining partnership arrangements require considerable change - who is involved, how projects are led and structures to support partnership.

First Nations and lived experience led organisations don't have to wait to do this with governments and services. They can get clarity on what's important to them and develop pre-determined principles for working in partnership.

"We have our own ways of knowing how to work. Our way of knowing and being and will only work in partnership with government and organisations who share the same values." [First Nations Stakeholder]

"Self-determination is deeply actionable, and how First Nations people move through the world".

Foundations for Partnerships

"All partners recognised as essential, equal and expert in their own right."

Establish the context, purpose, and vision for the partnership - why this partnership is needed.

Who is best placed to partner? Who decides? How will people be made aware of the opportunity? Ensure equity of opportunity - go to communities and their leaders, 'hold the door open for others'.

Common indicators of partnership: equity of influence, learning from each other, co- deciding from the start, fair and equal payment.

Recognise and embrace multiple diverse perspectives. Recognise and acknowledge the skills, expertise, and strengths everyone brings.

Safety - building relationships, trust, shared language, and shared vision. Take time to get to know each other.

Ensure accessibility and inclusivity (First Nations, rural/regional, cultural diversity, disability, LGBTQIA+, economic and educational disadvantage).

Identify the barriers to and facilitators of equitable partnerships.

"The starting point for building partnership with First Nations people is education and cultural awareness."

Building Partnerships

"In a partnership, each partner has more voice and say, feels more supported and heard."

Values-led and relational work for partnership:

- Values for building meaningful partnerships - mutual respect, trust, genuine listening, equity, inclusivity, collaborative, mutuality, valuing lived experience.
- Processes for building partnership - dialogue, consensus, jargon-free accessible language.
- Considerations for building effective partnerships - identify core beliefs, needs, and motivations for all partners.

Negotiation and agreement-making

- Equal and shared processes for defining the partnership, making decisions, and creating the outcome from the start.
- Good communication and information sharing, appropriately recording agreements.
- Practical processes for initial input, ongoing feedback, evaluation, and accountability.
- Partnerships are a relational commitment that need care and flexibility to support one another, to grow and evolve over time.

Maintaining Partnerships

"Partnerships are like all other human relationships... overcoming challenges requires time, communication, commitment and respect."

Partnerships need to be resourced, supported, and facilitated. This includes equal and appropriate payment, technology and tools that support participation, communication, and information sharing.

Mutually agreed plans that include processes for disagreement and for repair when things don't go so well.

Ongoing review of the partnership - accountability, regular evaluation.

Diverse representation, facilitated by diverse people.

Training for government and services on discrimination, trauma-informed practice.

Training for government and services on Aboriginal historical political and social context and Aboriginal principles and concepts. Cultural training and immersions should be non-negotiabe in First Nations partnerships.

Recognise the emotional impact of being constantly consulted and not seeing change.

Decolonising storytelling and reporting - inclusive of cultural practices, respectful of differing world views ("able to bring one's whole self").

Achieving Shared Goals

Shared understanding ... of what we are trying to achieve and how we are going to get there.

Shared purpose & goals

- Clear expectations and agreed approaches (see Governance).
- Access to information and resources.
- Evidence of integrity, mutual respect, collaboration, and unity of purpose.

Appropriate duration of funding agreements to empower communities to create long-term, sustainable solutions.

Two-way governance and collaborative decision-making

- Equal commitment and desire for the best outcome.
- Awareness of own and partners' limitations and helping each other to overcome them.
- Collaborative decisions and equal decision-making rights.

Cultural and other diversity competency development

- Governments and services take responsibility for their own ongoing organisational learning in relation to cultural and other diversity, including lived experience of mental distress, addiction and caring.

Governance

Context:

- Shared goals, shared values and a **clearly co-defined purpose** provide an agreed pathway forward together.
- People with lived experience and service providers operate as a **'bridge'** and work together as "essential, equal and expert", embracing intersectional perspectives.
- Critical factors for a **culture** of partnership are transparency, power-sharing, flexibility, and equity (of time, resources, value e.g., pay). Everyone is supported and able to contribute.
- Determine when and how to involve **the broader community** of stakeholders.
- **Flexible timeframes** allow for relationships and dialogue. How much time is needed may be unknown.
- Allow sufficient time, funding and other resources for project outcomes, specific work of the partnership, and to support individuals' contributions.

Content:

- Jointly determine the most appropriate **partnership structure** to support collaboration and power-sharing.
- **Share** agenda-setting, decision-making, allocating timeframes, identifying goals and value-based actions informed by the partnership structure.
- Jointly develop Terms of Reference to **clearly define roles, responsibilities, accountabilities** (including how commitments will be upheld) and processes for decision-making and dispute resolution.
- **Access** to financial resources, information and relevant training is critical.

"Organisations (and individuals) can establish what's important to them and may even develop predetermined engagement principles."

Accessibility

Ensuring equity of access to partnership opportunities and participation in partnership processes, including reasonable adjustments, supports people's right to participate. Ensuring reasonable adjustment measures also reduces the emotional labour of advocating for one's own needs, and the challenges of contributing to the partnership when these needs are not met.

Cultural Governance

Structures created to make decisions about how First Nations Peoples' knowledge and concepts are recognised, maintained, and promoted, and how projects are led.

Jointly develop a 'rule book' (partnership agreement) to identify shared language and goals early as the concepts used by First Nations peoples differ from those used by governments and services, impacting inclusion in decisions, processes, and funding.

Partnerships should be based in the social and political context of what went before, that are First Nations led or jointly led.

Timelines that sufficiently accommodate cultural governance processes to ensure meaningful community collaboration and decision-making. Draw on relevant practical resources such as The Indigenous Governance Toolkit.

The quality and depth of relationships, in working together using Aboriginal two-way governance principles, is critical.

"Two-way relationships that uphold respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility, that prioritise Aboriginal knowledge and ways of doing."

Lived Experience Leadership

Partnerships need structures that ensure lived experience is valued and amplified, and opportunities for lived experience leadership are supported and promoted. Examples include having people with lived experience as co-chairs and lived experience boards or steering groups for partnership projects.

Partnering with people with lived experience must also be inclusive of the diversity of experiences and how they may affect people. Non-mainstream ways of thinking and being should be expected, accepted, and made welcome! These can help all of us to re-examine beliefs, values and ways of understanding. It is important that traditional notions of professionalism are not used to exclude certain voices.

The principles on which partnerships are based should not only be evident within the governance of the partnership but should permeate the partner organisations.

Power Sharing

"Partnerships require, indeed necessitate, the sharing of power."

The dynamics of power

- Acknowledge power imbalances and elevate the power of lived experience voices.
- Address the impact of funding management strategies on power dynamics.
- Sharing power has significant positive impacts - feeling valued, equal, safe to share, and able to contribute. It can also promote a sense of real progress and genuine efforts towards change. Power imbalances can have the opposite impact and are detrimental to partnerships and people
- Moving toward equitable power sharing can involve uncertainty, discomfort, and vulnerability. Allow and prepare for this process.

Legacy of power abuses, oppression, and injustice

- Recognise past and ongoing structural and systemic misuses of power, prejudice, and discrimination, which especially impact marginalised groups.

Unlearning and critical reflection

- Recognise the value of unlearning and deconstructing ways of working to move towards more equitable approaches.
- Co-reflect critically on practices to inform how power might be shared for mutual benefit moving forward.

Acknowledgement of Harms Done

People with lived experience of mental distress, addiction and caring (and especially First Nations peoples, those from other cultural diversity, disability and LGBTQIA+) come to partnerships with previous experience of harm arising from services and/or attempting to partner with the service system. This harm may be cumulative, complex, and enduring. Distrust from past experiences is reinforced and even amplified when current partnerships are tokenistic.

Working towards trust:

- A **trauma-responsive** mental health and wellbeing sector listens to people who have survived trauma, including traumatic impacts of services and systems. Partner with people who have experienced trauma to ensure their lived expertise contributes to better partnerships, services, and systems.
- Make partnership and related processes **transparent**.
- Be honest and accountable. **Integrity** in partnership is evident in what people and organisations do and not just what they say.
- A more even distribution of power requires governments and services to trust people with lived experience of mental distress, addiction and caring to **share decision-making power.**
- Recognise and value the complementary nature of lived/living and learned expertise and **elevate lived expertise**.
- Affirm, honour and support **the meaning people make of their experience** and bring to partnership.

Acknowledgements: These findings came from 14 community conversations between July 2022 - March 2023, held as part of the Moving From Engagement to Partnership Project, Mental health and Wellbeing Division, Victorian Health Department. The framework used to conceptualise the findings was based on: SNAICC - Opening Doors Through Partnership, the Indigenous Governance Toolkit and Working Together: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Mental Health and Wellbeing Principles and Practice.