September 2016

Development of Aboriginal Community Engagement & Partnership Framework

# Social_Compass_Logo_Landscape_RGB_LR.pngForum Themes & Next Steps**Introduction**

August 15th - 26th 2016 Social Compass facilitated six forums around Victoria to seek input into the development of the Department of Health and Human Service’s Aboriginal Community Engagement and Partnership Framework (engagement framework)

The engagement framework will reflect the Department of Health and Human Services (the department) commitment to strengthening the voice of Aboriginal people, communities, and organisations in the development of policies and programs. Engagement, consultation and partnerships between Aboriginal communities and the department are central to self-determination and improving health and wellbeing outcomes.

We recognise the forums were held at short notice with limited lead-up time for people to attend. We are sorry for those who have missed out but these forums are not the end and more opportunities will be provided by the department to have input into the design and implementation of the engagement framework locally as well as at a state-wide level.

That said, the forums were a genuine effort to have a conversation and inform the development of the engagement framework. We have heard previously how the Communities would like engagement to take place and this was reinforced again during the forums. Therefore, the engagement framework will pay attention to issues of trauma, trust, representation, over-consultation and under-consultation and ensuring engagement is timely, meaningful, on-going and most of all respectful.

A strong community voice has emerged from the small gatherings.

**It should be noted that written submissions will be received as an ongoing process so if you have feedback send them to** [**admin@socialcompass.com**](mailto:admin@socialcompass.com)

## Summary of Discussions

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| **Region** | **Date** | **Venue** | **Attendance** |
| **Melbourne** | **15th Aug** | **Minajalku Healing Centre- Thornbury** | **5** |
| Being a small group, initial feedback clarified a lack of promotion of the forums. The conversation, whilst light on voices, was particularly significant in placing genuine context to the points in the discussion paper, by correlating with practice examples. There was significant discussion about the use of social media to access community voices and the need for local decision making with regard to the use of funding so that local community contexts can be taken into account. This makes better use of funding. There was also discussion about the department having and promoting a more “human face”. As one participant said “*we don’t know who you are*”.  Key message: The department needs to become more familiar to and with the Community. | | | |
| **Mildura** | **17th Aug** | **Mallee Districts Aboriginal Services (MDAS)- Mildura** | **11** |
| There was a robust group discussion, making a clear case for necessary improvements in the ways of engaging at a local level. Many in the room were Mallee District Aboriginal Services (MDAS) staff, and had a strong ability to place context on the barriers created by poor engagement practices. Others present were local government and health professionals. All conversations were in line with the themes in the discussion paper and supportive of the general approach to the development and purpose of the engagement framework.  Key message: Local trauma must be considered as a key factor in engagement for all Aboriginal initiatives and projects (etc.) undertaken/delivered/etc. in the Mallee region. | | | |
| **Warrnambool** | **22nd Aug** | **Gunditjmara Aboriginal Cooperative- Warrnambool** | **10** |
| This was a collective of strong and knowledgeable regional voices. All focus points of the discussion paper were accepted and clarified as legitimate local issues. The Aboriginal Justice Forum and Taskforce 1000 were spoken of as useful models for gaining and engaging community voices. The forum also highlighted the importance of engaging young people, capacity building for Aboriginal Community controlled organisations (ACCOs) and the possibility of establishing statewide / regional Councils.  Key message: The department needs to stop moving the goal posts and take a long term approach! We must have a shared vision. A vision which is Self-Determined. | | | |
| **Bairnsdale** | **23rd Aug** | **Krowathunkooloong Keeping Place- Bairnsdale** | **16** |
| There was a great combination of Community and service voices, with solid representation from various government departments. The local story is emerging as a strong example of Community expertise being the driving force behind decision making, and the serious risks and barriers occurring where only non-Aboriginal voices have decision-making power.  Key message: Local context of trauma is absolutely necessary to understanding what needs to be done. Applying local needs and capacity to funding delivery / decisions is essential in avoiding burden, and increasing positive Community outcomes. | | | |
| **Shepparton** | **24th Aug** | **Rumbalara Football and Netball Club- Shepparton** | **14** |
| The group discussion informed ways on how to apply Community needs to potential strategies. An overwhelming sense that the Shepparton region is too often the location for ‘pilot’ programs, which disappear after short periods, without achieving any genuinely positive or sustainable results. *“Too many pilots, not enough planes!”.* The issue of over-consultation was raised.  Key message: Aboriginal staff are absorbing the trauma of their clients, on top of their existing trauma. Without Self-Determined and long-term approaches, this will continue to occur, at the detriment of the Community. | | | |
| **Melbourne** | **25th Aug** | **Mullum Mullum Indigenous Gathering Place- Ringwood East** | **27** |
| This was the forum with the highest attendance, with a large representation of Elders. Focusing predominantly on Mullum Mullum itself, a combined voice spoke with great frustration and a sense of desperation in terms of the government’s continued ineffective consultations, and an inability to provide serious and sustainable support to healing programs. This Community feels ignored and misunderstood.  Key message: The department currently is not very good at understanding Communities, each other, and how to change for the better. Community wants to see a shift in the way the department reflect Community needs in their outputs, as opposed to the classic mainstream bureaucratic processes of command and control which are directly burdening and harming Communities. | | | |

## Summary of Responses

Following on from the Literature Review and Discussion Paper, eight key focus areas were discussed in each forum, through various channels of discussion, and always with a great deal of passion and conviction. Below, these eight focus areas are outlined and supported (even answered) by the combined voice of the forums. This voice not only provides absolute ratification of the existing data and necessities, but also (and perhaps most importantly) provides some contextualisation for ways in which poor engagement practices continue to burden and re-traumatise Aboriginal Communities. It also provides some clues for better engagement and how this might take place.

***“We’ve been saying this stuff FOREVER. It’s sad that we are still here talking about the same stuff.”***

**Question 1: How should trauma be recognised as a means to supporting engagement processes? What are the ways trust can be (re)built?**

***“Trauma is not considered by DHHS.”***

***“Never had trust, so it’s not restorative. They’ve yet to earn it”***

Trauma is an inherited factor of Aboriginality. Trauma is the key ongoing effect of dispossession and oppression, and as such is the foundational element of Community dynamics which must be considered. Community feel that currently no genuine trauma context is applied to Aboriginal engagement, Community funding / programs / etc. Therefore, governments can be actively burdening and re-traumatising Aboriginal people. This was particularly strong for Aboriginal workers: “*Being an Aboriginal worker is 24/7 while white fellas can just go home and be off-duty*”.

Aboriginal people are feeling the pervasive trauma “*in every case-load, every expectation for reporting, every hoop to jump through, and every Community suicide that we know could have been prevented had the services been sufficient*”. People spoke clearly that “[*W*]*e know where the needs are! Let us heal!*” but are continuously feeling unheard, and having to deal with “*pan-flash funding, and band-aid programs*”.

The forums reinforced the view that if the department is to be serious about engaging towards improved outcomes for Aboriginal Communities, they must start every decision with an acknowledgement of trauma, and the dynamics of that trauma in Victoria – Regions – Communities – Individuals. Obtaining these contexts, via collaboration (co-design) with the experts (state-wide tiers of expertise e.g. Aboriginal Justice Agreement), is thought to be the first essential step in legitimising trauma as a pivotal criteria for improving outcomes for Aboriginal people.

**Question 2: What is the most respectful way of gaining an understanding of the (local) Community and the decision making processes within it?**

Building on the context of trauma, forum participants suggested the department has a clear responsibility to “*just get out there*” and really get to know the Communities it is charged with supporting. Becoming transparent, visible, present, and “*human*” are viewed methods of establishing relationships. Community members often referred to the department as “*the ivory tower*” or “*holding the purse strings*”, and stated a need for “*absent and faceless bureaucrats*” to become approachable, and be legitimately “*real*”. The few conversations within the forums which took place between department staff and Community members were testament to the power of spending time “*in the real world*”.

Communities called for more Aboriginal people to be employed in all departmental offices and throughout all teams. The presence of Aboriginality must become normalised, and a crucial directional component to Aboriginal decision-making. Understanding the Community is more than getting a picture of what Community is, it also includes concepts of governance and decision-making. Community voices expressed frustration at feeling like “*guinea pigs*”, or being “*left in the dark*”, due to the inaccessible level of resources.

***“Keep trying. Take a few hits!”***

***“Learn a new way of thinking”***

**Question 3: Is there a way issues related to terminology and jargon can be addressed and ensure there is a common understanding reached?**

The Government’s approach to Aboriginal people is seen as “*shifting sand*”. There was a sentiment in the forums that, every few years, a “*new batch of buzzwords is plastered”* on Aboriginal people, and often these terms carry multiple meanings and connotations. Currently, co-design is the most salient, and definitions of the concept are viewed as wide and varied. Often, these definitions are in direct competition with the definitions offered by Community members.

Beyond these instances of translation issues between bureaucracy and Community, the issue of convoluted and / or overly clinical reporting is acknowledged as being a wedge between those at need (risk) and those in power.

**Question 4: How can the ‘people to people’ approach be strengthened even when timelines require quick decisions?**

***“They might come and listen, but they never actually HEAR”***

***“Listen to us! Hear us!”***

Forum participants agreed that, from a true understanding of Communities - multiple contexts of trauma, state-wide – regional – local dynamics – there comes an opportunity to legitimately work at a people-to-people level. Communities speak of a “*shared vision*” as a best case scenario for strategy. Given that Self-Determination is back on the agenda, forum participants feel that this is the time for government to “*truly listen*” and reflect learnings in new directions. However, they noted that at times they have a sense of being unwelcome in the physical environments (government buildings, offices) and that this increases the sense of being disenfranchised and vulnerable.

Participants reported that if genuine relationships are developed between the department and Communities, a sense of mutual benefit may emerge “*for the first time in history*”. Communities suggested they felt unheard and unable to be the experts of their own conditions. They want this lack of agency to be alleviated. Community know the potential resulting mutual benefit must prioritise Aboriginal Community outcomes, and strategies must move beyond the here-and-now noting healing will be hindered by short-term, poorly designed initiatives.

**Question 5: If there was more power sharing (whatever that means!) what would it look like?**

***“Everyone’s working in different departments, not talking to each other or sharing visions and goals. Then they all show up with the same old questions”***

A clear voice (especially those of Elders) suggested that Aboriginal people, in 40+ years of genuine citizenship, have never had legitimate agency over Aboriginal outcomes. In Community eyes, the concept of power with regard to government is biased and traumatic. Community feel that a crucial consideration for the department when attempting to enter discussions in ‘co-design’ is the actual capacity of Communities to operate at the expected levels.

With the well-understood (by Community) perpetual crisis and reaction system in ACCO’s and Aboriginal-specific programs, participants felt that there is very rarely an opportunity (like there is in a mainstream setting) to build capacity, and keep up with mainstream progress. There is a fear that parity will never occur if government continues to neglect the necessity for capacity building. Basic principles of Self-Determination (as stated by participants) clearly imply a requirement for Aboriginal people to define themselves, and their needs and goals. This is reported as being done regularly, however constant burden of inappropriate levels of consultation and reporting requirements attached to funding agreements are keeping parity “*locked up on the top shelf, away from Aboriginal hands*”.

Power sharing requires a full break-down of why the power sits where it currently does, how that imbalance can / does create trauma, and how changes can be made to create balance and healing. Participants know that Aboriginal expertise must be prioritised. However, there was concern expressed about the power of influence of Aboriginal peaks and state-wide organisations over the voices of Aboriginal Community controlled health organisations – particularly those outside of Melbourne.

**Question 6: What needs to change within the department / what needs to change within Communities to strengthen engagement?**

***“We need inspiration!”***

***“We need long-term investments, so we can actually get some things done”***

A consistent theme in the forums was that “*Community knows what Community needs*,” and a feeling that to make decisions without direction from Community is irresponsible. Isolated accounts of co-designed programs report a higher level of success and satisfaction in the outcomes, compared to ‘*pre-packaged*’ programs and funding.

The Community sector recommends the following: “Get out there”. “Get your hands dirty”. “Understand the Communities”. “LISTEN”. “Allow Communities to design their own work”. “Assess capacities”. “Build capacity, to ensure high quality and valuable outcomes are occurring”.

There was a suggestion of joint local forums either with different departments coming together and/or different program areas from the department’s central office along with divisions/regions going out to talk locally/through a forum set-up.

It was noted that if/when the department comes to approaching state-wide – regional – local - individual needs, there must be clear context and purpose developed, and without the continuation of research and consultation burden being placed on Communities. Stronger practices must be established to ensure that improved outcomes for Aboriginal people are targeted. Central and Regional offices of the department need to improve their image and gain trust with Communities.

**Question 7: What would a ‘true’ partnership look like (in practice) between government and Community?**

Key words that emerged included: Addressing trauma. Respect. Openness. Integrity. Honesty. Keeping Culture alive. Facilitating connection. Holistic approach. Security. Trust. Faith. Clarity. Understanding. Genuine. Long-term. Vision (shared). Pro-active and preventative. Communication. Empowerment.

These are the key terms used by Community to describe ‘true partnership’. Essentially, Community have clear and unwavering principles of relationships and collaboration which must be shared by government, if strong partnerships are to ever be established.

**Question 8: What are the ‘do’s’ and ‘don’ts’ of genuine engagement?**

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| DO | DON’T |
| Define authority- power sharing and government relinquish power to community | Consult late - showing up with pre-prepared answers, just to tick a box |
| Ask local needs | Assume knowledge |
| Deliver feedback to consulted groups, before publication | Over-consult |
| Get out into Community, just to talk and listen | Try to operate without Community understanding |
| Utilise Aboriginal expertise | Try to operate without Cultural understanding |
| Build capacity for ACCOs and department | Expect unreasonable accountability |
| Explain why things can’t be done | Expect mainstream levels of productivity |
| Flexible funding | Pre-package funding agreements (inflexible) |
| Consider long-term vision and approaches | Keep running pilots |
| Consider the pressures and realities of ACCO’s | Ignore self-reported risks |

**Next Steps**

***“Why is evidence not a catalyst for change?”***

As noted, the forums are not the end of the consultation process with regard to the development and implementation of the engagement framework. They have informed the development of the engagement framework and the department will be going back to communities across the state over the coming months.

There will also be a state-wide symposium in late October. The purpose of the symposium is to provide Aboriginal stakeholders and communities as well as departmental staff information on the Aboriginal Community Partnership and Engagement Framework as it stands and seek feedback as well as informing the next steps in its implementation.

***“It’s time to start listening.”***