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DEVELOPMENT OF ABORIGINAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT AND PARTNERSHIP FRAMEWORK

Discussion Paper

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# Background

The Department of Health and Human Services’ (DHHS) is committed to strengthening the voice of Aboriginal people, communities, and organisations in the development of DHHS policies and programs. Engagement, consultation and partnerships between Aboriginal communities and the department are central to supporting self-determination and improving health and wellbeing outcomes. Further, effective engagement will inform and strengthen policy direction, program development, and transparent monitoring and accountability of outcomes for Aboriginal Victorians.

The DHHS has commissioned Social Compass ([www.socialcompass.com](http://www.socialcompass.com)) to undertake the development of an Aboriginal Community Engagement and Partnership Framework (engagement framework).The engagement frameworkwill articulate a model for engagement, partnership and co-design between Aboriginal communities, government and agencies. It will include resources, tools, monitoring processes, and linkages across government to ensure the engagement framework can evolve with the community and the department.

The engagement framework will provide the department with a deeper understanding of Aboriginal self-determination and influence the planning, implementation and accountability of co-ordinated responses to improving health and wellbeing of Aboriginal Victorians. Further, the engagement framework will underpin the department’s new Aboriginal Health, Wellbeing and Safety Strategic Plan (strategic plan) currently being developed by the Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Branch. The connection between these two pieces of work (the strategic plan and the engagement framework) will enable community input, ownership and partnerships between the department and Aboriginal communities. The engagement framework will have a broader application for the department in terms of how it seeks to engage with the people it represents and therefore informs future departmental frameworks.

# Purpose

The aim of this document is to further inform the consultations that are yet to take place and consolidate and test what we have heard so far. It presents key themes as they have emerged from the literature review and early consultations with key stakeholders (individuals and groups). The findings are cross referenced with the findings from earlier and comprehensive community consultations undertaken by the Office of Aboriginal Victoria (formerly AAV). These consultations explored the key questions guiding the current consultations: That is, how do Aboriginal people, organisations and communities want government to engage with them? What does effective engagement look like? What can government departments do to improve engagement processes and practices – and for what purpose?

It is important to note that when considering engagement practices, this is not one dimensional and initiated only by government but is a two way process that can equally be initiative by community.

# Development Process

The development of the engagement framework will be informed by the following steps:

* A review of department’s current Aboriginal engagement mechanisms and key learnings from other engagement structures across the Victorian government
* Literature review to gather evidence on different models (national and international and specific to First Nations people) and approach to community engagement
* Conversations with Aboriginal leaders, community members and organisations, and departmental and other government stakeholders.

Ongoing communication and input from Aboriginal stakeholders is occurring through Aboriginal advisory groups/forums /networks across the department including the Expert Panel for the Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Strategic Plan. Information about upcoming consultations is provided at the end of this paper (page 10)

Figure 1 outlines the key milestones and timelines through to the completion of the project.

**Figure 1: Project Timelines**

# Emerging Themes

The following themes are emerging from the consultations and the literature. Others may emerge as consultations progress.

## Trauma and Past Engagement

* The early experiences of engagement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities with government have involved violent conflict, forced dispossession and displacement, protectionist policies that denied basic rights, separated families and entrenched discrimination and inequalities.
* The effects of these historical experiences and policies continue to reverberate through Aboriginal families and communities in unresolved trauma. It is not surprising, therefore that Aboriginal people continue to be wary of governments and others due to this punitive history.
* The tensions in relationships and the lack of trust that is the result of this history needs to be acknowledged and overcome if there is to be sustained successful engagement.
* While the effects of past engagement have had major impacts Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, cultural practices have been incredibly resilient. This also has to be acknowledged in any engagement with communities. The failure to appreciate this and the diversity of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people increases the risk of engagement, policies and programs failing.

Key question: How should trauma be recognized as a means to supporting engagement processes? What are the ways trust can be (re)built?

## Communities not Community

* Government policies have a tendency to refer to engagement with a community.
* In Victoria Aboriginal people are quick to point out there are many different ‘communities’ located in regional and urban / metro areas.
* That said, family ties and relationships to culture and country lie at the heart of all Aboriginal communities.
* Notably, communities have their own cultural boundaries, which generally bear no relationship to government administrative or jurisdictional boundaries.
* Consultations confirm that successful engagement requires a thorough knowledge of the community and the dynamics of decision making within it.
* Making assumptions about Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, their membership, governance, and who can represent their views undermine effective engagement.
* There is a difference between the engagement practices (past, present and future) for metropolitan versus regional Aboriginal organisations and communities
* It needs to be recognised that many Aboriginal people living in Victoria are not on their own country and their voice needs to be included and represented.
* While the work and voice of peak bodies and service providers is critical, it cannot be assumed that this fully represents all Aboriginal people, families and communities.
* There are individual voices and the voices of others (e.g. Aboriginal people with a disability and LGBTI) that need to be included

Key question: What is the most respectful way of gaining an understanding of the (local) community and the decision making processes within it?

## Language, Terminology and Capacity Gaps

* Understanding of cultural protocols is essential to successful engagement.
* Concepts and terms that government staff use (jargon) in everyday communications (verbal and written) can be foreign to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.
* Translating ‘government speak’ to enable community members to fully understand its meaning and implications is important to avoid confusion and misunderstanding.
* There is a need for clarification and agreed definitions to allow mutual-understanding across the direction and development of partnerships/relationships, as well as clarifying the capacity and acceptance of either party.
* Language and terminology needs to be effective and approachable. This is not ‘dumbing down’ consultations or having separate parallel processes for engagement with Aboriginal people and mainstream.
* “Dumbing down’ is disrespectful and can results in consultations with Aboriginal communities not having direct comparability with mainstream consults. This can in turn diminish the voice of Aboriginal people.

Key question: Is there a way issues related to terminology and jargon can addressed and ensure there a common understanding reached?

## Time to Talk

* There is a significant difference between consultation where information is passed from one party to another (usually government to community) and engagement being a two way, people to people conversation.
* There is a place for using consultation spectrums (such as the IAP2) but the context and reason for their application needs to be clear and communicated.
* Engagement and consultation is a two way, people to people process that must be genuine and open.
* Genuine engagement is not a consensus building exercise – effective engagement allows for difference of opinion.
* There may be occasions when some things cannot be negotiated – and so, what is ‘on’ and ‘off’ the table needs to be clearly communicated.
* Ongoing feedback loops should be in place and negotiated about how this should best occur – particularly where there are risks to over-consultation and the reality of timeframes
* Hurried, one-off ‘consultations’ that are organised without Aboriginal peoples input into their design, and where the parameters for discussion are centrally determined and fail to take proper account of Aboriginal peoples aspirations and ideas of wellbeing, reduce trust.
* While communities have a tendency to be over-consulted there is too little consultation at the early stages of program / policy design. Accordingly, current engagement arrangements are complex and onerous for Aboriginal people, organisations and communities.

Key question: How can the ‘people to people’ approach be strengthened even when timelines require immediate decisions? What mechanisms support the decision-making process and allow for feedback to and from the community?

## Co-design and Power

* Co-design is an important ‘concept’ and essentially involves working together early in the process and needs to incorporate the voice of service users.
* Everyone agrees that a process of co-design would enhance engagement arrangements but how this best takes place is still challenging to define – and the concept itself suffers from definitional problems.
* Self-determination needs to be actualized in practice if it is to be more meaningful and the very term needs to be better understood and defined.
* There are capacity strengths and gaps at the government and community levels for co-design to be meaningful.
* Questions of power (historical and contemporary) need to be addressed and understood. Who has (had) it, on what occasions and in what contexts? Power differentials need to be acknowledged and managed.
* Governments that have a tradition of devolved (less centralised) decision - making processes are generally more successful in bringing communities into policy and service design.

Key question: Who has the power and when? What would sharing power look like? Will a partnership model address unequal power in relationships? How can conflicts be managed?

## Progressive Leadership

* It is the responsibility of government agencies to be accountable for the policies and frameworks they promote around engagement.
* New forms of engagement might need new forms of leadership at both government and community levels.
* For government, new leadership requires a style that is strategic, collegial, not risk-averse, and not turf-bound.
* Once parties embark upon collaborative policymaking or service design with public servants, there are risks that must be managed. For example, lack of accountability and increased expectations.
* Processes must be robust enough to ensure responsible and accountable decision-making. Expectations must be managed so that disillusion or disaffection for those collaborating in the policymaking and service design does not set in.
* Problems can arise from ‘bureaucratic silos’ and the weak capacities of government agencies to ‘join up’ government.
* Governments have a tendency to want quick results, to maintain control, have heavy reporting demands and demonstrate low levels of trust in community organisations as decision makers.
* The challenges of shifting to a more participatory governance include the need for leadership, trusting relationships and willingness to share power. You need an organisational culture that supports such ways of working. Innovative strategies to enable people to participate meaningfully are also needed.
* The difficulty for these ‘new professionals’ can be that they have to work in ways that seem, at first sight, opposed to the prevailing culture around them.
* Co-design demands that public service staff shift from ‘fixers’ who focus on problems to ‘enablers’ who focus on abilities. The degree to which such a role is recognised or rewarded within the management structures currently in place can be problematic.
* Research and consultations suggest that effective engagement with Aboriginal communities is not taken seriously enough by Australian governments to disrupt the ‘business as usual’ approach. That is, with their reliance on the established bureaucratic methods of consultation and multi–party committees effective engagement is mitigated.
* At the same time, there is significant frustration in the community that changes of government immediately brings about changes in policy and approaches.
* A significant theme in the consultations is for an engagement framework that is resilient to government changes.

Key questions: What needs to change within the department for such leadership to emerge? What needs to be ‘given up’ to achieve it? What needs to change within communities to enhance engagement?

## Engagement to Partnerships

* + Partnerships have participatory processes as their foundation and involve Aboriginal agency and decision making, a deliberative and negotiated process, not just information giving or consultation, and starts early in the program or project development.
  + Partnerships should centre Aboriginal aspirations and priorities, within an Aboriginal framework, process, context and timeframe - while acknowledging there may be occasions where due to political imperatives, some elements are fixed and this needs to be communicated
  + Partnerships should build on existing community governance structures and Aboriginal strengths and assets, in an empowering process, rather than on deficits and gaps,
  + The partnership working well will have a high degree of clarity about desired outcomes, indicators and steps to achieving them, with clearly defined roles and responsibilities.
  + Both parties should be engaged in joint planning of monitoring and evaluation to meet the rights and needs of each party where there is a willingness to share responsibility and accountability for shared objectives.
  + Consultations suggest these are nothing more than ideals at present and changes in process and time frames needs to be driven by understanding and respecting the context within which the partnership exists.
  + There is a need for mutual capacity building: partnerships can be an effective means for achieving this. This will require significant support through training and local workforce development, mentoring of staff, governance systems development and support for obtaining sustainable funding.
  + Successful and respectful partnerships emphasize the transfer of resources, leadership and responsibility to Aboriginal partners.

Key questions: What would a ‘true’ partnership look like between government and community? What will it take to get there? What are the indicators and measures of success?

## 

# Next Steps

The questions raised in this discussion paper will guide the consultations that are yet to take place. These consultations will seek the voices of from a range of Aboriginal community stakeholders and departmental representatives. Information about upcoming consultations will be provided through the Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Branch website and email communications and through DHHS representatives, ACCOs and community contacts.

Consultation/workshops will occur through engagement forums, written submissions, online feedback, and direct conversations.

While the themes explored in this paper will form the basis of the consultations, there are other questions to be explored. These include views on the effectiveness of existing forums/advisory committees/reference groups. For example, questions about how the voice of the community / service user was present in the discussions and any decision-making processes? Who had the power and how were power differentials managed? Was self-determination being practiced? Are there examples of co-design, collaboration, working together that can inform the engagement framework? What made making decisions easier and what made them harder? What could/should be carried forward into the new engagement framework?

**For further information regarding the development of the Aboriginal community engagement and partnership framework or to have your say please contact:**

**Aboriginal Health and Wellbeing Website**

[**https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/aboriginal-health/engagement**](https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/about/health-strategies/aboriginal-health/engagement)

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