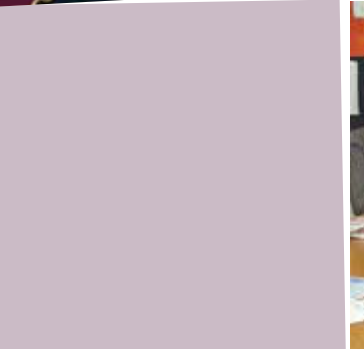
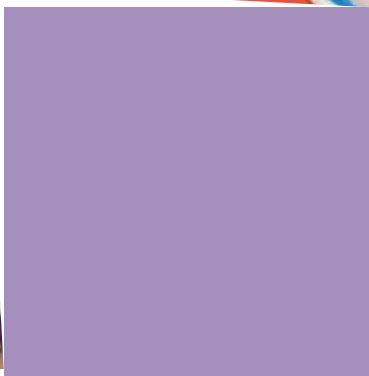


DEECD - Victorian Community Sector Collaboration and Consultation Framework



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1 - Purpose

The Victorian Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (DEECD) and Victoria's community sector are committed to working together to improve the learning, development, health and wellbeing outcomes of Victorians, particularly those who are vulnerable or experiencing disadvantage.

The DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Collaboration and Consultation Framework (Framework) outlines the way the signatories to the *DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Partnership Agreement 2010-14*¹ (Partnership Agreement) will strengthen collaboration and consultation. It articulates what effective collaboration and consultation between the Department, peak bodies and the community sector involves, as well as ensuring the right enabling processes are in place to realise this.

2 - Background

DEECD is responsible for delivering an integrated lifelong learning and development system, comprising early childhood development, school education, and higher education and skills. To achieve this the Department ensures that these sectors work together, to meet the needs of Victorian families and their children, provide access and choice, and assist transitions at key life stages. This agenda is complemented by a number of Council of Australian Governments' National Partnerships targeting specific areas of high-need.

The Department recognises that this agenda can only be delivered successfully in partnership with its stakeholders, including Victoria's community sector (the sector), which plays a significant role in the lives of Victorians and their families.

The sector is a provider of education and developmental support through the early years into adulthood, an advocate in improving the life chances of disadvantaged and vulnerable Victorians, and a key partner in the development of good policy and research. It should be noted that Victoria's community sector has a diverse mix of organisations with differing interests, mandates and governance structures. The importance of partnership with the community sector has been equally realised in other jurisdictions in Australia and overseas.

As a result, in June 2010 the Department and the Victorian Council of Social Service (VCOSS), on behalf of the sector, committed to the *DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Partnership Agreement 2010-14*. The Partnership Agreement is accompanied by annual Action Plans, which act as joint work plans for furthering the partnership. A significant part of the first Action Plan is the development of this Framework.

The development of the Framework also provides a platform for both the Department and community sector to include collaboration and consultation within strategic planning and corporate strategies, which will build on existing practice. It should be noted, however, that on many areas of policy or in the delivery of services, the Department and the community sector are part of a much larger set of stakeholders.

¹ *DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Partnership Agreement 2010-14* online at:
<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/commrel/policy/partnershipagreement.pdf>

3 - Who is the framework for?

This framework is for the signatories to the Partnership Agreement, including:

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development;
- Peak body representatives; and
- Victorian community sector organisations.

This framework will guide relationships, agreements and activities undertaken between the Department and the community sector.

4 - Roles

The Department

The Department recognises that the community sector works to improve the lives of many children, young people and their families through direct and partnered service delivery, social support and advocacy on behalf of Victorians, particularly vulnerable and disadvantaged Victorians. In this, the Department also recognises and respects the practice, diversity, knowledge and autonomy of the community sector, and its right to advocate.

The Victorian community sector

The Victorian community sector acknowledges the role and responsibility of the Department in delivering, facilitating and funding an integrated universal early childhood and education system, while operating within the parameters of legislation, Government policy and multiple and equally important stakeholders.

5 - Effective collaboration and consultation

What is collaboration?

Collaboration, for the purposes of this document, is defined as working together to share information, develop policy, plan and deliver services, and improve outcomes.

The Department and the sector commit to look to each other for advice and innovative ideas in developing solutions to issues of mutual interest, and to consider and incorporate this advice into decisions to the fullest extent possible.

What is consultation?

Consultation, as defined in the Department's *Stakeholder Engagement Framework*², is 'to obtain feedback from the other party on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.'

The Department and the sector commit to listen to and acknowledge the concerns and aspirations of each other, and to inform and provide feedback on how the input of the other party influenced decisions to the fullest extent possible.

What are the benefits of effective collaboration and consultation?

The Department's *Stakeholder Engagement Framework* outlines the benefits of stakeholder engagement as 'enabling better planned and informed policies, projects, programs and services... [that are] mutually beneficial to stakeholders and the Department.'

² DEECD *Stakeholder Engagement Framework* online at:

<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/commrel/policy/oct2011stakeholderengagement.pdf>

For the Department, the benefits of better collaboration and consultation with the community sector include:

- Higher quality and better informed decision making;
- Improved policy and program development and implementation;
- More efficient and effective service delivery, including services that we co-deliver;
- Greater engagement with sector interests;
- Better risk management and;
- Greater participation and community ownership of initiatives.

For the community sector, the benefits of better collaboration and consultation with the Department include:

- Opportunities to contribute to policy and program development;
- Ability to input into solutions to complex policy issues;
- Improved access to decision making processes, resulting in more efficient service delivery and policy development and;
- Better articulated and more transparent lines of communication.

For all Victorians, the benefits of better collaboration and consultation between the Department and the community sector include broader policy development, better decision making, more efficient and effective service delivery and greater access to streamlined support.

What are the challenges faced by the Department and the sector in achieving effective collaboration and consultation?

The Department and the community sector acknowledge that their relationship has a number of unique features that may create challenges in implementing best practice models of collaboration and consultation. Both the Department and the community sector are committed to exploring and re-evaluating solutions to these challenges in an ongoing manner.

The Department

The Department acknowledges that its relationship with the community sector involves a diverse range of organisations that sometimes have conflicting interests. The Department will not assume what the community sector would like to be consulted on, but will work in collaboration to determine priorities and interests.

The Department will continue to respect the diversity of the sector, the sector's right to represent and advocate on behalf of all Victorians, the diversity of opinion that can limit the development of a 'whole of sector' viewpoint or position on some questions, and the resource limitations that can sometimes limit the extent of sector input including staff, time and funding.

The Department is committed to collaborating and consulting to the fullest extent possible with the community sector, noting that processes such as Cabinet and Budget deliberations can at times constrain consultation.

The Community Sector

The community sector encompasses a broad and diverse range of organisations that have varied governance structures and accountabilities. Community sector organisations also have differing interests, capacity and motivation for engaging with the Department. Further, the community sector has an advocacy role and governance structures that may at times constrain collaboration.

The community sector acknowledges the role of VCOSS in facilitating collaboration between the Department and the sector as requested and required through a range of mechanisms, including the VCOSS convened Victorian Peaks and Statewide Networks Forum. However, VCOSS will not be the only avenue for the community sector to collaborate with the Department.

It is vital that both the Department and the community sector proactively engage in collaboration and consultation, including ensuring that all involved are active and informed.

6 - Enabling and promoting effective collaboration and consultation

The Department's *Stakeholder Engagement Framework* is a comprehensive framework for how the Department's staff plan engagement with stakeholders and ensure these interactions are mutually beneficial. The Framework complements the Department's CORE values of collaboration and knowledge sharing, outcomes, respect and diversity, and empowerment – the principles which underpin the Department's interactions.

The community sector is likewise informed by a range of existing frameworks and tools that inform collaboration and the development of partnerships, including with government agencies. These include the Department of Human Service's *Collaboration and Consultation Protocol*³ along with the Partnership Practice Guides that have been developed through the Human Services Partnership Implementation Committee (HSPIC).

This section outlines what the Department and the community sector consider to be the fundamental enablers for effective collaboration and consultation. Primarily, this section focuses on the diversity of approaches required in pursuing collaboration and consultation between the Department and the community sector, and provide pathways to engagement for Department and community sector staff.

What are the enablers for meaningful collaboration and consultation?

The Department and the community sector agree that there is a set of enablers for meaningful collaboration and consultation, without which there can be no strong foundation for collaboration and consultation. The Department and the community sector are committed to being:

- **Responsive and reciprocal** – by collaborating and consulting in reciprocal fashion, including opportunities for mutual learning and contribution.
- **Inclusive** – by seeking the views of others, seeking to overcome barriers to participation and ensuring the processes used to facilitate this involvement is not discriminatory.
- **Objective** – by communicating the purpose for individual collaboration and/or consultation processes clearly.

³ *DHS Collaboration and Consultation Protocol*, online at:
http://www.dhs.vic.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0008/412100/collaboration-and-consultation-

- **Open** – by providing information in clear and meaningful formats, with clearly outlined purpose and parameters.
- **Transparent** – by ensuring that any necessary preliminary decisions made by the Department or the community sector without consultation are communicated and explained.
- **Respectful** – by respecting diversity and difference, and ensuring that all views will be actively listened to and engaged with.
- **Timely** – by engaging early and consistently, while acknowledging that competing demands make it preferable (where possible) to have workable lead times.

What are the practical steps to ensuring meaningful collaboration and consultation?

The following steps will be taken by both the Department and the community sector to the fullest extent possible before and during any collaboration and consultation effort.

1. Clarify rationale, scope and mandate early, ensuring that improving the outcomes of children, young people and adults interfacing with the skills system is of critical concern.
2. Determine whether open or targeted collaboration and consultation is preferred, to prevent disappointment and misunderstanding.
3. Clarify the depth of participation, ranging from information provision, consultation and provision of advice through to deeper forms of participation.
4. Actively engage, noting in particular that the diversity of opinion and perspective of the sector must be considered.
5. Ensure effective and timely information sharing and provision both pre and post consultation.
6. Ensure appropriate timelines are in place and agreed by all to the fullest extent possible.
7. Maintain engagement through the life of the project, ensuring engagement is systematic, ongoing and, wherever possible, occurring at a central, regional and local level.
8. Actively build trust and good communication, within the tenets of the Partnership Agreement and the Collaboration and Consultation Framework.
9. Openly acknowledge and balance barriers and constraints during the life of the collaboration and consultation process.
10. Commit to respond to feedback, and to continuous improvement of collaboration and consultation processes.

Underlying all of these practical steps is recognition that collaboration and consultation processes are not resource neutral activities.

What mechanisms and tools can be used for meaningful collaboration and consultation?

It is vital that meaningful collaboration and consultation is undertaken using a variety of strategies in order to reflect the diversity of both the sector and the Department.

Methods that may be used include:

- Surveys
- Expert panels
- Public meetings
- Web-based consultations
- Action research
- Discussion papers
- Stakeholder visioning
- Opinion Polls
- Co-production
- Interviews
- Workshops
- Advisory committees
- Participatory editing
- Shared governance arrangements

Both the Department and the community sector are committed to an open and honest ongoing dialogue regarding the effectiveness and appropriateness of the methods that are used to collaborate and consult.

Drawing on the expertise of existing networks and structures will ensure strategic and streamlined collaboration and consultation that not only saves time and resources but also results in maximum impact. There are a range of key advisory groups convened by both the Department and the community sector, and while it is important to draw on these networks, as well as the networks and expertise of sub-sector peak bodies, future advisory groups should extend beyond traditional areas of collaboration. It is also important that information from prior consultations is drawn upon.

Further information on strategies for collaboration and consultation can be found in the *Stakeholder Engagement Framework*.

Who should take responsibility for promoting meaningful collaboration and consultation?

The Department and the community sector acknowledge that the strength of any collaboration and/or consultation process is equal to the commitment shown by everyone involved in the process. It is imperative that all those involved in one of these processes takes the decision to be active, informed and engaged.

In addition to this bottom up approach to ensuring good collaboration and consultation, the Department and the community sector intend to maintain strategic oversight and involvement in collaboration and consultation between the Department and the sector through the following means:

- The **DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Partnership Governance Group** will include collaboration and consultation as an agenda item at each of its meetings, and will address any high level issues that have been identified as constraining effective collaboration and consultation.
- The **Strategy and Coordination Division, DEECD** will take a leadership role in ensuring all parts of the Department are aware of the commitment to collaborate and consult with the community sector, and provide an avenue and knowledge base for any part of the Department that wishes to consult with the community sector.

- The **Victorian Council of Social Service** will take a leadership role in facilitating collaboration between the Department and the sector through a range of formal mechanisms, such as the Peaks and Statewide Networks Forum, and more informally, by acting as a conduit and knowledge bank for any community sector organisations wishing to engage with the Department.
- The **DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Partnership Agreement Action Plans** will contain initiatives to further streamline and enhance interactions between the Department and the sector, as identified by the Department, the sector and the Governance Group.

In addition, the Department and VCOSS commit to keeping an up-to-date ‘theme map’ of both the relevant parts of the Department, and relevant community sector peak bodies, so that any part of the Department wishing to engage with the community sector on a particular issue, or vice versa, can be directed through the correct channels.

7 - Review

The Framework will be subject to review by the DEECD-Victorian Community Sector Partnership Governance Group. Differences will be managed as per the requirements detailed in the Partnership Agreement.

