

Yarning with First Nations members about Governance - Session 1

23rd September 2024

Yarns with First Nations VMIAC members about governance



Overview

We gathered on Zoom from 3:30pm to 5:30pm on Monday 23rd September 2024. Most of us joined from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. One person attended from Yalukit Willam Country, for which the Boonwurrung people of the Kulin Nation are the custodians. We acknowledged the Elders past and present and thanked them for allowing us to visit and meet with purpose on their lands.

Facilitators: Neane Carter, Sam Brhaspati Stott and Sonia Law

Two First Nations' members took part in this yarn.

Welcome

- In keeping with VMIAC's Vision, we recognised people with lived experience of mental distress
- In addition, we highlighted the [Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Centre for Lived Experience](#) definition:
 - "A lived experience recognises the effects of ongoing negative historical impacts and or specific events on the Social and Emotional Wellbeing of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It encompasses the cultural, spiritual, physical, emotional and mental wellbeing of the individual, family or community. Furthermore, people with lived or living experience of suicide are those who have experienced suicidal thoughts, survived a suicide attempt, cared for someone through a suicidal crisis, been bereaved by suicide or having a loved one who has died by suicide, acknowledging that this experience is significantly different and takes into consideration Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' ways of understanding Social and Emotional Wellbeing."
 - In response to this, one member reflected on [Contemplative Development Pathway Theory](#) - the shame and false self-shame, which First Nations people carry. They highlighted that it is important that recognition of lived experience is distinct from First Nations lived experience recognition
 - Another member wants VMIAC to remove the term 'mental illness' from its name, which is a very Western way of looking at things

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- In this yarn, we'll be looking at what governance means to members, considering some proposed changes that VMIAC is legally required to make, and some possible changes to VMIAC's stated activities and how Annual General Meetings run. Changes to [VMIAC's Rules](#) require 3/4 of members at an Annual or Special General Meeting to vote in favour of them.
 - One member described the Rules as the constraints of the building and the richness is what goes into the building in the form of policies and procedures

Connecting

We introduced ourselves by sharing our preferred names; our pronouns (e.g. she/her, he/him, they/them); and one thing that attracted us to join VMIAC. Some members also shared their kinship affiliations where these were known. One is a sistergirl from the Stolen Generations and the other is a Palawa man descended from the lunawanna-allonah community. Members purposefully shared aspects of their lived experiences, describing a lifelong journey of investigating mental health and the shameful discrimination faced by professionals when their distress affected their employment.

One member shared that they had experience contributing to multiple Royal Commissions and has worked at VACCHO in policy roles. Another has lots of experience working in Indigenous Data Sovereignty. This is especially relevant for First Nations' people who come under community treatment orders or who are incarcerated - don't know how info is being used.

Both members were asked if they were comfortable being referred to using the titles of Aunty and Uncle and both agreed that they were.

The First Nations legal facilitator is a proud Dja Dja Wurrung, Yorta Yorta, Wamba Wamba, Wergaia, and Wotjobaluk woman with expertise in cultural dance and coil weaving.

One of the whitefella facilitators brings a consumer lived expertise. She was born on the traditional lands of the Yalukit Willam people of the Boonwurrung Nation. and was a member & policy worker at Being, the peak body for mental health consumers in NSW

The other whitefella facilitator brings legal expertise, advocating for people with lived experience of mental distress who have legal issues and in the governance of mental health non-government organisations.

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Being in the space together

Relational rather than transactional ways of being

- Don't be shame, be game!
- Two-way learning and knowledge sharing

Indigenous data sovereignty

Everyone present was invited to record what seemed important in the chat, in the spirit of co-documentation.

VMIAC has considered the principles of Indigenous Data Sovereignty and is respectful of members' rights to control their data and how it is used. To support this, a summary of the input from members in the sessions will be shared with those present with an opportunity to make any amendments prior to it being used in the report on the consultations.

Vision and activities

What does governance mean to you?

Mob contributed to a word cloud using Mentimeter, which members had started in previous consultations.



The VMIAC Committee of Management

[Simon Katterl](#), a current member of the VMIAC Committee of Management and former Chairperson, introduced himself and gave an orientation to how the Committee operates. He described himself as a social justice warrior bunny whose own lived experience provided a focus.



All VMIAC members, staff and members of the Committee of Management have lived experience of mental distress. The Committee of Management creates the conditions for good daily operations of VMIAC and sets the strategic direction for the organisation, then the VMIAC team (staff) help get us there. The Committee has monthly meetings and some sub-committees. The Chief Executive Officer is the link between the staff and the Committee of Management.

Changes to the Rules which VMIAC is legally required to make

Updates to the [Model Rules](#) for incorporated associations, like VMIAC, mean that VMIAC must make these changes to its Rules:

- *Changes to the procedures to follow if a member is suspended or expelled and appeals this decision. In general, the changes give a person more time to appeal and require an independent appeal subcommittee to be set up to consider the appeal and make decisions*
 - One member asked why a member would be suspended or expelled. Is there a bandwidth within which members' behaviour is considered ok? Can you give an example?
 - Another member asked how will data about suspended or expelled members be managed so that their privacy is respected?
 - Sonia explained that suspension or expulsion can occur under the rules where a person doesn't comply with the rules, refuses to support the purposes of VMIAC or acts in a way that is prejudicial to VMIAC. The change the Committee is considering isn't about when suspension or expulsion can happen. It's about providing members with more rights in the process if they are suspended or expelled.
 - Simon noted that this is not a common thing. He was not aware of any members being suspended or expelled.
 - One member spoke about the importance of the process for suspension or expulsion to be clear and to include the involvement of a First Nations

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person for cultural support if the member being suspended or expelled is a First Nations person.

- There might be other member based organisations, including Aboriginal Community Controlled Organisations that VMIAC can share learnings/expertise with. Ask them, how did you approach these changes? Do you have any examples you can share? And vice versa.
- *Removing the need for VMIAC to keep proxy forms from meetings*
- *Changing the term 'petty cash management' to 'cash management'*
- *Making it clearer how meetings can be held online*
- *The Treasurer of the Committee must give other all Committee members access to financial accounts and records*
- *Introducing a requirement for the Committee to keep a register of any conflicts of interest*
 - Members acknowledged that kinship relationships in Aboriginal communities might lead to perceived conflicts of interest

Feedback: *Most of this should also be in picture form for folks with cognitive disability or low literacy in English. Speak to the lowest denominator which means you need to explain the position example and then the purpose.*

VMIAC's vision

"Where all mental health consumers stand proud, live a life with choices honoured, rights upheld, and these principles are embedded in all aspects of society."

VMIAC's activities

VMIAC's activities enable it to achieve its vision.

At the moment, VMIAC's activities are listed in the Rules as:

- *Information provision*
- *Support*
- *Education and training (consumers, clinical, non-clinical staff and the general community) from the consumer perspective*
- *Individual, group and systemic advocacy*

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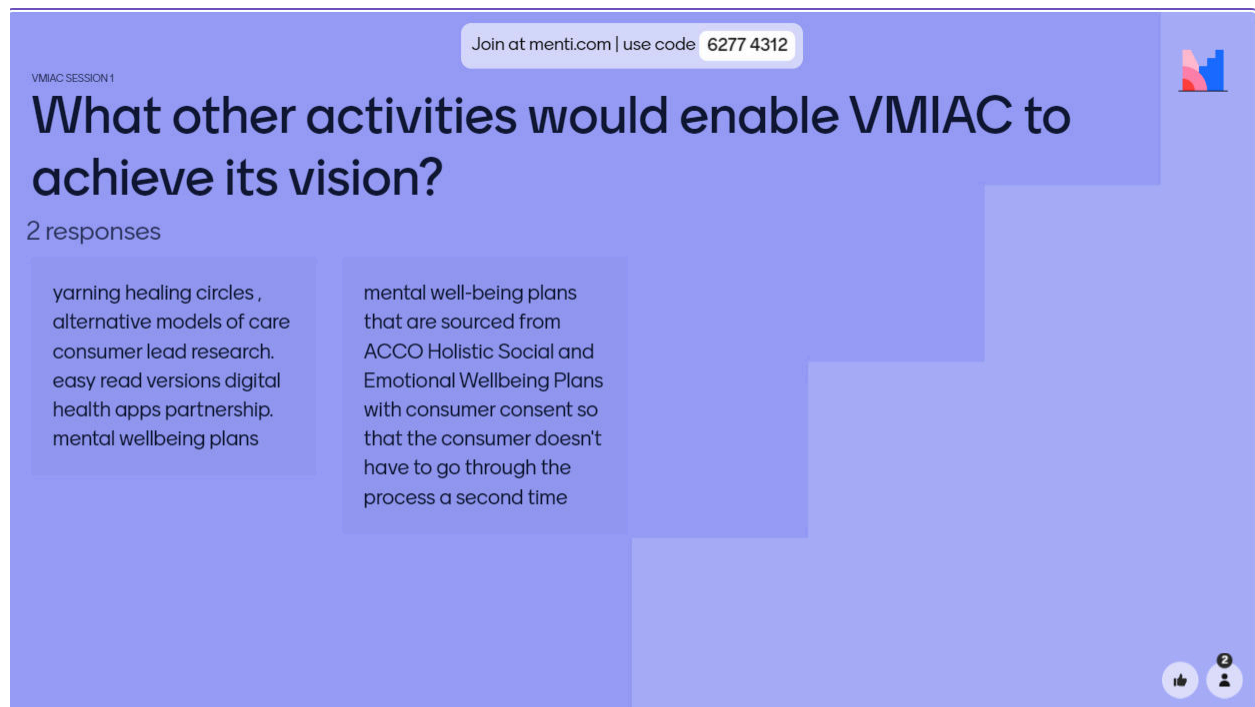
- *Research*
 - One member emphasised that research must be in partnership with consumers - led by consumers and collaborative.
 - Simon shared VMIAC's [Research Strategy](#).

One member highlighted that there was space to obtain greater clarity about VMIAC's role and purpose.

From a legal perspective, it is helpful to keep the description of activities in the rules broad and general so they enable VMIAC to respond to opportunities and changing circumstances and thinking. That may mean that activities are described in more detail outside the rules, such as in policies and procedures.

Members offered the following suggestions about other activities which would enable VMIAC to achieve its vision:

- Advocating and supporting consumer self-advocacy in engagement with police, Protective Service Officers and employment rights.
- The importance of kin and community over individualistic approaches in First Nations culture, as well as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities and LGBTQI+ communities.
- Being the 'go to' for comment on mental health issues in the media
- Engaging in systemic advocacy about the impacts of mental health on financial security, housing and access to supports, including issues with the Medicare Benefits Scheme
- Idea of having people with lived experience contributing to development of mental health wellness plans for all different kinds of intersectionality that VMIAC could advocate to be used by mental health services. Advocate with Aboriginal Community-Controlled Organisations and other organisations to support the process of developing these with people. Would need to consider intellectual property and data privacy - how transfer of wellbeing plans across services and sectors would be managed. If these were in the form of apps, they would need to be consumer-led too.
- Mentorship - supporting each other, offering care through tough times
- In Western culture, everything is bricks and mortar - why can't we shift our thinking to structures that are portable like healing hubs that don't have a fixed location, especially in a housing crisis especially for mob who are often off Country or don't have sovereignty over Country
- Some of these issues were covered with the 76 recommendations from the Royal Commission, however they have not yet been funded for implementation.

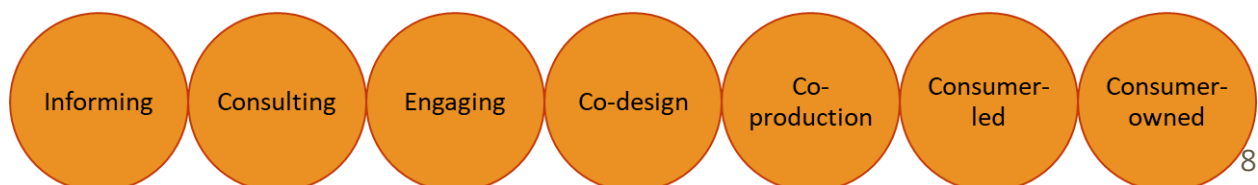


Policies and submissions

VMIAC staff write policies about how VMIAC does things. They also prepare submissions to external bodies, including the government. At the moment:

- VMIAC **informs** members through email newsletters and its website about these policies and submissions.
- Sometimes, VMIAC **consults** with members about policies and submissions too - this session is an example.
- Developing the VMIAC Reconciliation Action Plan (which both members are working on) is an example of **co-design** as it brings together First Nations and settler-colonial people with a lived experience of mental distress. If both groups are part of the implementation and evaluation of the Reconciliation Action Plan, it will be an example of **co-production**.
- The VMIAC [Navigating My Way](#) NDIS project (for which a member and a facilitator are on the Advisory Group) is **consumer-led**.

We asked mob where they would like to go on this participation ladder, which could also be thought of as a pyramid of involvement:



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Members shared the following ideas:

- The appropriate level of engagement should not be a blanket approach. It depends on the nature of the issue and its importance for First Nations members.
- Not a passive community, consumers in the foreground, leading and guiding

The Annual General Meeting (AGM)



Hands up if you've ever been to a VMIAC Annual General Meeting.

One person has attended the AGM and the other has not.



What is the value of attending a VMIAC AGM?



What would make attending the VMIAC AGM more appealing to you?

- Feedback on last year's AGM and how this was impacted by a member in a heightened space - discussion about registering to attend, appropriate conduct and what to do if a member steps off into behaviour that isn't within parameters
- Really important that there were a set of rules of engagement at the AGM
- Guest speakers
- A welcoming circle
- Opportunity to engage through a short focus group
- Sharing of food and wellness goody bags
- deep listening exercise
- Networking opportunities
- Clear agenda communicated before the meeting, including how much time would be spent on each agenda item and how questions will be managed so that the meeting can proceed in an orderly manner and to keep things on track. This may mean taking questions offline for follow up outside the meeting

Quorum at the Annual General Meeting

VMIAC must legally hold an AGM each year. There are currently 1800 members of VMIAC. For an AGM to go ahead, at least 30 members must attend. This is called the quorum.

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How can VMIAC ensure enough members attend each AGM (in person or online) to meet the quorum?

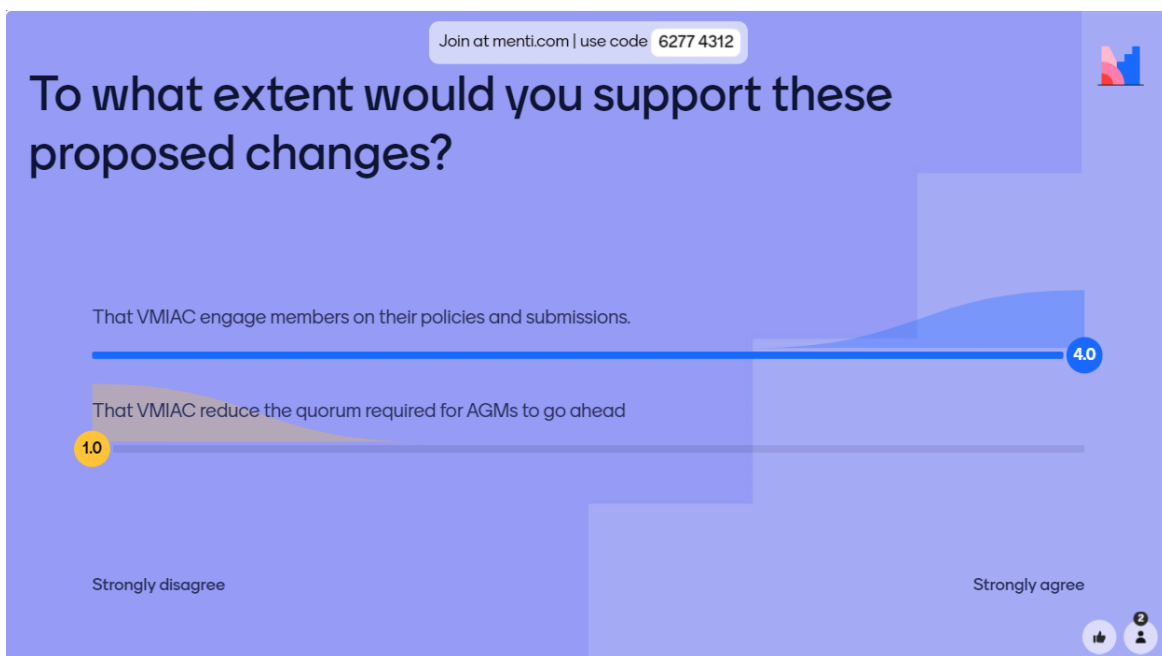
- Accessibility and different ways of participating to allow for people who are inpatients, unwell or have a disability to attend. Query whether VMIAC has a Disability Access Plan to allow for those who are inpatients or unwell to take part
- Clear rules of engagement, including processes to take questions offline for follow up outside the meeting if they are not relevant or necessary for the AGM itself
- Sending out weekly emails which each contain a highlight of interest for the coming AGM
- Have short snippet videos of different parts of the previous AGM online so that members can get an appreciation for what and how it happens to help gain participation
- Conduct the AGM in multiple modes e.g. online and in-person

Alternatively, should VMIAC reduce the quorum, and if so, to how many?

- There needs to be a representation of a number of intersections in that quorum. Having a small quorum could undermine diversity and result in unconscious bias.

Harvesting

We asked members to what extent they support these proposed changes



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They both **strongly agreed** with VMIAC engaging members on their policies and submissions. Both members **strongly disagreed** with VMIAC reducing the quorum required for Annual General Meetings to go ahead.

Next steps

Yarning with First Nations- members about governance - Session 2

The second session for First Nations' members of VMIAC will be held at **2-4pm** on **Wednesday 25th September**. The focus will be on the VMIAC Committee of Management.

In relation to the question about payment of the Committee of Management, which will be covered in that session, members had this to say:

- It's such a massive commitment of time and brain power, I totally support the Board being paid
- I have read them and I am full support for remuneration

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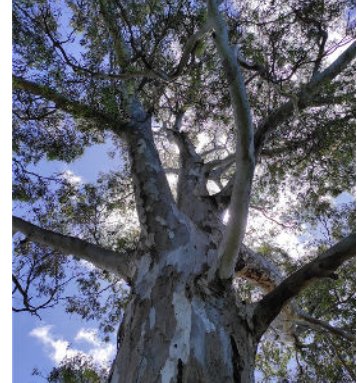


Yarning with First Nations members about Governance - Session 2

25th September 2024

Overview

We gathered on Zoom from 2pm to 5pm on Wednesday 25th September 2024. Most of us joined from the unceded lands of the Wurundjeri Woi-Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. One person attended from Yalukit Willam Country, for which the Boonwurrung people of the Kulin Nation are the custodians. We acknowledged the Elders past and present and thanked them for allowing us to visit and meet with purpose on their lands. In Acknowledging Country, we entered into a contract with Bunjil to bring the creator spirit and the environment into this space. We made a commitment to honour the community and Country we are visiting.



The importance of being heard and respected, including recognising lateral violence in ensuring a safe enough space, especially for those dealing with impacts of forced separation from family and culture. This is crucial to feeling well and resilient.

One member suggested the benefits of having an Indigenous worker at VMIAC to embed cultural ways of healing to make it a safe space for all, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. For example to provide opportunities to share connections with Country through photos to improve understanding and inclusion.

Facilitators: Neane Carter, Sam Brhaspati Stott and Sonia Law

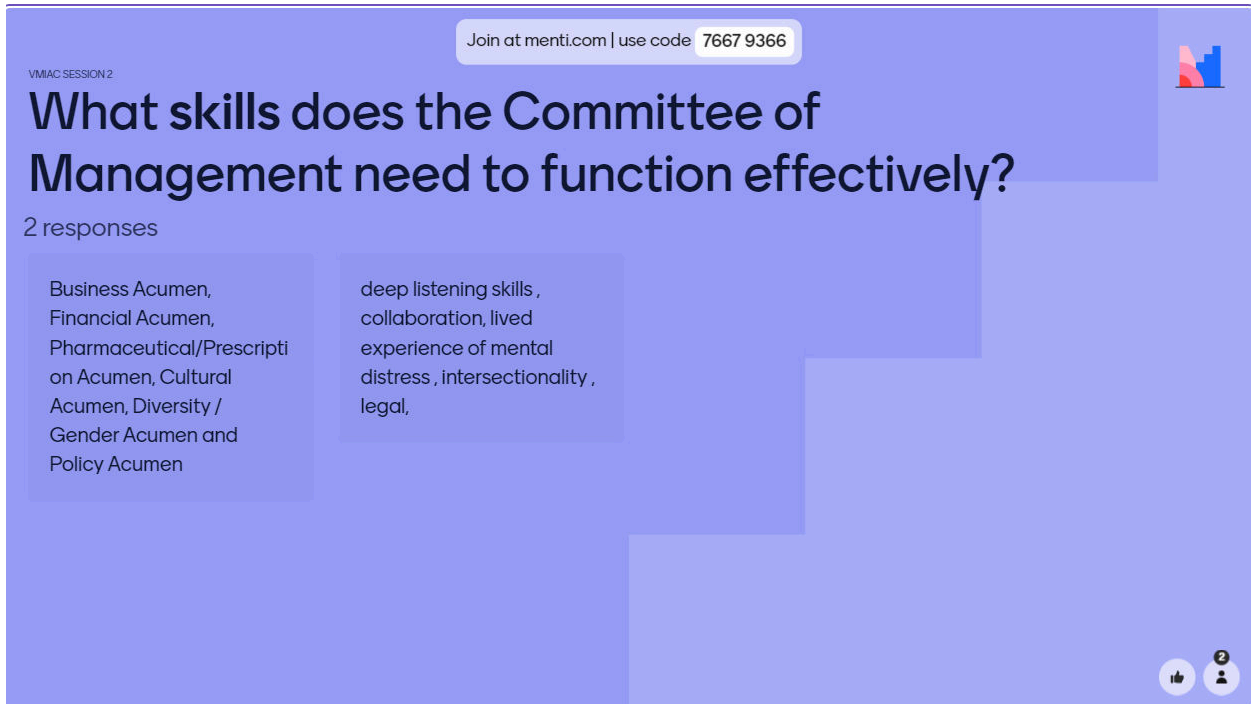
Two first Nations' members took part in this yarn.

Welcome

- In this yarn, we'll be looking at what skills and experience the Committee of Management need to work well, First Nations' cultural governance, payment of Committee members and Committee composition

A skilled and experienced Committee of Management

What **skills** does the Committee of Management need to function effectively?



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VMIAC SESSION 2

What skills does the Committee of Management need to function effectively?

2 responses

- Business Acumen, Financial Acumen, Pharmaceutical/Prescription Acumen, Cultural Acumen, Diversity / Gender Acumen and Policy Acumen
- deep listening skills, collaboration, lived experience of mental distress, intersectionality, legal,

Like, Help, Profile icons

Members also identified:

- Legal expertise, e.g. writing the constitution & hiring staff and accounting for the finances & receiving donations
- Clinical and First Nations healing expertise
- Media expertise to address misinformation, ensure that messages are consistent and aligned. This will ensure that VMIAC is an authoritative and legitimate space. This has potential to have a broader impact through the Committee's influence on the broader organisation.
- Understanding of cyber security and information management and how they impact the kind of work VMIAC does and the kind of information VMIAC holds
- Understanding of artificial intelligence and implications for VMIAC and its work, including data sovereignty requirements
- Meeting privacy requirements and appropriate governance of research. These elements support the Committee to protect the integrity of VMIAC
- Clear direction and purpose that is understood and shared by the Committee and clear to those outside so they understand VMIAC's role and whether they want to get involved.

Yarns with First Nations VMIAC members about governance

- Deep listening - Listen deeply to what people are saying and not saying rather than trying to quickly categorise
- It's important not to miss out on someone who is creative and brings new ideas - the rawness of new members who may not have prior governance experience but bring different perspective

What **experience** does the Committee of Management need to function effectively?

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VMIAC SESSION 2

What experience does the Committee of Management need to function effectively?

3 responses

- Lived and Living Experience of all the Acumen, Family, Community, Isolation, Engagement, Custodianship
- Racism,
- a victim of hate

Like, Profile icons

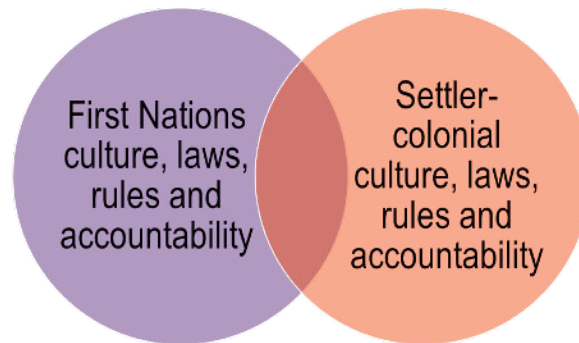
Members also identified:

- The importance of reflecting the diversity of people with a lived experience of mental distress
- Custodianship - both direct experience of being under custodianship and also someone who has responsibility for someone under custodianship.
- Experience in being good at engagement between organisations
- Lived and living experience of hate related to who they are, being on the receiving end of racism and vilification

First Nations cultural governance

VMIAC is developing a Reconciliation Action Plan. One aspect of this is cultural governance of the Committee of Management. They are proposing that 2 positions on the Committee are reserved for First Nations people with lived experience, using the the [Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Centre for Lived Experience](#) definition.

Yarns with First Nations VMIAC members about governance



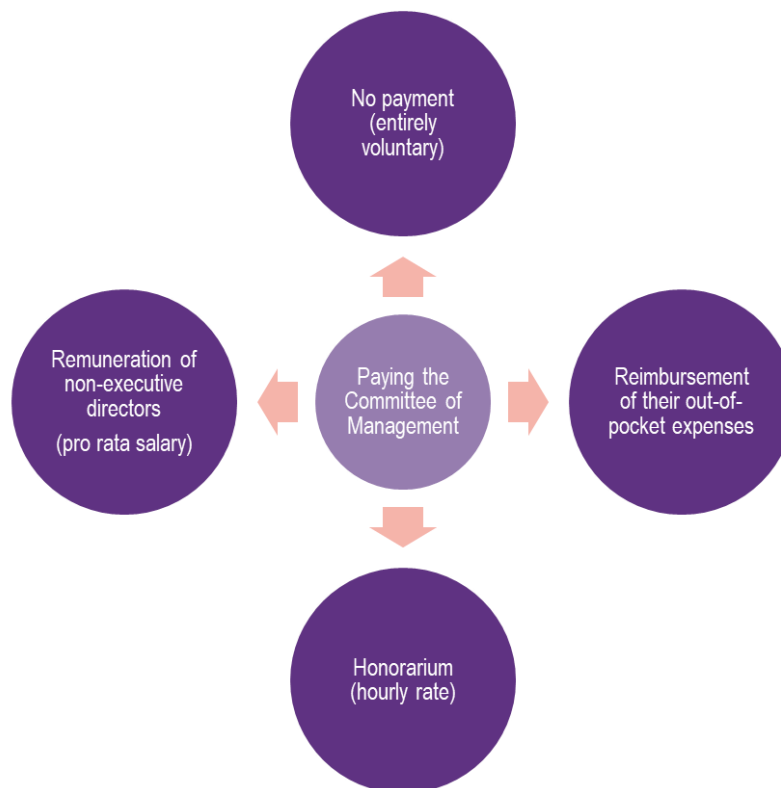
Feedback from members about this proposal was:

- Designated positions would address power imbalance and give opportunity for First Nations' ways of knowing, being and doing to influence and truth-tell at VMIAC.
- Bring First Nations ideas of healing and combine with other experiences to see what is common and can be learned from one another, e.g. through communication boards that highlight/record these experiences.
- We are over-represented in incarceration rates and being locked up in psych wards. Our cultural beliefs and practices are misinterpreted by the Western biomedical model as 'psychosis' or 'schizophrenia'. Important for us to be there to challenge racism and unconscious bias. As a people, we have shorter life expectancy and are more likely to end our lives
- If there were only 5 Committee of Management members, 2 designated roles would be too much and not reflective of the proportion of First Nations' members. If the Committee of Management has 8-10 members, then it is more viable.
- Issues with having a single First Nations position - this means a person has a huge load of being responsible to hold and represent the diversity of experience
- Culturally unsafe, tokenism & burnout if only one First Nations designated position, made harder when mob have multiple intersecting identities. If only one person, would need cultural support for them. Two members would enable each to provide support to each other
- Need to consider what these positions mean for Aboriginal people on the Committee of Management e.g. concepts of time, reflective approaches, slow vs fast work, divvying up the work. The way that we see the world is so different to Western people.
- Allow time to consider & deliberate and seek insights from community, whilst maintaining required confidentiality and privacy.
- First Nations members could be encouraged to join the Committee of Management by talking about why it matters and seeing Aboriginal involvement.
- Need to recognise the responsibility that First Nations folks would hold, being watched closely by their community.

Yarns with First Nations VMIAC members about governance

- Value in education for other committee members, so that they understand why those positions are designated and about Aboriginal ways of being, knowing and doing so this is understood in how the work is done, ie the need for 1:1 conversations with mob, have a yarn, do a bit of digging, sit with it for while, come back to them, it's a big commitment. Avoid pressure.

Payment of Committee members

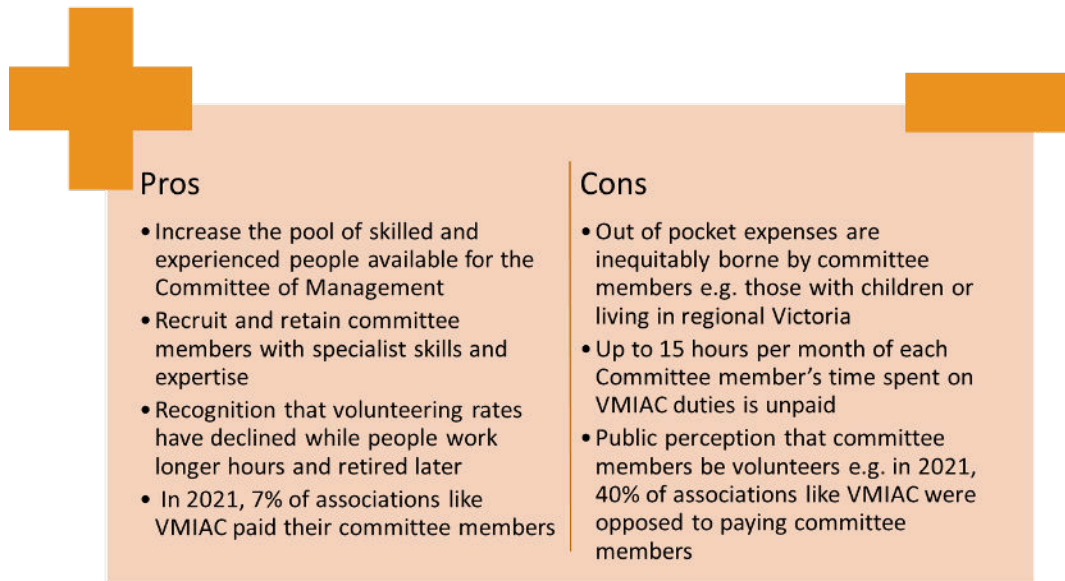


Currently, VMIAC **reimburses** Committee of Management members for their out-of-pocket expenses, such as public transport fares, mileage and meals.

Members supported the payment of Committee members, highlighting:

- CoM must be paid for their time, skills and knowledge
- Payment makes it clear that the work needs to be respected and responsibility taken
- Remuneration needs to recognise the work out of session, such as reading papers
- It makes sense to learn from what others have done
- Context of mental health consumers being underemployed and discriminated against on the basis of sanism.
- Possibility of an opt out approach - where payment is assumed and members can choose not to be paid

Yarns with First Nations VMIAC members about governance



Pros

- Increase the pool of skilled and experienced people available for the Committee of Management
- Recruit and retain committee members with specialist skills and expertise
- Recognition that volunteering rates have declined while people work longer hours and retired later
- In 2021, 7% of associations like VMIAC paid their committee members

Cons

- Out of pocket expenses are inequitably borne by committee members e.g. those with children or living in regional Victoria
- Up to 15 hours per month of each Committee member's time spent on VMIAC duties is unpaid
- Public perception that committee members be volunteers e.g. in 2021, 40% of associations like VMIAC were opposed to paying committee members

Committee composition

The following proposals were discussed:

	Current	Proposed
Size	4 minimum with no maximum	7 (minimum) - 9 (maximum)
Tenure	2 years, with scope for re-election	2 years and a maximum of 10 years
Leadership	Chair and Deputy Chair	Chair or Co-Chairs
Executive	Elected individually by members	Elected within Committee

Members shared the following thoughts about these proposals:

- If there are two designated Indigenous roles, need to also consider other designated roles e.g. LGBTIQ+, culturally & linguistically diverse, people who grew up in care (including Forgotten Australians) which will impact the size of the Committee
- The need for the Committee to include the skills and acumen noted above will also impact on Committee size
- A committee of 7-9 was supported because people may be unwell and unable to attend meetings, with uneven numbers viewed as better for voting.

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- Maximum terms were viewed positively, as bringing growth and fresh ideas, modelling to the organisation based on strengths
- A consecutive term of 10 years on the Committee without a break was considered to be too long by one member, who suggested a maximum of a total of ten years but for there to be breaks in this tenure, with consecutive terms of a maximum of three to five years at a time.
- If positions are held for too long this can create positional power that can drag the organisation down
- A mentoring sub-committee, observerships and building resilience and structures of care to support capacity building and a pipeline for new Committee members and executives was supported, recognising the importance of developing and supporting young people in particular.
- A co-chair model has potential to bring different skills and experience to the role, such as having a person without lived experience to provide a different perspective, or gender and age diversity
- Co-chairing allows for mentoring other members of the CoM and the membership more broadly, sharing the work and power and supporting learning
- The CoM electing the executive 'makes sense', stressful for this to be left with the membership

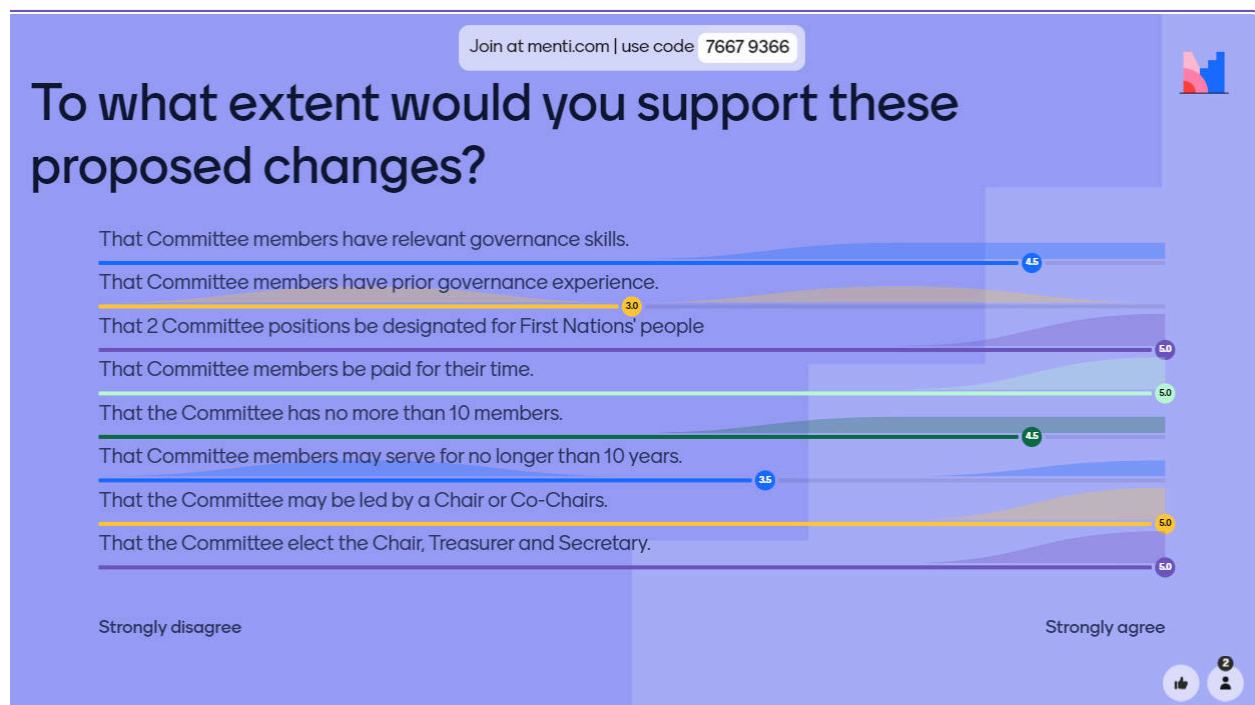
Other thoughts

The members shared these additional suggestions:

- It's really wise that VMIAC is doing this and doing this now before the organisation gets any bigger
- One member shared experience of an Aboriginal statewide peak body not seeing VMIAC as a representative of mental health consumers or the 'go to' on mental health issues
- There are opportunities to improve organisational profile and reputation through telling a story in the media or posting on Linked In about work such as Reconciliation Action Plan development or this governance consultation with mob, make it a very open experience, making the people visible to enable community to have a yarn with people, sharing workforce's experiences, interviewing workers and members about positive experiences. This could also influence other organisations to do similar positive work.
- It would be positive to create greater visibility of Committee of Management members and strengthening their connection with members, remembering the importance of human connection
- Taking a strengths-based approach is important and should be in the Rules

Harvesting

We asked members to what extent they support these proposed changes:



They both **strongly agreed** that

- 2 positions on the Committee of Management be designated for First Nations people
- Committee members are paid for their time
- The Committee be led by either a Chair or Co-Chairs
- The Committee elect the Chair, Treasurer and Secretary

Both members were supportive of Committee members having relevant governance skills and the Committee having no more than 10 members (one **agreed** and the other **strongly agreed** to each of these).

One member **strongly agreed** that members may serve for no more than 10 years while the other **disagreed** with this proposal.

One member **disagreed** that Committee members should have governance experience while the other **agreed** that they should.

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Next steps

Feedback

Your feedback on these yarns will help us to improve. You can scan this QR code or use this link:

<https://forms.office.com/r/ttPVHxeTmG>.



Members can get in touch with VMIAC in these ways:

Email	membership@vmiac.org.au
Phone	(03) 9380 3900
Facebook	www.facebook.com/theVMIAC
Twitter	www.twitter.com/VMIAC
Web	www.vmiac.org.au

Indigenous data sovereignty

Members attending the First Nations' sessions are invited to review and edit this summary of the session. Please do this by **5pm** on **Sunday 29th September**.

Reporting back

Sam and Sonia will bring the de-identified views of members who attended the 10 consultation sessions plus those who completed the online survey together into a report. We will complete this by **Thursday 3rd October**. We will share them with the Committee of Management and the VMIAC Chief Executive Officer, Vrinda Edan, who will circulate it to the whole VMIAC membership.



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Special General Meeting

Members will receive a postal or email notice in mid-October of the proposed changes to the Rules ahead. You can vote on these at the Special General Meeting on **6th November**.

Annual General Meeting

VMIAC will hold its AGM in **early December**. Members will receive postal or email notice 21 days' beforehand.