

Voice of Parents: A Model for Inclusion

Supporting participation of birth parents

June 2022

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About the Voice of Parents: a Model for Inclusion Project

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare (the Centre) is the peak body for child and family services in Victoria. Representing over 150 community service organisations, students and individuals, the Centre advocates for the rights of children and young people to be heard, to be safe, to access education and to remain connected to family, community and culture. Our vision is to see a community that is fair, equitable and creates opportunities for children and their families to live happy and health lives.

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The Voice of Parents: a Model for Inclusion Project

Through the support of Gandel Foundation and Equity Trustees - The Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust, the Centre is leading the Voice of Parents project, which aims to develop evidence and lived experience informed systemic approach to parental participation.

The project is developing a Charter of Parental Participation and a Parental Participation Model and Toolkit, which will provide foundational principles and practical resources that are culturally sensitive and adaptable to a variety of contexts, during and post completion of the project. These resources will be used by the government and the child and family services sector across Victoria for the inclusion of parents' voice in their work.

For updates on the Voice of Parents project, visit www.cfecfw.asn.au/voice-of-parents



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Acknowledgements

The Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare acknowledges and pays respect to the past and present Traditional Custodians and Elders of the Country on which we work. The Centre also acknowledges the injustices and trauma suffered as a result of European colonisation, the stolen generations, and other policies such as the forced removal of children from their families, communities, culture and land. We respect the resilience of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the face of this trauma and respect their right to, and aspiration for, self-determination and empowerment.



The Centre and the Voice of Parents project wish to thank the following people for their contributions to this work:

- The nine parents with lived experience who made up our amazing Parent Advisory Group (PAG).
- The Voice of Parents' Senior Reference Group for their continued guidance and expertise. All other parents who expressed interest in participating and who we hope to include in future participation activities.
- Helen Makregiorgos from Victoria Legal Aid for consultations on lived experience and co-facilitation.
- Lydia Trowse and Kerry Hawkins from Emerging Minds for consultations on co-design processes and best practice with parents with lived experience.
- Leanne Claussen from Parents on a Mission for consultations on lived experience and ideas for our PAG welcome packs.
- Centre staff who have consistently supported the Voice of Parents project through administrative, design, secretariat and professional advice and support. With special mention of Sheena Lestock-Kay, Bronwen Maher, Celeste Oliver, and Sue Wilson.

This report was primarily authored by Nicole Paterson with support and input from Danielle Walt and Paulleen Markwort.

The Voice of Parents project is funded through the generous support of Gandel Foundation and Equity Trustees – the Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust.

Executive Summary

Overview

The Voice of Parents project is developing a framework for birth parent voices to be heard through a Charter of Parental Participation, an agreed set of principles that can be applied across organisations and programs in the child and family services sector, and a Parent Participation Model (with a practical toolkit of resources). These resources will be used by government and the child and family services sector across Victoria for the inclusion of parents' voice in their work.

To make sure the framework and resources provide meaningful, effective and scalable ways of embedding parental participation in service design and delivery, the Voice of Parents project engaged a Parent Advisory Group (PAG). The PAG was made up of nine birth parents, over 18 years old, with recent lived experience of child protection and service system contact in Victoria. Parents were recruited through a process of selection and assessment of fit (for them as well as the project) and provided significant support, minimising the risk of harm to participants. The PAG were trained, supported and resourced to participate effectively in their advisory role.

This report provides a full discussion on the PAG participation process including key learnings. It is a companion document to Voice of Parents: A model for Inclusion: Hearing the lived experience of birth parents, which details the findings of the work with the PAG including experiences.

Principles of ethical participation

Informed by the findings of a literature review, sector survey, review of compliance frameworks and consultation process, the project developed an ethical participatory framework. The framework includes six key principles which guided the development of project strategies for recruitment, assessment, onboarding, and co-design:

- 1. Recognition of expertise:** Participants should be recognised as experts of lived experience, both in system navigation, in their own lives, and, if engaging parents, in their children's lives.
- 2. Remuneration:** A non-negotiable participant financial contribution recognising of the expertise of lived experience.
- 3. Mechanisms for sharing power:** To minimise the impact of inherent power dynamics, engagement opportunities have in built mechanisms that enable sharing power and elevating lived experience voices where possible.
- 4. Clarity of privacy and disclosures:** Provide clear parameters on the collection, storing, use and sharing of participant information. This may relate confidential and what will be used during the project. Reiterate participant choice including their ability to opt out. Make sure they are aware of any reporting obligations that could be trigger a mandatory disclosure (e.g., a child in danger) through discussions.
- 5. Accessible information:** Provide project materials and resources in a variety of ways to ensure sharing of information is timely, engaging and fit of purpose. Remember that not everyone will have the same levels of literacy and access to IT.
- 6. Trauma-informed:** Above all, engagement needs to be trauma-informed, particularly when exploring sensitive topics such as those relating to Child Protection. Projects should have a range of options to mitigate or support any distressing impacts of participating.

Recruitment of participants



Co-design workshops

In July 2021, eight co-design workshops were run with the PAG. Workshops each went for two hours and were conducted over Zoom due to COVID-19 considerations. Workshops covered a range of topics that were identified by the PAG as important for discussing their experiences of participation: child protection processes and decisions; having a child removed; having a child in out-of-home care; reunification and planning; court; access visits; understanding parents as people; the impact of worker turnover; speaking the ‘language’ of child protection; including dads in services and more.

Participant engagement with the co-design workshops was extremely successful. There was zero attrition throughout this engagement, with most workshops being attended by the majority of or all Parent Advisors. Group cohesion among the participants was also very successful. Throughout the process, participants were being asked to share some of their most vulnerable parts of their stories, and all members of the PAG attended to each parent’s difficulties and successes with generous care and understanding.

Key learnings: Recruitment of participants

- **Process:** Plan the recruitment strategy and be ready to engage as soon as participants express interest. Provide as much information as possible up front, in varied and accessible ways, emphasising the importance of hearing participant voices. Pre-empt barriers to engagement and provide options where possible such as preferred method of contact.
- **Diversity of representation:** Develop a clear strategy for recruiting diversely. Explicitly invite diverse voices in recruitment material and outline how to facilitate participation. Be flexible in planning stages to ensure underrepresented parents have options to participate (e.g., time of day, weekend options).
- **Participant availability:** Flexibility is critical to ensure room for accommodating participant preferences (e.g. date and time, online or in-person). Provide options to enable participation of certain cohorts who may face additional barriers and include alternative pathways for participating where possible.
- **Sources for recruitment:** Utilise existing professional networks with direct client contact to assist participant expression of interest where barriers may exist (e.g., access to internet). Be mindful of how widely spread information can be on social media, and that information is at risk of being misused on public platforms.
- **Onboarding:** Develop a participation agreement. This should include all necessary information

for participants to make an informed choice. Ensure participants can ask questions and seek clarification, being mindful that the process can be overwhelming. Highlight the potential benefits to participants and consider co-creating a goal/workplan to orient them and support their engagement.

- **Clear and compassionate communication:** Ensure communication throughout the recruitment process is clear and compassionate. Use trauma-informed principles to pace the exchange of information and allow space so that parents are not overwhelmed by the process. Be careful to contain early conversations about trauma and validate parent experiences where possible and appropriate.

Key learnings: Co-design workshops

- **Topics identified:** In true co-design, participants need to have control over the direction of the conversation. Provide participants with ongoing opportunities to identify topics where co-design is needed, facilitating brainstorming and minimising staff influence on the outcomes.
- **Workshop overview:** Be flexible. Workshop format should be tailored to the needs of the group, with iterative refinements to processes and content. Actively seek out feedback and make genuine attempts to incorporate this. Provide participants with options and decision-making capabilities throughout the engagement to demonstrate a genuine commitment to co-design.
- **Engagement:** Empower participants with choices wherever possible, including the choice to stop participating at any time. Ideally, participants are involved from the inception of the project. Ensure multiple options for engaging are available and consistently emphasise the value of their contributions (i.e. with appropriate remuneration). Encourage feedback on improving engagement and welcome critiques of power and authority (e.g., use of jargon by staff).
- **Group cohesion:** Group cohesion is a critical element to the success of participation. Benefits of co-design should be equally felt by participants. Establish a friendly, non-judgemental and welcoming space, and explore and normalise any feelings of apprehension. Encourage and model positive support in the group and provide clear parameters about how participants can connect with each other during or after the formal work (if appropriate and wanted).
- **Activities for engagement including co-facilitation:** Explore activities with mechanisms for sharing power with participants and empower them in this role. Support participants to lead the conversation and minimise interpretation of their words. Ensure multiple types of activities are used for discussion and have participants co-develop an agenda for future workshops.
- **Final workshop:** Reflect learnings back to participants to ensure you have captured their voices and experiences. Be clear about what happens to their work after the engagement and ensure they are recognised for their contributions. Allow space for participants to reflect on their personal experience of engagement.
- **Ongoing feedback loop:** Ensure there is ongoing communication with participants throughout the engagement. Seek out feedback, providing options for doing so and ensuring no negative consequences will occur. Makes genuine attempts to incorporate feedback. If possible, have a dedicated staff member as the liaison for participants throughout the engagement.

Key learnings: Analysis

- **Elements of co-design:** This process takes time and requires a commitment to letting go of control over the outcome. All processes need to be trauma-informed with contingencies for providing additional support. Include participants in the development of co-design processes and ensure they will benefit in addition to the project achieving its goals.
- **Support for participants:** For some participants, the impact of experiences such as grief and loss continues throughout the lifespan and can be triggered by participating. This risk requires careful planning and management e.g. by setting a clear agreement or group rules from the outset, and planning/resourcing of additional support for parents outside of the PAG.
- **Support for staff:** This kind of participation activity is resource-intensive and deals with potentially difficult subject matter. Be proactive in supporting staff to be responsible and careful with participants, for example, by providing supervision or debriefing. Strongly consider additional staff to support workshop activities (e.g., taking notes, supporting facilitation). Plan ahead for the delegation of tasks as there can be a lot to juggle at once.
- **Power dynamics:** Make consistent attempts to address power dynamics between staff and participants. For example, consider options for reducing your role as the expert (e.g., through dress, language, role titles) and regularly reiterate the value of participants' lived experience expertise.
- **Payments:** Participants engaging in co-design must be appropriately reimbursed for their work. Provide participants with options for payments and consider if this may impact other income such as Centrelink. Ensure payments are made as soon as feasible, within clearly expressed timeframes.
- **Legal considerations:** Participants need clear and plain information about their rights when participating, and about privacy and confidentiality. Provide options for a pseudonym if anonymity is preferred. Convey that information supplied is protected and anonymised unless explicit consent is provided. Legal obligations such as mandatory reporting must be transparent.
- **Retention of participants:** This is likely to depend on the implementation of other co-design elements (e.g., inclusion of participants in project development, reduced power hierarchies, targeted and careful recruitment, appropriate payment, decision-making capabilities etc.). Include participants in decisions around the type and time of activities, and ensure barriers to participation are reduced.

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

The Voice of Parents project is developing a framework for birth parent voices to be heard through a Charter of Parental Participation, an agreed set of principles that can be applied across organisations and programs in the child and family services sector, and a Parent Participation Model (with a practical toolkit of resources). These resources will be used by government and the child and family services sector across Victoria for the inclusion of parents' voice in their work.

To make sure the framework and resources provide meaningful, effective and scalable ways of embedding parental participation in service design and delivery, the Voice of Parents project engaged a Parent Advisory Group (PAG). Our PAG was a made up of nine birth parents, over 18 years old, with recent lived experience of child protection and service system contact in Victoria. These parents were recruited through a careful process of selection and assessment of fit (for them as well as the project), ensuring the risk of harm to participants was minimal and appropriate supports were in place.

The PAG were trained, supported and resourced to participate effectively in their advisory role. More importantly, they were provided with genuine opportunities to be heard by professionals across the sector and engage in a co-design process PAG members provide critical insights of the lived experiences across the child and family service system. Key learnings provided better understanding of a birth parent's journey through the system. A genuine partnership with the PAG was developed, supporting ways of working that encouraged collaboration, authentic inclusion and greater solution finding with a focus on meaningful change for more inclusive practices and processes for families in the future work together to design solutions for greater inclusion of parent voices in services.

1.2 Objectives

This report provides a full discussion on the PAG participation process, including approaches to recruitment, engagement type, topic selection, onboarding and parental involvement. The report is intended for practitioners, managers, policy-makers, and all people involved in the design and development of services for families including birth parents. It is relevant to professionals from both statutory and non-statutory organisations who may be looking to engage birth parents with lived experience in their work, particularly through co-design processes.

This report is a companion document to the Voice of Parents: A model for Inclusion: Hearing the lived experience of birth parents, which details the findings of the work with the PAG and provides the reader with direct birth parent accounts of services, and proposes solutions based on comprehensive and varied lived expertise.

1.3 Understanding the landscape

In the early phases of this project, a literature review was conducted in partnership with the University of Melbourne to identify parent engagement and participation approaches in child protection. The review examined national and international models where the voices and experiences of parents had been included in service design and development, focusing on those that had success in engaging parents and leading to improved outcomes for children and their families. It identified key strategies for effective parent participation, as well as understanding the barriers that compromise meaningful parent engagement with services.

The following key strategies were featured across supportive engagement approaches with birth parents:

- Demonstrate respect
- Communicate clearly
- Adopt a strengths-based approach
- Understand and address parental needs
- Develop a competent workforce.

Key barriers to engagement were identified, in themes relating to parents, practitioners and systemic factors:

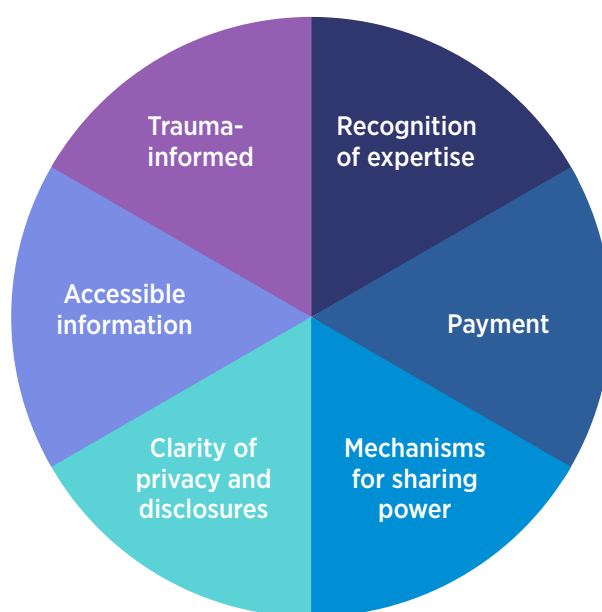
- Parent factors: Complexity of parental needs; power dynamics between worker and parent; fear and distrust; shame and stigma
- Practitioner factors: Judgemental attitudes towards parents; professional and personal bias
- Systemic factors: Dealing with multiple professionals; time constraints (the Centre & University of Melbourne, 2020).

These learnings informed the development of an ethical participatory framework to engage parents.

1.4 Principles of ethical participation

Informed by the findings of a literature review, sector survey, review of compliance frameworks and consultation process, the project developed an ethical participatory framework. The framework includes six key principles which guided the development of project strategies for recruitment, assessment, onboarding, and co-design. These principles were identified through engagement with literature on the evidence of successful co-design, through speaking with experts of lived expertise and participation, and with professionals who have facilitated co-

Figure 1. Key principles of ethical participation



design with participants across the welfare sector.

- 1. Recognition of expertise:** Participants should be recognised as experts of lived experience, both in system navigation, in their own lives, and, if engaging parents, in their children's lives.
- 2. Remuneration:** A non-negotiable participant financial contribution recognising of the expertise of lived experience.
- 3. Mechanisms for sharing power:** To minimise the impact of inherent power dynamics, engagement opportunities have in built mechanisms that enable sharing power and elevating lived experience voices where possible.
- 4. Clarity of privacy and disclosures:** Provide clear parameters on the collection, storing, use and sharing of participant information. This may relate confidential and what will be used during the project. Reiterate participant choice including their ability to opt out. Make sure they are aware of any reporting obligations that could be trigger a mandatory disclosure (e.g., a child in danger) through discussions.
- 5. Accessible information:** Provide project materials and resources in a variety of ways to ensure sharing of information is timely, engaging and fit of purpose. Remember that not everyone will have the same levels of literacy and access to IT.
- 6. Trauma-informed:** Above all, engagement needs to be trauma-informed, particularly when exploring sensitive topics such as those relating to child protection. Projects should have a range of options to mitigate or support any distressing impacts of participating.

2. Recruitment process

2.1 Theory of practice

The participation and engagement of parents throughout this project has been underpinned by an anti-oppressive theory of practice. This aligns with the key principles of the project's theory of change, including:

- **Trauma-informed:** Our work understands and reflects a trauma-informed approach that is realising of, and responsive to, forms of trauma experienced by participants. This approach recognises the potential impact of PAG discussions and potential for harm and re-traumatisation through revisiting lived experiences.
- **Safety:** Participants and staff can expect to feel physically, culturally and psychologically safe.
- **Empowerment:** We use a strengths-based approach to support participants to meaningfully engage and build autonomy, and a value system that aims to reduce the impact of structural inequalities.
- **Co-design:** Parents' participation is supported through open collaboration and co-design that reduces the impact of social hierarchies. We value the process and the outcomes as equally important.

2.2 Criteria for participants

The project aimed to recruit 6-8 parent advisors from diverse backgrounds and experiences (e.g. relating to gender, abilities, cultures) to engage in the process of co-design and participation. The criteria for participation on the Parent Advisory Group included:

- Over 18 years old.
- Experience of the Victorian child protection system, as the birth parent of a child who has been, or has been at-risk of being, removed from their care.
- Experience of the Victorian child protection system within the past 5 years. This time frame is to capture current child protection practices.

Within the target number of 6-8 parent advisors, we aimed to recruit:

- Two or three parents with both the lived experience described above, and
- Previous experience on other groups across the child and family welfare sector (e.g., lived experience participation).

2.3 Peer support

This approach integrated aspects of peer-support into group settings with parents, putting other parents at ease and modelling a 'successful' relationship between professionals and parents. This approach can give others a sense of hope and a way forward. The approach aimed to disrupt the power hierarchies that are present between facilitator and participants.

2.4 Initiating recruiting

A three-tiered approach to recruit participants included:

- 1. Direct engagement:** During May 2021 the project Reference Group was engaged to promote the project recruitment process and identify potential participants.
- 2. The Centre's networks:** Project information seeking expression of interest from parent groups were sent to existing sector networks of the Centre (for example, the Foster Care Network, Kinship Care Network).
- 3. Social Media platforms:** Communications were planned for The Centre's social media platforms, including Facebook and Twitter to promote the project and seek expression of interest.

The third tier of this approach was ultimately not utilised due to high levels of interest generated by the first and second tiers.

The project recruitment materials and key information were adapted and made available for accessibility. This included:

- Plain English project overview (Appendix 1)
- Parent invitation to participate poster (Appendix 2)
- Expression of interest online form (Appendix 3)
- Project team contact details

Applicants were encouraged to register interest for joining the Project Advisory Group by completing an online Expression of Interest process. This process enabled the project team to quickly identify applicants meeting the criteria and to contact applicants by their nominated preferred mode, time and day of week. The project team supported two applicants to complete the online expression of interest process. Applicants were largely referred to the project by case workers, or by previous case workers with whom they still had a relationship.

All applicants were contacted regarding the outcome of the process. Successful applicants were confirmed and given an opportunity to ask questions answer any questions they may have and set up a time for a 1-hour screening interview to further assess suitability for both the participant and the project staff (see Appendix 4).

2.5 Assessment and selection of applications

Figure 2. Overview of recruitment process



A total of 25 expression of interest applications were received over a 6-week period. Applicant breakdown included:

- Relationship to child (ren) – mother (23) and father (2)
- Cultural diversity - Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander (2) and/or born outside Australia (2)
- Living with a long-term disability including mental health (10)
- Varied rural and regional locations
- Varied types and recency of child protection engagement, and
- Engaged in further education studies (and others who expressed interest in future study), including Certificate or Diploma in Community Services, Certificate in Alcohol and other Drug, Certificate in Disability, Bachelor of Social Work (in progress) and a counselling course.

Readiness to participate

From the 25 applications, 18 parents went on to complete a screening interview with project staff. This screening interview informed an assessment of the participants' readiness to participate, ensuring they would be exposed to minimal risks by participating. This interview assisted parents to reflect on the potential benefits and challenges of being involved in the project. The scope of the project and the role of participants, including payment, was explained through the interview, and parents were asked about their availability and preferences for co-design workshops (e.g., time, frequency, day). Parents were informed that they could withdraw from the project or seek support at any time without repercussion.

The interview aimed to:

- Help parents to identify their interests, skills and strengths.
- Explore their goals in participating (personal or professional)
- Identify aspects of their story they want to share and discuss how this might benefit them, their family and the project.
- Consider what parts of their story might be “off-limits” for the workshops (encouraging safe disclosure and self-care).
- Consider what their triggers may be (if any) and explore how to build awareness and access support if these arise in workshops.
- Explore participants' support networks and explore whether they may need additional support throughout the participation process.
- Work through a self-care plan, exploring how they will know when they are distressed and what they will do to help themselves. Identify what staff can do to help if this happens as well.

All parents were reminded of their interview time the day prior to the meeting via text message. All interview times were open to being rescheduled per parent needs.

After the screening interviews were completed, project staff considered the applications and short-listed candidates for inclusion in the PAG. These candidates were reviewed and approved by senior project and executive staff. At this time, due to the overwhelming interest, the project budget was revisited to expand the number of participants in the Parent Advisory Group to 9 (originally planning for 6-8 parents).

Successful applicants were advised of the outcome by phone call. Unsuccessful applicants, while still considered suitable but perhaps less able to commit to the life of the project, were also advised of the outcome via phone call. These applicants were encouraged to remain connected to the project for future opportunities of engagement (e.g., additional Parent Advisor Groups, individual case studies). All indicated their interest in these opportunities.

One parent was offered a place in the PAG however declined upon offer due to personal circumstances. A further discussion of this is outlined in the Recruitment Learnings section of the report.

Conflicts of interest

During the open application process, project staff identified an unexpected conflict of interest that required proactive risk management. Two people submitted expressions of interest who were believed to be separated parents (a mum and dad to the same children). Identification was made through last names, matching timelines and shared service history. Evidence of family violence was present in both applications, requiring extreme care in our response.

Upon consulting with a number of professionals, we initiated the following risk management steps:

1. Updated our risk register to carefully record our process regarding these two parents,
2. Included new screening questions in our interview to work through a potential scenario where two parents know each other and discussing expected outcomes (e.g., alerting staff immediately so we can manage privacy and safety concerns),
3. Included an overview of expected behaviour and our response should a situation like this arise in our Participant Agreement (the consent form for participating in this project). Parents were made aware of the possibility of this situation and asked to agree that they were aware of the risks when they consented to being involved in the project.

Ultimately, neither participant in this scenario ended up as members of the Parent Advisory Group, for unrelated reasons. It was made clear that this type of conflict of interest would not necessarily preclude parents from participating in this project, although every effort to maintain privacy and safety would be prioritised.

This engagement highlights not only the need for clear processes to reduce the likelihood of such conflicts, but for staff to be experienced and resourced to have the time and capacity for careful analysis and readiness interviews. Without this, such issues may go unnoticed during recruitment, potentially causing significant distress to parties.

2.6 Parent Advisory Group

The final Parent Advisory Group comprised of:

- 9 participants (all mothers)
- 1 participant identified as Aboriginal
- 6 participants had long-term health conditions or disability
- 3 participants had current child protection contact
- 3 participants had child protection contact within the previous 12 months
- 3 participants had child protection contact within the previous 5 years

- Participants were from mixed locations (Melbourne metro and regional Victoria).
 - All 9 parents were assessed as being group ready via the application and screening interview.
- At least 2 participants had also experienced child protection involvement as children themselves.

2.7 Onboarding participants

Once participants had confirmed their offer of Parent Advisor, we arranged a time to meet over Zoom prior to the workshops commencing. This meeting had multiple goals:

- Inducting parents to the project and reviewing their Participation Agreement (consent form) with them to clarify their role, rights and responsibilities,
- Sensitisation to the themes of the workshops and the co-design process,
- Co-development of an individualised workplan.

It also provided participants with the opportunity to test out and get support for any internet or Zoom-related queries as well as “meeting” key project staff in an individual capacity prior to the full group.

Participant Agreement

A Participant Agreement was given to all members of the PAG to sign. This agreement outlined important information to help participants make a decision about their involvement in this project. It also acted as a consent form for agreeing to participate and acknowledging any risks that may be involved. The Participation Agreement was written in plain English and covered the following details:

- About the project
- Purpose of the agreement
- About the PAG
- What is involvement and what is expected
- What you will need to be involved
- What is expected of Voice of Parents staff
- How payments work
- What you can do if you have complaints or feedback
- Prior relationships to participants
- Privacy and confidentiality information.

This agreement was lengthy, however it was very important that participants in this project understood their rights, the expectations of themselves and the project, and what the roles and responsibilities would be of everyone involved. To minimise any reluctance to engage with this agreement or any difficulty reading the information, the agreement was read through which each individual participant during the one-on-one onboarding meeting over Zoom. This was also an opportunity for participants to ask any clarifying questions or to discuss anything they had concerns regarding their participation.

This meeting also was an opportunity to discuss payment options provided to participants, and to select their preferred option. Participants were given the following information regarding payment options available to them:

Figure 3. Payment options for participants

Option 1: We can pay you as a volunteer. This would mean that you would have to fill in a form which will let the ATO (Australian Tax Office) know that you are getting paid for your help on this project. These payments would be made directly to your bank account, and they would be processed every two weeks (depending on if you attended workshops in those two weeks).

Option 2: We could pay you with pre-paid visa cards. These cards are generally accepted by most places where you can pay by card. You could receive a visa card every two weeks (the same amount that you would be paid for that time) or in one lump sum at the end. We want to make sure you can access the money as soon as possible.

Option 3: We can pay you as an employee. To do this, you would need to have an ABN (Australian Business Number). If you already have an ABN and would like to be paid this way, please let us know.

Participants were encouraged to consider how these payments may impact any Centrelink payments they receive and to contact services for advice if necessary. Participants were given contact information for various Centrelink phone lines, the National Debt Hotline, Koori Help, VincentCare Financial Counselling and financial counselling services available through the Victorian government.

Participant Goals and Workplan

All members of the PAG also co-developed a workplan with staff to identify individual goals and parameters of participation. This was recorded in a Participant Goals and Workplan (Appendix 5), signed by both project staff and the participant. A signed copy of each workplan was sent to participants in their welcome pack (discussed below) for their own records and reflection. The workplan explored participants' goals and why they were important to them, identified their strengths and skills, acknowledged and planned for any obstacles in participating, and outlined 3 key steps for self-care during the project.

The project also engaged with an Aboriginal organisation to consult on best practice support we could provide to any Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander participants, including culturally sensitive opportunities for debriefing if needed. This is particularly important as the Voice of Parents project specifically explored culturally specific experiences of child removal or state intervention. One participant in our Parent Advisory Group identified as Aboriginal, and this participant was engaged in discussions around cultural support that was available and what would work for them.

Figure 4. Participant Goals and Workplan: example participant responses

The image shows two pages of a form titled "Participant goals and workplan" from the "Voice of parents" project. The first page includes fields for "Name:" and "Date:", and a section for "My 3 main goals for participating in the Voice of Parents project are..." with three numbered lines. The second page has two boxes: "These goals are important to me because..." and "When I achieve these goals I will feel...", and a larger box for "Some of my strengths that will help me achieve this goal are...".

Welcome pack

All participants were sent a welcome pack to facilitate their onboarding and to welcome them to the project. These packs were sent to participants' homes, with consent from the participant to share their address. In planning for the onboarding of participants, we consulted with lived experience expert Leanne Claussen from Parents on a Mission in QLD. Leanne generously provided insights and suggestions for what to include in our welcome pack.

Welcome packs included:

- Welcome letter (Appendix 6)
- Calendar with workshop dates and times
- Plain language project overview
- Participant agreement (signed and printed)
- Participant goals and workplan (signed and printed)
- Self-care tip sheet¹
- How to use Zoom easy guide
- Feedback and complaints form (also available as an online form) (Appendix 7)
- Pens
- Post-its
- Coloured markers
- Notebook
- Tissues and chocolate



2.8 Process reflections

Recruitment of participants in this project was considered a success. The expression of interest process exceeded expectations in terms of the number of parents applying to be part of the PAG. As noted earlier, the third tier of the recruitment strategy did not have to be employed; it is assumed this would've identified greater numbers of interested parents. Interest in this project indicates a potential need in the community to engage parents with lived experience more proactively in the design and delivery of services, and to provide avenues for parents to discuss their experiences with child and family services.

Parents who applied to the project and completed a screening interview (n=18) were very willing to share their experiences and many expressed an overwhelming gratitude for the opportunity to provide feedback and have their voices heard. They identified a clear lack of alternative pathways to share these experiences. They also demonstrated an admirable commitment to contributing to positive system change and to help future children and families through improved parental engagement. There is an abundance of potential here that is waiting to be harnessed.

Having an online expression of interest form worked well; parents were able to fill in the application on their own time, perhaps supported by a case worker, and were not relied upon to cold call project staff to express their interest. Through this form they were able to elect how they preferred to be contacted and what days/times would suit them. At this stage they had also been provided with a plain English overview of the project and what it would entail for them, a recruitment poster, contact information of project staff if they had any questions and a clear invitation to participate and receive payment for their expertise. This strategy was considered

¹ Adapted from Emerging Minds' Child and Family Partnership Toolkit: <https://emergingminds.com.au/resources/child-and-family-partnerships-toolkit/>

effective and follow up data from project evaluation surveys is expected to add validity to this process. It was also made clear to potential participants that access to a computer/internet would not be a criterion for involvement – participants were encouraged to alert us if this was a barrier for them and we would consider how their participation could still be facilitated. As discussed, throughout the application process the project budget was revisited to determine how many participants could be accommodated in excess of original plans. It was a core value of the project that parents who had expressed interest in participating would not just be turned away from the project without alternative options to have their voices heard (which was conveyed to participants who did not make it into the PAG).

Key learnings:

1. Have a plan for reaching potential participants; a tiered approach may help to control reach and intake.
2. Provide participants with as much information as possible prior to recruitment, in varied and accessible ways (e.g. pre-empting potential barriers and being clear that it is a paid opportunity).
3. Emphasise the importance of hearing what participants have to say.
4. Reduce barriers to expressing interest where possible (e.g., don't expect participants to feel comfortable cold calling or sending an email).
5. Provide options throughout this process and ask about preferred ways of being contacted.
6. Be ready to go as soon as participants express interest – don't leave them hanging.

2.9 Diversity of representation

While the project made concerted efforts to reach traditionally “difficult to engage” cohorts and ensure a diversity of representation, more targeted efforts may be needed in future engagement efforts. As with many projects in the community services sector, fathers were severely underrepresented in the number of applicants and completely un-represented in the final PAG.

Of the two fathers that expressed interest in participating, one did not continue to engage with project staff throughout the application process and the other was offered a spot in the PAG but declined due to personal circumstances. Every effort was made to accommodate and include this father in the project however they decided it was not suitable for them at this time. In line with the nature of this project, it was important to respect the autonomy and wishes of participants and their ability to make their own decisions about participating. Alternative pathways to engaging fathers in future participation opportunities have been explored by project staff: through consultation with the Voice of Parent's Senior Reference Group and by consulting with professionals engaged with dads through various other programs (e.g., Working Out Dads, Parenting Assessment and Skills Development Service (PASDS), Home Parenting Education Support Service (HoPES)).

Additional representation from parents who identify as culturally or linguistically diverse also needs to be more proactively pursued in future engagements. Attempts were made to recruit these participants through specific encouragement via case workers, and provision of translators where needed, however no applications were made. Similarly, greater representation of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander parents is needed, and future efforts should be concentrated on

their inclusion. Advice from cultural experts is being sought on improving this pathway in future engagement processes.

It is also worth noting that we did not have any representation from parents who were in same-sex parenting relationships.

Key learnings:

1. Understand what appropriate representation looks like for your participant cohort. This will help to inform your recruitment strategy for participants.
2. Develop a clear and targeted strategy for recruiting a diverse representation of participants, including through professional networks.
3. Explicitly invite diverse voices in all recruitment material, specifying how you can facilitate their participation (e.g., through translators, culturally appropriate support, child care subsidies).
4. Be flexible in planning stages to ensure underrepresented cohorts have options to participate (e.g., time of day, weekend options).

2.10 Participant availability

Another learning throughout this process was the difficulty in capturing parents' voices who were either fully or partially employed. In this project, that tended to exclude fathers who were in full time work while their children were in the care of their mothers. Further attention needs to be given to this for future engagement, for example, engagement with some parents may need to occur outside of business hours or on weekends to ensure full access to participation.

Parents who had children in their care were asked about their caring responsibilities being a barrier to participation; all parents were offered reimbursements for childcare if this was needed to facilitate participation in workshops. For most PAG members, however, their children were either in day-care already (including day-care funded by DFFH) or at school. One parent had a young child at home who was cared for during the workshops as per their preference.

2.11 Sources for recruitment

Key learnings:

1. Be flexible about the date/time of participation activities in the planning phase. A tip could be to have a few options ready to share.
2. Consider if online or in-person participation activities may work best for your cohort. This will help to inform decisions about how workshops will be run (e.g., using Zoom online).
3. Explore availability with interested parties and use this to accommodate maximum number of participants.
4. Understand limitations of certain cohorts (e.g., stay-at-home parents, working parents) and provide options to participate that work for most.
5. Provide alternative pathways for participating where possible (e.g., through individual feedback if unable to commit to group activities).

Most parents indicated that they had been encouraged to apply by a current or previous caseworker they were linked in with; this strategy was considered successful and would be utilised in future engagement with parents.

A number of parents flagged that they had been waiting for an opportunity like this project to provide system feedback on their experiences with services; ideas and suggestions for change had already been considered by some throughout their own engagement journeys. Some parents had spoken to their workers about these ideas and were encouraged to apply as their workers saw this as a great opportunity for them to be listened to and contribute to change.

Key learnings:

1. When recruiting participants, utilise existing networks of professionals in direct contact with clients (e.g., caseworkers) where possible. These professionals are likely to have best knowledge of appropriate participants through their close contact with clients.
2. Encourage professionals to assist participants in expressing interest where barriers may exist (e.g., literacy, access to internet).
3. Be mindful of how much social media could increase the volume of interested parties. The opportunity could also be promoted by community members who are not committed to the same messaging as the project.

2.12 Onboarding

Much of the onboarding process was considered to be successful and a similar process would be employed in future recruitment drives with this cohort. There were various steps throughout the process to ensure participants understood what their role in this project would be and what their rights, responsibilities and expectations would be as well as those of project staff. The need to provide information has to be balanced with the ability to take in a potentially overwhelming amount of information on the participant's behalf. This might require multi-stepped approaches to disseminating information, being concise and plain in language, checking for understanding and even reading through important documents with participants to ensure it is clear. Parents later indicated that they felt this process was "gold standard" and it helped them to make informed decisions about their participation.

Key learnings:

1. A participation agreement should include all necessary information for participants to be able to make an informed choice about their involvement in a project. This should include their rights, role, responsibilities and expectations, as well as those of staff in the project.
2. Multiple opportunities should be provided to participants to ask questions and seek clarification, and for staff to check for understanding. These processes can be overwhelming and you can't assume that people have understood things just because you have sent them an information sheet.
3. Try to engage participants in positive processes to make them feel excited about their involvement and welcome (e.g., by sending a welcome pack).

4. If workshops will be run online, meeting participants individually prior to the group can be a useful way to help troubleshoot any technical difficulties and to test out some of the online functions that might be used (e.g. whiteboard, reactions, chat function in Zoom etc.).
5. Creating a goal and workplan with participants can help to orient them to the co-design process and content. This also provides staff with insight into the motivations and barriers/facilitators of participation for that person which can assist with ongoing engagement.

2.13 Clear and compassionate communication

The topics discussed with parents during the recruitment process were often sensitive or difficult, given the nature of lived experiences with child protection. Drawing on a trauma-informed approach, the communication style used during this process was warm, curious and compassionate, with attention to the pacing of information provision and intake from parents. Project staff were careful to ensure language was clear and to check for understanding at all stages of the recruitment, and to provide compassion and empathy as a principle of engagement. Some early boundaries were established with participants, for example, by asking them not to share an overwhelming amount of detail through recruitment processes.

When difficult or upsetting experiences were described, staff checked for participant wellbeing and consent to continue with recruitment interviews. In recruitment interviews, participants were guided through identifying support networks and self-care strategies and given clear opportunities to opt out at any time they felt uncomfortable.

Key learnings:

1. Communication with participants during recruitment should be warm, curious and compassionate.
2. Be careful to pace the provision of information during recruitment while participants are getting used to the subject matter and processes.
3. Ensure communication with participants is clear and regularly check for understanding.
4. Flag potential topics for conversation early on and provide clear boundaries to ensure participant stories are contained.
5. Work with participants to identify support networks and self-care strategies. Make sure these are in place prior to engagement to ensure participants are sufficiently supported.

3. Co-design workshops

Co-design workshops with the Parent Advisory Group (PAG) were run throughout July on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Workshops each went for 2 hours, beginning at 10:30am, although three workshops ran overtime by half an hour (for which participants were also paid). Workshop dates and times were based on parent feedback during the interview process; the project aimed to cater to the availability of the greatest number of participants. A total of 8 workshops were run starting on July 6 and finishing on July 29, 2021.

Workshops were conducted over Zoom due to COVID considerations. This created an ease of access for participants, especially those outside of the Melbourne metro area where the Centre office is located.

3.1 Topics identified

Key topics relating to touchpoints of service engagement were proposed to participants during the screening process and incorporated in workshops based on their feedback. All participants agreed that the following were important topics through which to discuss their experiences and participation:

- Child protection processes and decisions
- Having a child removed
- Having a child in out-of-home care
- Reunification and planning
- Court
- Access visits.

In the screening interview, and again in the initial workshop, participants were asked what other topics they wanted to explore. Parents identified a range of key topics including:

- Understanding parents as people, not just paperwork
- How worker turnover impacts parents
- How child protection can work better with other services
- How to speak the 'child protection' language
- Improving early engagement
- Improving the provision of information (e.g., support available, parent rights)
- Improving collaboration between services
- Including dads in services.

As much as possible, these additional areas of interest were also incorporated into the workshops, and this was an iterative process throughout the engagement as other topics emerged. This ensured the project was including participants with lived experience in the process of identifying the issues and co-designing the solutions.

Key learnings:

1. In true co-design, participants need to have control over the direction of the conversation. This helps to ensure that problems identified, and solutions designed, are most likely to succeed.
2. Provide participants with ongoing opportunities to identify topics where co-design is needed. Some participants made need more time to contribute ideas, and other topics will emerge throughout the process.
3. Facilitate brainstorming and group decision-making on topics of importance with minimal influence on the outcomes.

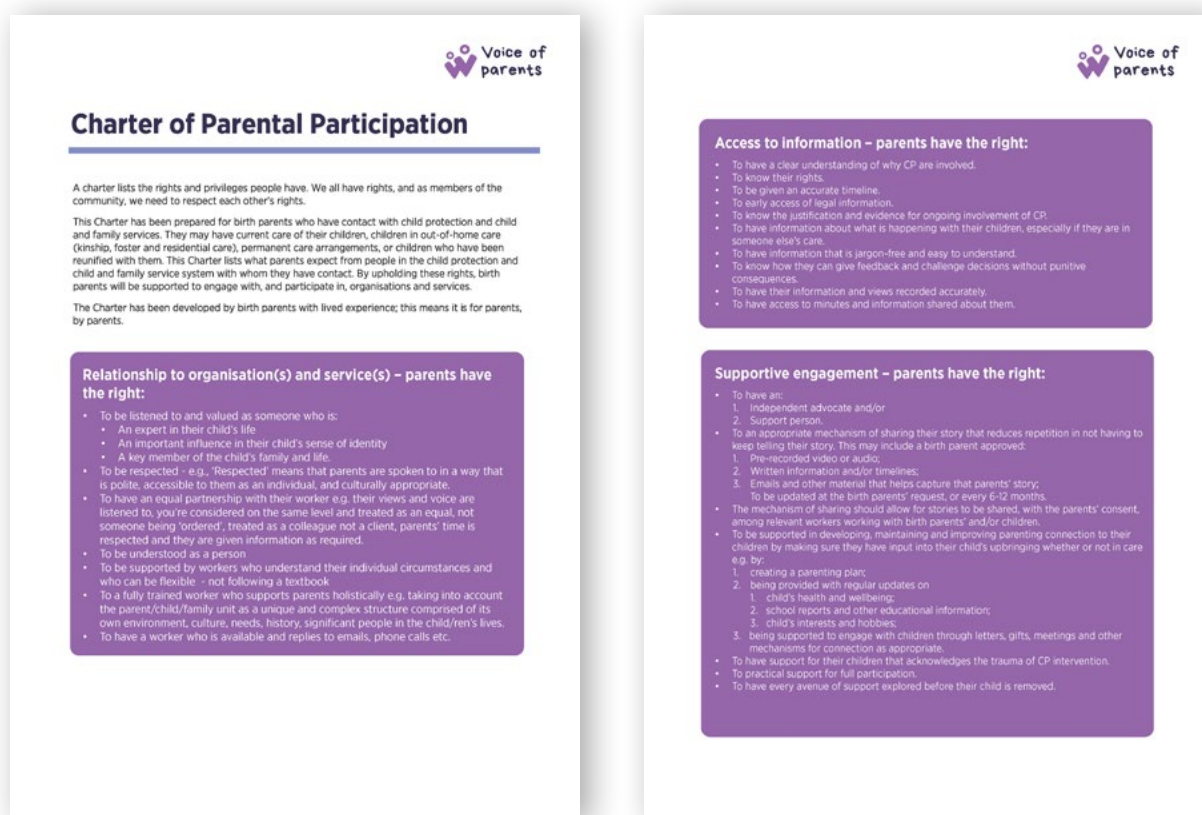
3.2 Workshop overview

| No. | Overview |
|-------------------|---|
| Workshop 1 | Overview and scope of the project, introducing everyone, feedback on important topics to discuss, setting up the group agreement. |
| Workshop 2 | Introduction from Deb Tsorbaris (Centre CEO), participant stories, how have parents felt included or listened to by services. |
| Workshop 3 | Early engagement with child protection or other services, understanding parents as people, how parents want to tell their stories to service, initial development of Charter of Parental Participation. |
| Workshop 4 | Charter of Parent Participation, engagement with child protection, participation in child removal, impact of worker turnover. |
| Workshop 5 | Parenting bond during engagement, support for parents, reunification/working with non-statutory services, what does a good meeting look like? |
| Workshop 6 | Experiences of court/ how to have difficult conversations with your workers, access visits/ ideas for resources, how can services work better together?, what does meaningful engagement mean to you? |
| Workshop 7 | Speaking the “language” of child protection, involving fathers in services, tips for other parents engaging with services, what is the most important thing you want us to know? |
| Workshop 8 | Review progress, early drafts of the Charter of Parent Participation, ideas for the model and the resources. Feedback from participants regarding their experience in the PAG, feedback from project staff, next steps. |

While not prescriptive, the workshops followed a general format of Acknowledgement of Country, welcome and review of topics to be discussed, emotions check-in, a short, guided meditation, ice breaker activity, small group discussion/s, morning tea break, further small group discussion/ large group discussion and co-creating an agenda for the next meeting. The format of the workshops evolved as we received and integrated feedback from the parent advisors.

In the first few workshops, we began to develop the Charter of Parental Participation as participants identified the critical rights of parents in service interactions. This document was refined throughout the engagement, with minimal input or influence from Voice of Parents staff. An early draft of this was presented to the PAG at the final workshop and participants indicated that this was an accurate recording of their ideas and decisions.

Figure 5. Early iteration of the Charter of Parental Participation developed by PAG



As the workshops progressed, we received feedback that the topics were quite focused on child protection experiences and that there was a desire to explore engagement with non-statutory child and family services as well. To accommodate this, we began to create options for discussions that were both child protection-related and not child protection-related. Participants were given the option as to which discussion they wanted to be a part of, and we often had a balance of numbers between both groups. This was a successful approach to include a diversity of experiences among the group. For example, not all parents in the group had experienced child removal or reunification so options for them needed to be created. Alternative topics for discussion drew on topics of importance proposed by parents throughout the engagement (e.g., involving fathers in services).

Key learnings:

1. Workshop format should be tailored to the needs of the group. Processes and content will need to be refined iteratively throughout the engagement. This ensures participants have decision-making capabilities and demonstrates a commitment to genuine co-design.
2. Actively seek out feedback on what is working and what is not working in the workshops and make genuine attempts to incorporate this.
3. Provide participants with options within the workshop (e.g., running multiple conversations at the same time, promoting participant choice). This recognises participants as being fully autonomous in decision-making processes and honours their agency in participation.
4. Be flexible. Some conversations generate more engagement from participants and it is important that their views are listened to.

3.3 Engagement

Participant engagement with the co-design workshops was extremely successful. We experienced zero attrition throughout this engagement, with most workshops being attended by 7, 8 or all 9 Parent Advisors. All participants remained engaged with the project even when they were unable to attend a particular workshop, alerting project staff to the reasons for this and assuring them of their continued interest in being involved.

Participants were encouraged to engage with workshop material even if they couldn't attend. For example, some participants would email project staff their responses to workshop discussions/questions which could be sent to them via the newsletter or in a personal email to the participant. Parents regularly communicated with project staff via text message, phone call and email throughout this period of engagement.

Key learnings:

1. Empower participants with choices wherever possible, including the decision to stop participating at any time. This reiterates their power and agency in the engagement.
2. Ideally, participants should be involved from the project's inception, ensuring there is both a need and an incentive for ongoing engagement.
3. Ensure participants have multiple options for engaging, including the ability to contribute when they are unable to attend or participate in certain conversations.
4. Emphasise participant's value at every opportunity. This includes during workshops, in all public relations (with consent), and through appropriate remuneration.
5. Encourage participants to contribute ideas to improving their own engagement throughout participation. Ask them to point things out (e.g., staff's use of jargon) and acknowledge you will not always be right.

3.4 Group cohesion

Group cohesion among the participants was also extremely successful. Project staff dedicated time to facilitating this environment by sensitising participants to the process early on, developing a group agreement of behaviour and expectations, encouraging a supportive, judgement-free environment in the group, handing over facilitation powers to parents to lead conversations among themselves, taking time to do ice-breaker activities (often facilitated by a Parent Advisor) and defusing any tension between workshops with individual debriefing.

It must be noted (and the participants highly commended) that the group's warmth, encouragement and support of each other was an organic by-product. Throughout the process, participants were being asked to share some of their most vulnerable parts of their stories, and all members of the PAG attended to each parent's difficulties and successes with generous care and understanding. In the initial workshops, parents spoke of their fears of judgement, being pitied and being seen as a 'bad parent'. It is a testament to their empathy and compassion for each other that this did not eventuate in any way as a part of the group.

Parents also regularly used the chat function in Zoom to express support and understanding to each other when sharing aspects of their story/ experiences with service engagement, particularly when it had been difficult. This supported findings that relationship development and cohesion could be supported and facilitated even in online environments.

Key learnings:

1. Group cohesion is a critical element to the success of participation. Projects need to balance the benefit of co-design to participants as much as the eventual outcome/deliverables.
2. Target group cohesion through a dedicated process in recruitment and onboarding (e.g. through sensitisation of the process, negotiating expectations).
3. Establish a friendly, welcoming and non-judgemental space for participants to feel comfortable engaging with the group. Support this environment in the development of a group agreement.
4. Provide space to explore participant concerns about participating, normalise and encourage sharing of similar feelings.
5. Encourage and name positive examples of within-group support when it happens (e.g., through Zoom chat function).
6. Part of a group cohesion may mean participants want to connect with each other outside the group. Consider what parameters need to be in place to manage individual privacy and confidentiality while also respecting participant autonomy (e.g., avoid requests to set up a group Facebook page).
7. Provide options for participants to stay connected with each after formal group work finishes, if participants express interest.

3.5 Sharing of participant's personal stories

“I'm really excited to hear other people's experiences.”

The PAG identified a strong desire to share stories with the group, in a separate activity to the integration of their experiences in our co-design work. While honouring our co-design commitment and ensuring parents were leading the direction of conversation, a trauma-informed perspective required that we put some parameters in place to ensure minimal risk of harm to all participants while doing this activity.

Although we engaged participants through a careful process of onboarding and sensitising them to the topics expected, there was potential for re-traumatisation or vicarious trauma to occur in the group sharing activity that needed to be addressed. Prior to the second workshop, an e-newsletter was sent out to all participants to help prepare them for this activity, and this was followed up in detail during the next workshop to ensure participant choice and safety were maximised. Below is a diagram that outlines the process undertaken.

Figure 6. Process for sharing participant's personal stories



1. When did child protection first contact you?
2. What was happening in your life at this time?
3. Did anything major happen during your engagement with child protection?
4. Are you still engaged with child protection or other services?

As expected, and while protecting PAG members' privacy, there were common themes across the experiences of participants: trauma, loss, violence, systemic disadvantage, lack of access to information and support and mental health difficulties. It was powerful to hear the participants sharing their experiences of system engagement with all their strengths and struggles, then acknowledging and validating each other, and reinforcing our shared goal of improving the system for future families.

We were also reminded that going through this experience of service engagement can be taboo for parents and families, with minimal opportunities for them to talk about their experiences, and there can be high levels of shame and stigma attached to being involved with child protection.

The PAG responded very positively to the process of sharing their stories with each other. One parent thanked the others in the group for speaking about their experiences and told them:

“We are important...we are so lucky to be on this [Parent Advisory Group] and to try to make a difference.”

Key learning:

While there may be some risks attached to this kind of story sharing exercise that require extremely careful management, there may also be great potential for such an activity to contribute to positive group cohesion and a sense of solidarity and reinforce a shared commitment to a project's goal.

3.6 Activities for engagement including co-facilitation

Various types of activities were undertaken with the PAG in the workshops to try and maximise opportunity for parent leadership and contribution. As well as large group discussions, we tended towards increased small group discussions as the workshops progressed for a number of reasons. In large group discussions, we were regularly running short of time to have a robust-enough conversation where parents felt they could contribute everything they wanted to say. Breaking into 2 small groups was a way to give people more time to speak. This was also an opportunity to have parents facilitating the conversation instead of project staff. Parents would volunteer and be allocated a small group discussion to facilitate in the previous workshop.

Ahead of their facilitation, project staff would send them all the necessary information so they knew what the topic would entail, and they would be encouraged to facilitate however they liked with some guidance and suggestions from staff. One staff member would also be present in each break-out group to support the parent facilitator as needed (however this was almost never necessary). This was a powerful mechanism for sharing power within the group.

Parents provided very positive feedback about this process and Voice of Parents staff saw enormous benefit in having parents undertaken this role, particularly as it is a process where parent voices are genuinely being facilitated and recorded. Once again, the PAG participants rose to the occasion and did a wonderful job of supporting each other throughout these processes. 8 of the 9 parents in the group contributed to workshops in this way, and many expressed their interest in continuing to develop this skill further beyond our workshops.

Other activities being utilised to facilitate parent contributions include polls through Slido, creating a word cloud of emotions (see below image), using images to indicate experiences, and creating eco-maps of support networks. Participants were able to use the supplies sent to them in their welcome pack to brainstorm, take notes, draw pictures however they worked best. At various points in the workshops, we asked permission for parents to share their work with us (e.g., by sending a picture via text message).

Example activity 1: Emotions word cloud

Q: How did you feel when you first had contact with Child Protection?



Example activity 2: Group discussion about participation in child protection

When you were working with Child Protection:

1. How were you included in the decisions being made about your family?
2. Were you given enough information?
3. Did you know what your rights were?
4. What did your workers do well?
5. What did your workers not do well?

At the completion of each workshop, we jointly developed an agenda for the following workshop to ensure parents were contributing to the direction of conversation. This also helped to signpost to parents what we'd be talking so they could prepare for any emotional impact or plan if they want to sit out of certain conversations due to sensitivity.

Key learnings:

1. Explore activities that have mechanisms for sharing power with participants, and empower them in this role where possible.
2. Support participants to lead the conversations and to capture this in their own words. Minimise interpretation from professionals as much as possible and preserve genuine participant voices.
3. Ensure there are multiple types of activities to facilitate discussion, acknowledging different styles of learning and expression among participants.
4. Develop an agenda together at the end of each workshop to facilitate participant contribution to the conversations.

3.7 Final workshop

In the final workshop we shared the progress we had made through the co-design process, with project staff presenting an early draft of the model, ideas for resources and an early iteration of the Charter of Parent Participation. This was presented to the PAG as a summation of their input and work, to ensure that we had appropriately captured their ideas and solutions as they intended. Participant feedback was very positive, and the group felt their views had been adequately captured and represented.

Project staff shared their views on the strengths of the group and the contributions of each participant. The PAG were asked to share their experiences of the process as well. The Centre's CEO Deb Tsorbaris was also present in this final workshop, sharing their views on the value of the co-design process in Voice of Parents and how the Centre intends to progress this work. Participants were given the opportunity to ask Deb questions, mostly high-level questions about sector engagement with the deliverables from this project.

Key learnings:

1. Reflect learnings back to participants to ensure you have captured their voices and experiences.

2. Be clear about what happens with their work beyond formal engagement. Provide options to stay involved and continue to make decisions about the work they've contributed.
3. Allow space for participants to reflect on their engagement and acknowledge their contributions to the project.
4. Ensure recognition is given to participants and explore consent for any potential for public recognition.

3.8 Ongoing feedback loop

It was important for the project to establish an ongoing feedback loop with PAG participants. Between each workshop, project staff distributed an e-newsletter via the online platform Mailchimp, which consolidated learnings from the previous workshop, provided information for the next workshop (e.g., Zoom link, meeting agenda), and exchanged information such as support for facilitation, reminders to submit invoices for participation payment and general words of encouragement.

Parents were also being contacted one-on-one by Voice of Parents project staff between workshops to debrief and understand any feedback they may like to give. These check-ins provided staff with the opportunity to defuse any rising tension, understand parent experiences of the group, and to debrief after any difficult conversations ensuring a self-care plan is in place. Participants were at liberty to answer and utilise these phone calls as they saw fit.

Feedback was also continuously encouraged via other mechanisms, including an online feedback and complaints form, an evaluation survey, and direct communication through email, text or phone calls. All avenues for feedback were utilised by PAG participants, and learnings were captured and accommodated where possible.

Key learnings:

1. Develop a strategy for ongoing communication with participants throughout engagement. This is an importance mechanism for ensuring you have accurately captured the voices and experiences of participants.
2. Continuously invite and actively seek out participant feedback and make genuine attempts to incorporate this.
3. Provide participants with options for providing feedback, including anonymously and outside the group setting. Reassure participants that project staff are open to negative feedback and no punitive consequences will occur.
4. Have a dedicated staff member who is available as a liaison to participants throughout the engagement.

4. Post workshop engagement

4.1 Parent Advisory Group reflections

Members of the PAG advised us that they found their engagement to be extremely meaningful. All 9 parent advisors talked about the total absence of other avenues to provide feedback, and all were motivated by creating a better system for parents and children in the future. The lack of attrition and very high engagement with the co-design activities indicates the value of this kind of project and of hearing parent voices.

At the conclusion of the workshops, parent advisors spoke of the importance of this work and how proud they were of their involvement in the Voice of Parents project. All indicated an interest in staying engaged with the project and being involved in other opportunities related to parent participation. Several parents spoke about their desire to do more peer-advocacy work as they discovered a passion for this through the project.

All parents who participated in the post-workshop surveys indicated that they felt confident to share their story, felt respected and listened to by others including the project team, and felt they contributed and achieved the goals in their individual workplans.

Figure 9. “What has this project meant to you?” Participant responses



4.2 Parent suggestions: Key elements of engaging with birth parents

- Ensure parents have information about, and access to, support (independent advocate, legal support, other services, family/friends).
- Remember the impact of information gathering and repetition on birth parents AND their children.
- Understand how parents want to tell their stories.
- Acknowledge and support parent emotions.
- Find opportunities to seek parent review and confirmation of information being used in their case.
- Include both parents (and other important people) in decision-making processes and discussions about their child/family.
- Be transparent and accountable throughout the engagement.
- Be available for support, questions, clarification that is needed.
- Support should be long-term and genuine, even beyond an intervention if parents need.
- Recognise strengths of parents and acknowledge progress made.
- Recognise the impact of worker turnover on parents.
- Check in with parents about how they prefer to communicate.
- Time is VERY important – any disruptive intervention needs to be as short as possible and safe for everyone involved.
- Make sure assessments are based on the most up-to-date information (e.g., not a case note from crisis point in the past or from other contexts).
- Everyone has a past and a history - where there is past information acknowledge this and reflect on progress made.
- Better initial engagement.

4.3 Parent suggestions: Resources to support engagement with birth parents

For services/practitioners:

- Supporting parent participation in the initial engagement
- Supporting parent participation when they have a child who is not in their care
- Supporting parent participation through court processes
- How parents want to tell their story
- How to support a parent-inclusive child protection investigation
- How to have difficult conversations with parents
- How to have a good meeting

For other parents:

- Tips for parents, by parents
- Explaining key terms and processes in plain language

5. Analysis

5.1 Elements of co-design

Genuine co-design processes that are set up to be trauma-informed and supportive of participants take time. It has been important to the success of this project so far that there was built in time to carefully plan and execute the steps of this process and to learn and adapt along the way. Processes like the one undertaken in this project need to be understood as time and resource-intensive from the outset. It also needs to be acknowledged that the process is iterative throughout; project staff need to be careful not to be attached to an outcome before any co-design happens. To ensure we were supporting parents throughout the co-design process, project staff were contacting PAG members in between all workshops to provide an opportunity for them to debrief. Again, this is a time and resource-intensive process. It was critical, however, to the support of the participants, and part of the trauma-informed care that must be provided when exploring participant experiences that can be difficult or traumatic.

At every point possible, participants were provided with options and choice, to protect and promote their autonomy and to ensure system-related damage was not enacted. The process of co-design was given equal weight and attention with the outcome of the process (e.g., the development of the model, Charter, toolkit). It was crucial that the participants benefitted from engaging in this process as much as the project benefitted from their insights and experiences in the development of our deliverables. A careful process of recruitment that was sensitive to the potential risks of this kind of participation helped to ensure our PAG was made up of people who are:

- in the right stage of their journey to be reflective and forward-focused,
- well-supported and cognisant of self-care,
- understanding of the potential risks of being involved (such as emotional distress) and have protective factors in place,
- open to sharing and hearing other people's stories,
- able to thrive in a group setting.

Key learnings:

1. Co-design takes time and requires a commitment to letting go of control over the outcome.
2. Co-design with potentially vulnerable participants needs to be trauma-informed. Participation activities that explore potentially difficult aspects of people's lives also need to protect participants from the risk of re-traumatisation and further harm.
3. Consider contingencies for providing support to participants beyond project scope if needed.
4. Participants should be included at all stages of co-design including from the inception of a project to establish need and interest.
5. Participants must benefit from the co-design process in addition to assisting a project achieve its goals.

5.2 Support for participants

It is important to have a comprehensive plan for supporting participants when engaging people with lived experiences. Asking participants to talk about their experiences requires projects to set appropriate parameters, provide notice of topics in advance, and to be compassionate, as well as providing more formal support such as debrief opportunities or access to counselling if needed. Clarity of purpose for engaging participants on these topics will allow participants to make informed decisions on contributing to discussions. It is important for staff to be aware of potential triggers for each participant prior to their engagement, and to provide alternative participation pathways or the ability to opt out of certain discussions if preferred (e.g., the option to provide a written response instead of participating in a group discussion). Certain experiences such as grief and loss can impact participants throughout their life and these responses may come up at unexpected times. Careful planning about risk management and support is needed; this can be facilitated through tasks such as setting up a group agreement at the outset of engagement and having additional formal support available for participants outside the project.

Key learnings:

1. Activities that ask participants to share lived experiences require supportive parameters to ensure participant wellbeing.
2. Flag expected topics ahead of time so participants can prepare and make an informed choice about their engagement.
3. Provide alternative pathways for participating for topics that may bring cause distress for some participants (e.g., a written or video account instead of through group discussion).
4. Understand lifelong impacts of certain experiences (e.g., grief, loss) and carefully plan how this can be supported.
5. Consider external support that can be offered to participants if needed, such as debriefing or counselling outside the project.

5.3 Support for staff

As well needing to care for the participants, staff also had to be cognisant of the risks involved in this kind of engagement. Throughout this process, staff were exposed to many difficult elements of peoples' stories, including those from parents who were unable to self-regulate or contain difficult emotions, and those who shared distressing or traumatic details of their narratives. Project staff were supported throughout this project with clinical supervision and encouraged to engage in self-care wherever necessary.

Senior project staff provided ongoing opportunities to debrief and facilitated flexible work schedules to accommodate time for self-care or less intensive client-facing work. Subscribing to a holistic, trauma-informed lens of practice, it is equally important to support staff through this process with the provision of time, flexibility, and emotional care. This in turn ensures that participants can be provided best practice engagement and support themselves.

Key learnings:

1. This kind of participation activity is resource-intensive and deals with potentially difficult subject matter. Proactive planning should occur to support staff in providing responsive and consistent care to participants.
2. Supervision or debriefing opportunities for staff can be helpful.
3. Strongly consider having a second staff member in co-design workshops to take notes and support with any additional facilitation needs (e.g., providing information in the chat over Zoom).
4. Staff may need to wear a lot of hats during this process. Plan ahead for the delegation of tasks (e.g., note taking, planning workshop content, liaising with participants, facilitating payments, coordinating participant roles in workshops).

5.4 Power dynamics

Where possible, project staff attempted to dilute and divert power hierarchies that can dominate client-professional interactions. Project staff made every effort to work with parents in a casual, respectful, and empowering manner. This could include things like not wearing overtly professional outfits in meetings, using plain language, avoiding jargon and encouraging participants to call us out if we slipped up on this, avoiding role titles, using first names and ensuring that staff also shared personal information to engender a more equal dynamic of power. Project staff also consistently encouraged feedback, including any negative feedback, through various avenues and made genuine attempts to incorporate this feedback when received.

Where possible, participants were encouraged to lead the conversations in our workshops, and project staff attempted to avoid giving undue input into the discussion unless it was required to facilitate the discussion. Often, the role of project staff was to summarise, clarify, and reflect back to the group, ensure everyone in the group was getting a chance to speak, and to try to keep workshops on time. The use of parents as co-facilitators contributed to a reduced hierarchy of power, allowing parents to direct the conversations, to facilitate input from each other and to accurately record and reflect parent voices back to the group and to project staff.

Parents were reminded at every opportunity that they had expertise in lived experience of service engagement, and that we wanted to listen to their accounts so we could learn from them.

Key learnings:

1. Addressing power dynamics between staff and participants is perhaps the most important element of co-design.
2. Consider options for reducing your identity as the 'professional/expert' in co-design activities (e.g., dress, avoiding role titles, relinquishing decision-making power, using plain language).
3. Reiterate the value of participants' lived experience expertise. This is important as participants may not see themselves as experts and giving them this opportunity to be recognised as such can help to disrupt deep-rooted power hierarchies between professionals and clients.

5.5 Payments

Every effort was made to ensure payments were made to parents as quickly and painlessly as possible. Inevitably, there were some learnings to be kept in mind for future participation processes. As noted above, parents were given three options to receive payment based on their preferences, with all choosing to be paid in instalments via invoice as a volunteer or by prepaid visas. Originally, digital prepaid cards were provided to participants through the website Thank You Gift Cards for the first fortnight of engagement. While this is a fast process that can offer participants immediate payment, there were some issues with this approach. Issues that arise may include participant comfort with card validation, use of gift cards at certain venues (ex: grocery stores may not accept gift cards), and using cards for payments of certain suppliers.

Following feedback, parents were then given the option to choose physical or digital cards. All chose physical cards. Prepaid visas were purchased from Australia Post, and these were sent express to participants requiring a signed, end-to-end receipt to ensure safety of delivery. This was expediate and convenient, however from a project perspective it adds to the cost of payment (e.g., postage, extra security) and is resource-intensive to organise.

Another limitation of prepaid cards (both digital and physical) is maximum value amounts (e.g., Australia Post cards has a limit of \$500 per card). This meant that large payments had to be sent using multiple cards with varying amounts (e.g., one participant elected to receive a lump sum payment with prepaid cards after the workshops).

There were also some difficulties using an invoicing system with parents when the lockdown restrictions were enforced; some paperwork sent by participants to the Centre offices were inaccessible and no alternative postal address was suitable (i.e., employee's homes). This created a delay in payment for one participant. We addressed this immediately upon learning, and payment was fast-tracked using the digital visa card for that person. Electronic literacy is also a potential limitation of this invoicing approach.

A solution that was identified was arranging pre-filled paperwork and sending it to the participant for electronic signature. This was an effective way of organising participant's signature and approval from authorising officers at the Centre. This would be the recommended approach in future participation opportunities, in conjunction with options for physical or digital prepaid cards based on participant preference (acknowledging the limit of these cards and additional processing/postal fees).

Key learnings:

1. Participants engaging in co-design must be appropriately reimbursed for their work. This is an essential part of a project budget that engages participants and asks them to contribute their time and expertise.
2. Provide payment options for participants to choose from based on what will work for them.
3. Consider the impact of payments on participants' income, particularly if they are receiving a Centrelink payment.
4. Payment must be made to participants as soon as feasible. Participants also need to be provided with clear timelines as to when they can expect payment.

5.6 Legal considerations

Participants were given information about privacy and confidentiality in their Participation Agreement. This was informed by the Centre's Code of Conduct and the Centre's Privacy Policy and Procedure, such as where data is stored and who may have access to this. Parents were assured that their personal information would not be accessible to anyone but key project staff without their consent, and that their contributions to the project would be de-identified. Participants were asked to agree not to discuss any other member's personal information outside the group and also asked not to contact other members while the workshops were still running (they have since shared email addresses with each other). All participants were given the choice to use a pseudonym, although no one chose to do this.

It was also critical for project staff to be clear about the legislative boundaries for privacy and make participants aware of disclosure responsibilities in mandatory reporting situations. Parents were provided with the necessary information through their Participant Agreement regarding these scenarios and encouraged to assess the risk of information they wanted to share as part of the co-design work.

A scenario did arise where one participant did not attend a workshop and was uncontactable for a number of days. Due to a combination of circumstances, project staff sought advice on whether a welfare check was required if we could not make contact with this parent. Steps were taken to advise the parent of the potential need to make a report however they were able get in contact and advise that that was not necessary.

Key learnings:

1. Participants need clear and plain information about their rights when participating. Having this in writing may not work for all participants; other ways of sharing this information may be required.
2. Legal obligations such as mandatory reporting must be transparent.
3. Be clear about privacy and confidentiality during participation activities (e.g., who owns the information, where personal information is stored, what consent will be asked for).
4. Give participants the choice to use a pseudonym if they prefer to remain anonymous.
5. Personal information supplied by participants must be protected and anonymised unless explicit consent has been provided by participants.

6. Conclusion

Co-design workshops were run with nine Parent Advisors to understand their lived experience insights on service delivery, design and development in child protection and child and family welfare service. By using the processes described in this report, parents were well resourced and highly engaged in the co-design work, and in various supportive activities (such as participating in a short video to promote their work). All participants were extremely committed to the core goals of the project – to give parents more of a voice in decisions that affect them, and to improve outcomes for children and their families. Many critically important key learnings were identified by the PAG, which are outlined in detail in *Voice of Parents: A model for Inclusion: Hearing the lived experience of birth parents*. Major themes of these learnings have been identified, and these will inform the development of the Voice of Parents model of parent participation and framework.

7. Next steps

Design work continues to develop the Voice of Parents model of parent participation, supporting resources and the Charter of Parental Participation. The PAG will be engaged and remunerated to participant in design progress including reviewing, providing feedback and endorsing a final model.

Similarly, the Senior Reference Group is being engaged in the review of the model, Charter and resources. This group will provide expert advice and direction on the implementation of this work and help to provide a professional lens. Through this group, up to 5 trial sites will be identified as part of the early implementation phase of this project. These sites will be provided with first drafts of the model, the Charter and the toolkit of resources to trial their use in services. Feedback will be incorporated in the next iteration of these publications and the PAG will also review these changes. Publication of these deliverables is expected in the first half of 2022.

Opportunities to run additional PAGs is being explored, as is the development of case studies with parents who have lived experience of child and family services including child protection. These case studies will be a deep dive into parents' experience, intended to highlight elements of service engagement where the expertise and resources of birth parents were underutilized, or where their inclusion led to positive outcomes for the family. These case studies may inform the development of resources that are part of the toolkit supporting increased inclusion of birth parents in services.

Upon completion of the project, a launch for the publications is intended. Parents who have contributed to this project will be invited to attend and be thanked for their hard work and input into the model, Charter and associated resources.

Appendix 1: Plain English project overview



About the Voice of Parents project

Voice of Parents is a two-year project that is run by the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare in Victoria. In this project we want to talk with parents who have been involved with organisations such as family services, child protection or other child and family support services. We are really interested in talking with parents who are over 18 years old, and who have had to work with child protection in Victoria in the last 5 years (since 2015).

In this project we want to listen to your experiences of child protection and other services. We think that you have expert knowledge of these services and that you know what worked or didn't work with them. We think that your experiences can help us all to figure out a better way to work together to support children and their parents. We want you to help us put together some resources that will show services how they can better help other parents like you in the future.

By talking with you and other experts, we are planning to develop:

- A Charter of Parental Participation (what we all think needs to happen every time services work with birth parents)
- An agreed set of principles that can be applied across organisations and projects in the child and family service sector (what we all think is important for services to do when working with birth parents)
- A Parent Participation Model (this will help services to understand how they should work with birth parents)
- A practical toolkit of resources (this will give services advice on how to work with birth parents).

In this project, we want to make sure all services are better at listening to what parents have to say, and including them more in their work. We think this will be better for everyone and that it will help children to thrive.

About the Parent Advisory Group

We want to talk to a group of 6-8 birth parents for this project. You will all have some experiences of child protection but you will all have different stories. We want parents from all different backgrounds – mums or dads, old or young, parents who are loud or quiet and parents who speak any language or are from any culture.

The group will include people who have also had contact with child protection and/or child and family services. We will make sure that it is a non-judgemental space where we will all learn together about people's different experiences. Sharing and listening to other people's experiences will help us to do the best work possible.

Thank you for your help with this important work.

Should you have any questions please email Nicky Paterson at
Nicole.paterson@cfecfw.asn.au

Supported by Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees – the Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust

Visit <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/voice-of-parents/> to learn more

Appendix 2: Parent invitation to participate poster



Join our Parents Advisory Group

Are you a parent and over 18 years old?
Have you dealt with Child Protection in Victoria?
Did this happen between 2015 and now?

What will you have to do?

- If you are selected for the project, you'll have a phone chat with a staff member. We'll get to know each other and find out how we can make sure this will be a positive experience for you.
- Attend some virtual workshops and meetings with other parents like yourself. We'll talk about some parts of your story and work together on ways to make it better for other parents and kids in the future. We can also talk about other ways you can be involved.

Why should you get involved?

- You'll be paid for your time – you are the expert!
- You'll meet other birth parents who will share their stories about working with child and family services.
- You'll help to make sure other parents feel more included and are listened to when working with child and family services.

What do you need?

- You only need to have reliable internet and a computer at home (or a tablet or laptop). If this is not available and you still wish to be involved, we can work with you to identify a solution.
- You won't have to go anywhere. All of our conversations will be on the phone or the internet and we will support you to use the technology.

What now?

If you are interested in joining the Voice of Parents project as a Parent Advisor please fill out the [Expression of Interest form](#) and we will get in touch.

Should you have any questions please email Nicky Paterson on Nicole.Paterson@cfecfw.asn.au

Even if you're not sure if you have an important story to tell – we want to hear from you!

Supported by Gandel Philanthropy and Equity Trustees – the Arthur Gordon Oldham Charitable Trust
Visit <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/voice-of-parents/> to learn more

Appendix 3: Expression of Interest online form

Voice of Parents - Expression of Interest

This Expression of Interest form is for birth parents with lived experience who would like to join the Voice of Parents project Parent Advisory Group. This form has a range of questions about you - your background, your experience, and how you might like to participate. Your details will not be provided to any third parties.

While the project is recruiting 6-8 birth parents, those who do not progress will be provided with other opportunities to have their voices heard.

If you would prefer to speak to someone about your Expression of Interest over the phone please call [number supplied] (Monday - Thursday, 9am - 5pm)

You can learn more about the project here: <https://www.cfecfw.asn.au/voice-of-parents/>

Should you have any questions about this project please email Nicole Paterson on Nicole.Paterson@cfecfw.asn.au

Email

Full Name

Please provide us with your full name and any preferred name.

Are you over 18 years old? (please select one)

- Yes
- No

Postcode

The postcode in Victoria in which you currently reside.

Phone number

A mobile or home phone on which we can reach you.

What gender do you identify as? (please select one)

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Other

Do you identify as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander? (please select one)

- No
- Yes, Aboriginal

- Yes, Torres Strait Islander
- Yes, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

What language do mainly you speak at home?

In which country were you born?

Do you have a long-term health condition or disability? (please select one)

- Yes
- No
- Maybe
- Other

Are you a birth parent? (please select one)

A birth parent is the biological parent of a child. Birth parents might be known as the child's mum or dad, or by a different name that reflects their relationship.

- Yes
- No

Have you ever had contact with Child Protection in Victoria? (please select one)

Child Protection contact can mean: You/your child have been the subject of a notification or investigation by Child Protection; or an order has been made for you/your child (e.g. Temporary assessment order, Interim accommodation order, Family preservation order, Family reunification order, Care by Secretary order, Long-term care order, Permanent care order, Undertaking).

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

How recent was your last contact with Child Protection? (please select one)

- In the last year
- 1-5 years ago
- 6-10 years ago
- 10-15 years ago
- 15+ years ago
- I currently have contact with Child Protection

Was your child removed from your care either temporarily or permanently? (please select one)

The Voice of Parents is project that works with birth parents who have been in contact with Child Protection, especially parents who have had a child removed from their care. This could mean that you have had a child or children placed into kinship care, foster care, permanent care, or another care arrangement.

- Yes, temporarily placed in another form of care (ex: foster, kinship, or permanent care)
- Yes, permanently placed in another form of care (ex: permanent care or adoption)
- No, my child was not removed from my care

***Have you ever been required by Child Protection to work with a child and family welfare service?
(please select one)***

Child and family welfare services may include: Family support services, parenting services, family violence services, foster or kinship care services, alcohol or other drug services.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

Which services or services were you engaged with?

You may not remember the name of the specific organisations, in which case consider the type of service. For example, parenting services or a foster care case worker.

Why are you interested in the Voice of Parents project? (tick all that apply)

- I had a positive experience and want to share it
- I had a negative experience and want to share it
- Some of the people I worked with were really supportive and I want to talk about how they helped me
- Some of the people I worked with were not very supportive and I want to share what I think they could have done better
- I have suggestions for how we can improve the system based on my experience
- I want to meet and talk with other parents who have had similar experiences to myself
- Other

In your home do you have access to any of the following? (tick all that apply)

- A computer, laptop, tablet or iPad
- The internet
- A quiet place/room where you can close the door

How would you like us to contact you? (tick all that apply)

- Phone call
- Text message
- Email

When would you prefer us to contact you? (tick day and time)

- Monday
- Tuesday
- Wednesday
- Thursday
- Friday

- Morning
- Afternoon

If not selected would you be interested in participating in other opportunities with the Voice of Parents project or the Centre for Excellence in Child and Family Welfare?

If you select yes we may contact you for participation in surveys, interviews and/or other opportunities to work with people with lived experience.

- Yes
- No

Is there anything else you would like us to know, including anything you might need support with to help you participate in this project (e.g., childcare, language interpreter)?

Appendix 4: Screening interview

Date:

Name:

Pseudonym (explore with parents):

Phone number:

Interviewer:

Decision:

Parents are to be reminded of this meeting 2 days prior to the agreed time via text message.

Parents to be contacted by project staff for an onboarding interview via their preferred mode of contact (e.g., Zoom or phone call) at a time agreed upon in the initial contact during recruitment.

Introduction of interviewer, facilitator and parent

- Introduce name and explanation of role, share some small personal info e.g. how long I've been a social worker/researcher and what I'm excited about in this project.
- Explain purpose of this interview and that it will take 45-60mins.
- Ask consent to take notes - brief explanation on how notes will be used and who can access them.

Basic program information

- Overview of Voice of Parents project.
- This project is not run by Child Protection and is not associated with Child Protection.
- What codesign means and how the participant will be involved (specific tasks).

Basic group information

- Explanation of workplan and workshops with other parents, some in-between individual contact, including what workplans and workshops are.
- Explain benefit of the group process and that parents can opt out at any time.
- External support will be available and we want to acknowledge that some of the material may be upsetting – self-care is important and we will go over this more later.
- Participation is paid in recognition of lived expertise, in instalments.
- Group is semi-structured, with the ability for parents to help lead the meetings if they're interested. Themes include:
 - Experiences of child protection
 - Experiences of removal and entry of a child into the out-of-home care system
 - Experiences of parenting connection whilst a child is in out-of-home care
 - Experiences of a child being returned to a parent's care
 - Pre- and post-natal support (particularly first-time parenthood)
 - Experiences of court

Explore how the project relates to parent's needs/goals/interests

Q1: How did you find out about this project?

Q2: What makes you interested in participating in this project?

Q3: In what ways do you think participating in this project would be helpful for you?

Q4: What skills or strengths do you think you have that will help you to participate in this project?

- Prompting question: Do you have some personal/professional goals you wish to achieve? (e.g., connecting with others, telling your story, making it better for someone else).

Q5: What makes now the right time for you to participate in this project?

- Prompting question: Has someone encouraged you to get involved? Do you think it will be useful for you to participate in this process?

Q6: Are there any topics related to this project that would be particularly helpful or important to cover?

- Themes are child protection, removal of child into OOHC, parenting connection while child is in OOHC, reunification, pre- and post-natal support, court experiences.
- Explain how their story will contribute to the project.

Explore self-care and awareness of needs

Q7: Are there any topics that might be sensitive or particularly difficult for you to discuss?

- Explain safe disclosures, confidentiality, mandatory reporting obligations.
- Confirm if anything in their story is "off limits".

Q8: How do you think you'll be able to tell if something we're talking about is making you feel upset or is overwhelming?

Q9: What has worked in the past to help yourself feel better when this happens? and is there anything you think we could do to help?

Q10: Do you feel like you have enough support if this project does bring up some difficult feelings for you?

- Prompting question: Are you currently accessing any individual counselling or support services?

Explore self-care strategy – let's make a plan together for what to do if your reactions become overwhelming.

- Feel free to walk out of your meeting or stop your work if needed and find a safe and comfortable space to relax.
- Feel free to return to your work when comfortable and/or return to your meeting if you feel up to it. Remember, there will be no judgement from our staff.
- Seek support from our staff during the meeting if you need it. If this is not possible, seek support from staff after your meeting.

- Are there friends/family members you can reach out to?
- Support services such as Lifeline.

Q11: There is no expectation that participants will tell all the parts of their story that are sad or traumatising if they don't want to, but other people might feel okay to share these experiences in discussion. Is that something you will be okay with?

- Yes or no – discuss if needed

Q12: Because we want to include mums and dads in this group and capture a range of experiences, there could potentially be a scenario where we have someone in the group who has a history of domestic violence perpetration. If this happened, would that be something you would feel comfortable about?

- Explore as necessary

Q13: There could also be a scenario where you could know someone else in the group, including an ex-partner who might also be interested in participating. If you found out that you knew someone in the group, what would you do?

- Explore that we would want them to tell us immediately of any connections between group members as soon as they find out. We will also outline our expectations for this scenario in the participant agreement.

Q14: We would ideally like parents to commit to attending all the group sessions as this will help to make sure all participants are able to support each other and can get as much out of the group as possible. However, we do understand that things can come up and interrupt plans. Is there anything that you're currently going through that you think could make it hard for you to participate in this group?

- Prompts: mental health, suicidal ideation, accommodation and transport, special needs, childcare difficulties, relationship difficulties

Q15: Is there anything you think we might be able to do to make it easier for you to participate in this project?

- Explain we are not case managers.
- Explain parameters of support we can provide e.g., childcare reimbursement, translators.

Explore past experiences and concerns about groups, review expectations

Q16: Have you ever been involved in a project like this? If so, what was your experience like?

- Explore if there was any negative experiences and how this may have impacted their attitude towards the group
- Explore if there is any anxiety towards the group setting

Q17: Do you have any concerns about being involved in this group setting?

- Give an overview of who else might be involved in the group and the kinds of characteristics they may have.
- Explain how we will establish basic rules together e.g., self-disclosure, sharing information, good listening.

- Clarify expectations about speaking and behaving (e.g., no belittling or abuse language).

Q18: How do you feel like you go working in a group setting?

- Explain the basic idea of how we will address power dynamics – I am not the expert; I will help to bring people in and make sure everyone gets a turn to speak.
- Prompting question: if there is someone in the group who is really loud do you find it hard to speak up?

Q19: How do you feel like you go working in a group setting?

- Explain the basic idea of how we will address power dynamics – I am not the expert; I will help to bring people in and make sure everyone gets a turn to speak.
- Prompting question: if there is someone in the group who is really loud do you find it hard to speak up?

Explain how it will work with facilitators and participants and how this role may be shared if parents are interested. Explore any interest.

Check in with parent about how they are feeling so far about the project and the groups and ask if they have any questions.

Q20: How do you prefer to be contacted?


- Email, text, phone, mail

Q21: How are your skills in using technology? Have you used Zoom before?

Outline next steps and finish interview.

The development of this screening interview was informed by the pre-group interview for Foundations, a group program for men who have been sexually abused in childhood, accessed <https://learn.livingwell.org.au/mod/page/view.php?id=61>.

Appendix 5: Participant goals and workplan

 Voice of
parents

Participant goals and workplan

Name:

Date:

My 3 main goals for participating in the Voice of Parents project are...

-
-
-

These goals are important to me because...

When I achieve these goals I will feel...

Some of my strengths that will help me achieve this goal are...

Other skills I'm interested in developing are...

Some options for how I can develop these skills include...

Some of the obstacles that may come up for me are...

The way I plan to overcome these obstacles are...

If I feel overwhelmed at some point during participation in this project I will...

-
-
-

I acknowledge that participating in this work takes strength and courage and I want to tell my future self...

Appendix 6: Welcome letter for PAG (accompanied Welcome Pack)

CONGRATULATIONS on being selected to be in the Voice of Parents' Parent Advisory Group! We are very excited to have you onboard with us and we thank you for agreeing to be a part of this important project. We are really looking forward to working with you to design a better model for working with birth parents in the child and family welfare sector. You are all experts of lived experience - I look forward to hearing your stories and suggestions!

I hope that this will be a really positive experience for you, and that you feel proud to be part of our Parent Advisory Group.

Before our first workshop

Please read through the documents in this pack. You will find:

- Easy-to-read project overview
- Participant agreement
- Self-care tip sheet
- Feedback and complaints form

If you have any questions about these documents please don't hesitate to call me! I am available to talk throughout this project, and you can also give anonymous feedback through the form provided in this welcome pack.

At our first workshop

Please come to the meetings with an open mind and an open heart. Be courageous, ready to work hard, and ready to listen to other people's experiences. Together, we will try to design a new way of working with birth parents that is more inclusive, more respectful, and better for future families.

It is important that we all look after ourselves during this project. Even more important – let's try and have some FUN along the way.

Nicky Paterson

(Voice of Parents mobile supplied)

Appendix 7: Feedback and complaints form



Feedback and complaints form

We are happy for you tell us if you have any feedback or complaints. For example, you might want to tell us that:

- We have done something well.
- We have made a mistake.
- We have treated you badly or unfairly.
- We have made a wrong decision.
- We can do something better or differently.

What would you like us to know?

Write your feedback or complaint...

What would you like us to do?

Write what you'd like us to do about your feedback or complaint...

Would you like us to contact you about this?

Leave your name as well as your phone number if you would like to be contacted.

Thank you for sharing your feedback or complaint with us. We will try our best to listen to what you have told us and to take action if something needs to be fixed or improved.