

Case study – enabling Indigenous-led reform



Community Panels – putting joint decision making into practice in Inner Sydney

Background

In Inner Sydney two Indigenous communities, Redfern and La Perouse, have strengthened their collaboration through the regional Empowered Communities model. With facilitation from backbone Inner Sydney Empowered Communities (ISEC), they have agreed first priorities and presented to government a development agenda called 'Pathway of Empowerment' (see earlier [Jawun case study](#)).

As part of the Pathway of Empowerment, all policies, programs and investment decisions within the Indigenous region should be assessed from a community perspective. In 2017, the ISEC team decided to approach this by applying three tests proposed in the EC Design Report¹:

1. Empowerment – Is what is proposed consistent with the Indigenous Empowerment policy?
2. Development – Is what is proposed supported by international and national evidence bases for Development?
3. Productivity – Is what is proposed the most productive use of the available resources?

Practically, implementation of this requires government to devolve part of its decision making power to community and play the role of enabler in supporting the community to realise their vision. ISEC needed to design a Joint Decision Making (JDM) mechanism to support this.

Approach

In the first half of 2017, ISEC designed a rigorous but practical approach to the implementation of JDM and the Productivity Test. By October, a pilot Community Panel took place, whereby community delegates assessed non-Indigenous service providers against the community's Empowerment and Development principles.

First, the process was underpinned by a commitment from the Minister for Indigenous Affairs to providing a weighting of 75% to EC leaders in Indigenous Advancement Strategy (IAS) funding decisions. The Minister had also made a statement that he wanted to see all IAS funding be directed to Aboriginal Controlled Organisations over the next two to three years. With this commitment in place, a clear breakdown of roles and responsibilities between ISEC and government were established.

For the October pilot, one program delivery area was reviewed, and a total of six programs were assessed. These were programs which were being delivered by non-Indigenous organisations, funded by IAS, and whose contracts were ceasing at the end of 2017.

The Community Panel process comprised five phases:

1. **Notification** to service providers with contracts coming to an end and guidance on self-assessment of the organisation's alignment to the Pathway of Empowerment
2. **Data Collection** by the office of the Prime Minister & Cabinet to review alignment to the Pathway of Empowerment

¹ <https://empoweredcommunities.org.au/about-us/our-proposal/>

3. **A Community Panel** of six people, representative of the community and the sector in question. The Panel assessed each program's degree of alignment to the Pathway of Empowerment according to a matrix clearly stipulating characteristics for service providers. A detailed recruitment process ensured a good cross-section of the community and equal representation from La Perouse and Redfern communities. Delegates were recruited through EC opt-in organisations, underwent an induction process covering ethical guidelines, and signed a confidentiality clause
4. **Review and Recommendation by the ISEC Board**, based on the evidence and feedback: renew, vary or cease the program under assessment
5. **Sign-off** as a result of deliberation and joint decision-making by ISEC and PM&C

The pilot Community Panel took place over an evening, in the Board Room of a key Indigenous community organisation in La Perouse. A local caterer fuelled the group's already strong commitment, and together they reviewed each program against the matrix of community-agreed principles. Again and again they reminded themselves of what the community agreed were the building blocks of empowerment for their community, and the ways in which a good service provider supported these. Panel members decided to work collaboratively on a shared assessment rather than a set of individual ones.

Outcomes

The recommendations from the Community Panel process were supported with confidence by the Minister of Indigenous Affairs. And as anticipated, the process was as important as the outcomes, with participating community delegates feeling energised by it:

"It was empowering to sit with fellow community members and make decisions that we know will improve outcomes for our community members"

"I was a bit unsure of what to expect but I was very happy with being involved once I learned what it was all about and the importance of our process and input with our wealth of experiences"

After the pilot, it was agreed that the Community Panel approach would be continued under IAS as a process for joint decision making in Inner Sydney. It will be used to ensure future funding decisions will be aligned to regional Development Agendas defined by the local Indigenous leaders and community.

ISEC shared information on the community panel implementation within the Empowered Communities network, particularly other backbone organisations. They acknowledged the specific regional context for its success, while encouraging that the principles and core components be adapted to progress joint decision making as part of the Empowered Communities reform movement unfolding across the nation.

Next Steps

After the success of its implementation, the community leaders and Prime Minister and Cabinet have commenced discussions with other Departments to provide the same level of endorsement for this process. Inner Sydney receives only a small amount of funding under IAS – so it is critical, in order to continue to drive efficiencies and align services to community priorities, that the NSW State Government and other Commonwealth departments also authorise this approach. This reflects the sense of accomplishment felt within the region at having translated into action their vision for joint decision making as a vehicle for Indigenous empowerment.

This practical and symbolic achievement is explained by ISEC Regional Director Eula Rohan:

"This Joint-Decision Making process has brought community members directly to the table to influence change and make decisions about the future of their community. It is a major step towards self-determination and empowerment."

Community members assessing services providers, and working more closely with government, brings a new level of accountability to the equation. Oversight by ISEC board ensures that duplication and misdirection of funds comes to an end in this region."

This process is breaking down the current supply-driven model and replacing it with a community demand-driven one."