The Victorian Collaborative Centre
For Mental Health & Wellbeing

Guidelines for establishing sustainable Statewide Communities of Practice

within Victorian Public Mental Health and Wellbeing Services

Contents

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Purpose of Guidelines

CoPs are a valuable mechanism for fostering connection, innovation, knowledge sharing, and evidence-informed practice across diverse roles and settings (Li et al., 2009; Noar et al., 2023; Wenger et al., 2002).

The Victorian Collaborative Centre acknowledges the foundational work of the Centre for Mental Health Learning (CMHL) Victoria in developing these guidelines to support Communities of Practice (CoPs) across the mental health workforce.

This updated, non-prescriptive guide outlines the Victorian Collaborative Centre's current role in supporting the establishment and sustainability of CoPs across Victoria. It includes:

- Guidance on establishing, coordinating, and evaluating effective, sustainable CoPs
- An overview of key roles, including convenors, members and statewide mental health educators
- Support for connecting members and using digital platforms such as Basecamp
- Useful tools and links to assist with meeting facilitation and CoP evaluation

Definition of a Community of Practice

A Community of Practice (CoP) is a group of people who, through their shared interest or passion, voluntarily and continuously engage and collaborate to deepen their knowledge and expertise to advance a professional domain. CoPs are characterised by:

a) a shared group identity, interest or passion (*domain*)

b) regular joint activities, interactions and reflections and shared learning (*community*)

c) the development of resources, knowledge, attitudes, skills, and practices that support continuing professional development and evidence-based practice (*practice*).

(Wenger, 1998)

See:

- Appendix A: Comparing Communities of Practice with other collaborative formats
- Appendix B: Key Features of a Successful CoP

CoP Aims and Potential Outcomes

Aims	Potential Outcomes
Connect mental health professionals around a shared area of practice	• Stronger professional networks and sense of belonging • Greater understanding of peers' roles and responsibilities • Improved access to practical and mutual support • Enhanced wellbeing, job satisfaction, and workforce sustainability • Strengthened professional identity
Promote collective learning, innovation, and growth	• Expanded opportunities for professional development • Enhanced knowledge, skills, and attitudes • Strengthened capacity for best practice
Share information and resources	• Greater access to practical, time-saving resources • Reduced duplication of effort ('avoiding reinventing the wheel')
Explore roles, strengths, challenges, and successes through opportunities for reflective practice	• Enhanced innovation • Improved solution focussed problem solving • Strengthened mutual support
Support evidence-based practice	• Advancement in the practice domain • Enhanced evidence building and knowledge translation • Increased visibility of initiatives to a broader audience
Improve the overall quality and experience of consumers, families, and carers within Victorian public mental health services	• Centred expertise of people using services • Enhanced transparency and partnerships with lived experience in service provision • Improved outcomes for consumers, families, and carers, as defined by each CoP

COP LEAD ROLES

Convenor(s)

Two or more convenors is ideal - it helps share the load and sustain the group

The role includes:

- Sending calendar invites
- Managing the membership list and Basecamp
- Ensuring meeting minutes are taken
- Chairing the meeting (or allocating a chair each time)
- Offering meeting surveys at the end of each CoP session
- Coordinating topics for upcoming CoP meetings

Members

Members are the heart and leaders of the CoP

The role includes:

- Supporting convenors as needed (e.g. taking minutes)
- Attending meetings regularly (or sending an apology)
- Suggesting and discussing topics
- Engaging in Basecamp discussions
- Sharing resources and examples of practice
- Completing meeting surveys and the annual evaluation

Statewide Educator

The Statewide Educator provides support and statewide oversight for the CoP

The role includes:

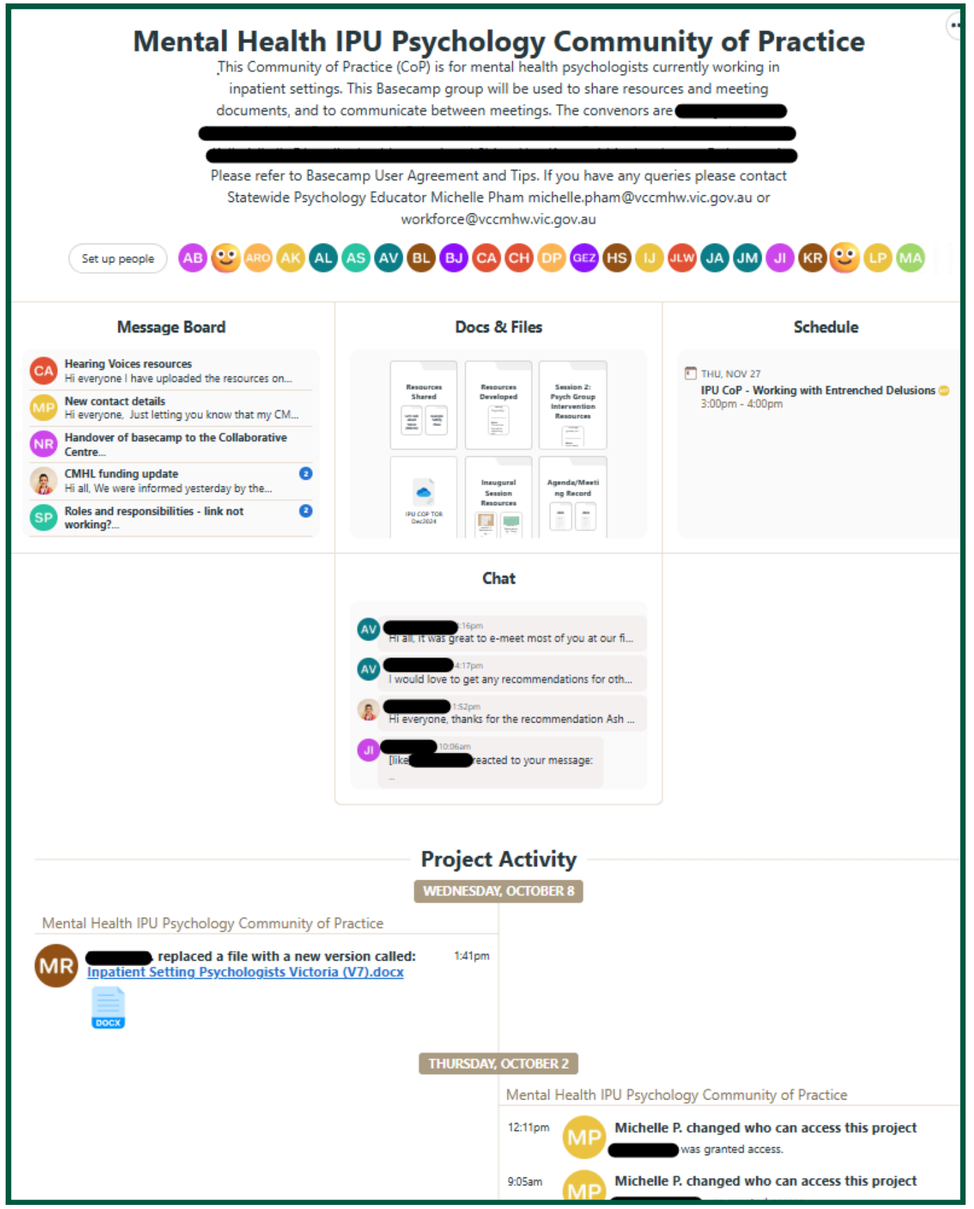
- Providing templates and guidance
- Promoting the CoP to encourage statewide participation
- Setting up and moderating Basecamp
- Completing annual evaluations
- Supporting convenors as needed
- Attending meetings as appropriate (e.g. first meeting, Basecamp tutorial, annual review)

What is Basecamp?

Basecamp is an online platform designed to help Communities of Practice (CoPs) stay connected and collaborate between meetings. It's a central hub where members can share resources, access meeting documents, and keep communication flowing.

A typical Basecamp page includes:

- An overview of the CoP
- Contact details for convenors and the statewide educator
- A message board for announcements and discussions
- A meeting schedule
- A shared documents area, including:
  - Meeting records
  - Terms of Reference
  - Annual snapshots



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Using Basecamp

Accessing Basecamp

Members will be invited to join the CoP Basecamp by the Statewide Educator or the convenors of the CoP.

Each Basecamp group includes a folder called ‘Using Basecamp’, which contains:

- Basecamp User Agreement
- Basecamp User Tips

Managing CoP Membership

The Statewide Psychology Educator and/or CoP convenors are responsible for:

- Maintaining an up-to-date membership list
- Ensuring all CoP members are added to the relevant Basecamp group

Video tutorials are available to support Statewide Psychology Educators and/or convenors to manage the platform effectively.

Tutorials for Managing Basecamp:

1. How to Invite Someone New to Basecamp (2min 26sec)
2. How to Add an Existing Basecamp User to a New Project (2min 34sec)
3. How to Create and Manage Groups in Basecamp (3min 7sec)
4. How to Use Basecamp Groups when Scheduling Meetings (2min 13sec)
5. How to Manage Notifications (3min)

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Life Cycle of a CoP

Initiate

The initial phase focuses on identifying:

- The **need** for the CoP
- A **name** that reflects its focus
- Key **goals** and **intended outcomes**
- **Key roles** including convenors
- A draft **Terms of Reference (ToR)**

This stage sets the foundation and shared purpose for the CoP

Establish

Once the need for the CoP is endorsed, this forming phase focuses on getting things started:

- Setting the **meeting schedule** for the year
- Developing a **standing agenda** and **meeting record** process
- Confirming **membership**
- Setting up **Basecamp**

Additional support may be provided by the Statewide Educator during this phase. CoPs may re-enter this phase at various times.

Sustain

This phase reflects a well-functioning, self-sufficient CoP:

- **Active regular meetings**
- Consistent **engagement** on Basecamp
- Annual review of the **ToR**
- Ongoing **evaluation** through surveys
- **Annual snapshot** to highlight achievements

As the CoP matures, focus may shift towards **showcasing outcomes** and **measuring impact.**

Sunset

CoPs may finish or sunset by considering:

- Consistently **low attendance** (e.g. fewer than two members across three meetings)
- **Limited ongoing interest** from members
- Consensus to **disband** or formally **close** the CoP

Before disbanding, discussion with the Statewide Educator is recommended to explore revitalisation or merging options

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How to initiate a new CoP

1. An individual or group of discipline professionals identifies a gap or need that could be addressed by establishing a CoP.
2. The proposer completes and submits a CoP Proposal Submission Form with convenor details to the Statewide Educator for review.
3. The Statewide Educator reviews the proposal in consultation with networks and provides feedback to the proposer or seeks clarification if required.
4. An Expression of Interest (EOI) is circulated statewide to invite potential members.
5. An initial meeting is scheduled to gather interested members.
6. At the first meeting, members collaboratively develop the Terms of Reference (ToR).
7. The Statewide Educator provides ongoing support throughout this initiation phase.

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Initiate Phase

Key Roles and Responsibilities

Convenors	• Are identified (or express interest) during proposal development • Draft the Terms of Reference (ToR) • Schedule and facilitate the first meeting • Invite members • Refer to *Appendix C: Considerations when planning a new CoP'*
Statewide Educator	• Provide the Proposal Submission Form • Review the proposal in collaboration with relevant networks to ensure it aligns with workforce development needs/priorities • Provide templates for the ToR, Meeting Agenda/Record, Session Plan • Support identification and recruitment of members (e.g. via EOI form, promotion through networks)
Members	• Complete the EOI form • Discuss participation with their manager and discipline lead

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Establish Phase

Key Roles and Responsibilities

Convenors	• Send CoP meeting invitations to members (include topic and brief description) • Develop a session plan prior to the meeting to guide discussion and provide prompts during the meeting • Facilitate CoP meetings and ensure minutes are recorded and uploaded to Basecamp • Offer the meeting survey toward the end of each session to capture immediate feedback
Statewide Educator	• Set up Basecamp for the CoP • Attend first meeting (if requested) to clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations • Provide templates and resources (e.g. session plan, meeting record, meeting survey
Members	• Attend and actively participate in meetings and discussions • Contribute agenda items of interest or relevance • Participate in the development and endorsement of the ToR • Complete the member survey during sessions • Engage in Basecamp discussions and resource sharing

Sustain Phase

Key Roles and Responsibilities

Life Cycle of a CoP

Convenors	• Continue tasks outlined in the *Establish Phase* • Ensure the membership list remains current • Support ongoing member engagement and information sharing via Basecamp
Statewide Educator	• Provide support or attend meetings as needed (e.g. for evaluation, Basecamp use, or updates on Collaborative Centre education activities relevant to the CoP's domain of practice) • Coordinate and complete the annual evaluation, and present key findings to CoP members • Offer consultation and guidance to convenors as required
Members	• Attend and actively participate in meetings and discussions • Contribute agenda items of interest or relevance • Participate in the annual revision and endorsement of the ToR • Complete the member surveys during meetings • Engage in Basecamp discussions and resource sharing • Consider rotating into a convenor role to share leadership and support role-sharing among members

Evaluating the CoP

To help each Community of Practice (CoP) stay meaningful and productive, the following evaluation tools and processes are used:

Meeting survey:
A short Microsoft Forms survey completed during or after each meeting. It gathers member feedback on relevance, usefulness, and engagement. Convenors are encouraged to share the survey's link before closing each meeting.

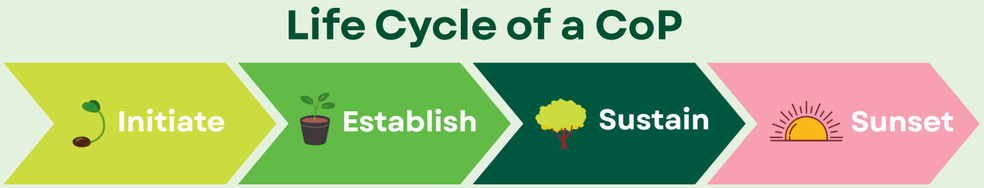
Annual Snapshot:
A visual summary developed by the Statewide Educator at the 12-month mark. It combines meeting survey results and attendance data to highlight participation, key themes, and the CoP's overall impact.
This offers a chance to reflect on achievements and set priorities for the next phase.

Annual Review:
After the Annual Snapshot is completed, convenors and members are encouraged to:

- Reflect on what's working well
- Identify opportunities for improvement
- Update the ToR if needed
- Plan focus areas for the year ahead

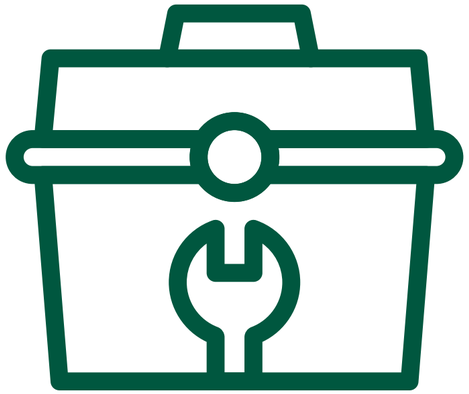
Sunset Phase

Key Roles and Responsibilities



Convenors	• Raise concerns about low attendance or limited engagement with Statewide educator and members • Communicate the decision to sunset the CoP with members, if there is group consensus
Statewide Educator	• Discussion possible revitilisation strategies, or explore options to redefine or merge with another CoP
Members	• Contribute to discussions and reach agreement or consensus on whether to disband

Resources



Templates and forms

- Terms of Reference
- Meeting Agenda / Record
- Session Plan
- Meeting Survey
- New CoP Proposal Submission
- EOI to Join CoP

Basecamp

- User Agreement
- User Tips

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Appendix A

Comparing Communities of Practice (CoPs) with Other Collaborative Formats

Collaborative Format	Common Features with CoPs	Distinctive Characteristics
Network	• Recurring opportunities for members to meet • Opportunities to highlight successes and challenges • Opportunities to share and/or develop resources	• Clear agenda focusing on operational and strategic matters • Content driven by a chair or facilitator • Attendance is often compulsory
Working Party	• Involves sharing ideas • Involves developing resources • Membership is voluntary	• Time-limited or project-based • Focused on achieving specific deliverables
Training/Workshop	• Provides professional development opportunities	• Time-bound, usually a one-off or short series • Clear, pre-defined learning objectives • Facilitated by an expert or trainer
Group Supervision	• Supports professional development • Opportunities for reflective practice • Promotes peer learning • Membership is voluntary	• Led by a designated supervisor or facilitator • Focus on clinical guidance and accountability
Connect and Reflect Session	• Supports professional development • Opportunities for reflective practice • Encourages peer learning and shared reflection • Participation is voluntary	• Facilitated by a designated facilitator • Participation is ad hoc; recurring attendance not assumed • Less formal participation structure / no Terms of Reference

Appendix B

Key Features of a Successful CoP

KEY FEATURES	TIPS
Regular Meetings: Strengthens connections, participation, and shared learning (Staempfli et al., 2016). Balance frequency to avoid fatigue (Goodhue & Seriamly, 2021).	Schedule meetings and topics in advance, with member input.
Clear Purpose: Ensures relevance and addresses member needs (Cambridge, Kaplan & Suter, 2005).	Define aims using the Terms of Reference.
Voluntary & Supported: Participation is voluntary and requires organanisation support (Chandler & Fry, 2009).	Use EOI forms and showcase benefits through the CoP Annual Snapshot.
Member Led: Encouarges active member participation (Cambridge et al., 2005) and balanced leadership by convenors.	Develop shared values in TOR; use polls and surveys.
Safe Space: Provides a trusted environment to share ideas without repercussion (Probst & Borzillo, 2008).	Reinforce safety principles in the Basecamp User Agreement and TOR.
Online Platform: Supports transparent communication and collaboration (Gannon-Leary & Fontainha, 2007).	Use Basecamp for sharing and chatting between meetings and Microsoft Teams for virtual meetings and live discussions.
Diverse Representation: Includes members with varied experiences, perspectives and worldviews (Staempfli, 2020)	List participating organisations in the ToR and encourage participation from professionals with varying experience levels relevant to the CoP's focus area.
Evaluation: Ensures the CoP remains relevant and effective through regular feedback (Probst & Borzillo, 2008).	Use Meeting Surveys, the Annual Snapshot, and an annual review discussion.

Appendix C

Considerations when planning a new CoP

Defining the Focus and Purpose	What is the specific area or focus of the CoP? What key topics does the community want to explore and learn about? Are there any governance or ethical considerations specific to this CoP's focus? What are the anticipated benefits for members and the organisation? How will the CoP help members achieve their goals and improve their work? How will it support members' professional development? What resources or support (time, technology) will be needed to achieve these goals? Is there an existing CoP or similar forum addressing this area? How will this CoP complement or differ?
Membership and Leadership	Who are the intended members of the CoP? How will new members be identified, invited, and welcomed? How will the CoP ensure inclusivity and diversity among members? Who will provide leadership and coordinate the CoP?
Structure and Processes	How often will the CoP meet? How will members connect and communicate between meetings? How will information, resources, and knowledge be shared, stored, and updated? What processes will address practice-related concerns or challenges? How will decisions be made within the CoP (e.g., leadership, task allocation)? How will feedback from members be collected and used for continuous improvement?
Sustainability and Evaluation	How will the CoP's effectiveness be evaluated and reviewed over time? What mechanisms will support ongoing engagement and sustainability? Is there an existing CoP or similar forum addressing this area? How will this CoP complement or differ?

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