

## Moving beyond incremental change to system transformation in mental health

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The Open Dialogue Centre welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Productivity Commission's *Final Review of the National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement*.

As a purpose-led organisation dedicated to transforming mental healthcare through the implementation of the Open Dialogue Approach, we believe this review by the Productivity Commission offers a defining opportunity to reshape Australian mental health policy.

Unfortunately, the lack of specific objectives, goals and targets within the Agreements has prevented national mental health reform at the scale we need to see, and iterations of future Agreements will potentially continue to miss the point.

ODC agrees with Commissioner Selwyn Button's statement in the accompanying press release where he stated: *'The Agreement comprises a raft of outputs and initiatives that aren't connected to each other or to an overarching strategy. In its current form, it cannot deliver the systemic, coordinated change it promises.'*

### The need for system transformation

Australia's mental health system requires transformation, not reformation.

A new structure or architecture is needed for mental health and suicide prevention. While previous agreements have attempted to address systemic issues through incremental improvements and tweaks to resources, these approaches have essentially applied band aids to fundamental structural problems.

The persistent challenges highlighted in this review—including fragmented care, poor outcomes, and system inefficiencies—demonstrate that incremental change is insufficient. We need solutions that match the scale of the challenge.

Without a wholesale rethinking of how Government funded services deliver mental healthcare, this agreement risks following the same trajectory as its predecessors by offering initiatives that while promising, ultimately fail to achieve their transformative potential because they operate within the existing architecture of a system that is no longer fit-for-purpose.

By way of example of an alternative, Open Dialogue offers more than a treatment model—it provides a framework for reimagining how mental healthcare systems can operate.

Put simply, Open Dialogue enables local services and community organisations to transform their practices so they can work together in a strengths-based, dialogical, integrated way.

### Community-centred, collaborative care works

True transformation requires shifting from service-centred to community-centred approaches. Services must interact with each other, breaking down the silos that currently fragment a person's care experience, often re-traumatising them as they continually repeat their story.

To address this, we need to see youth services collaborating with mental health services, schools and First Nations led community organisations – so that no matter where the person is in their community – they are surrounded by a supportive network.

The Open Dialogue Approach does this by:

- Creating seamless collaboration between different service providers
- Enabling people to drive their own care with a network of support in their community including family, friends and local
- Recognising that healing happens in relationships and community connections, not just in clinical settings

This collaborative approach extends beyond professional services to meaningfully include the people who matter most in a person's life—their family, friends, and chosen support networks. Rather than viewing these relationships as peripheral to treatment, they become central to the recovery journey.

### Being true to what we mean with a person-centred focus

The Open Dialogue Approach places the person experiencing mental health challenges at the absolute centre of their care planning and decision-making. This isn't merely consultation or involvement—it's genuine empowerment where the person's voice, preferences, and goals drive every aspect of their support.

When people experience truly person-centred support, the experience has a positive impact throughout the system:

- Services evolve their practices to be more responsive and relevant to each person's individual needs
- Families and friends become active partners rather than passive observers
- Communities develop greater capability and capacity to support mental wellbeing
- Professional practice shifts from "doing things to people" to "working with people" and this more human and compassionate way of being also strengthens workforce outcomes.

### Recommendation: Recognise that transformative change is possible

We urge the Productivity Commission to recommend that the next National Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Agreement explicitly prioritise system transformation over system expansion. We believe this is possible and in fact, we believe it is now time to stop asking 'how can we do more of the same better?' and start asking 'what could a transformed system look like and what frameworks could we use to start this process?'.

The possibility now exists to:

- Invest in approaches like Open Dialogue because evidence demonstrates it has transformative potential
- Support pilot programs that test fundamentally different ways of organising mental healthcare
- Measure success not just by service volumes but by genuine improvements in people's lives

- Create space for innovation and system learning rather than simply scaling existing programs of adding new programs.

The evidence is clear: incremental change within unchanged systems produces incremental results. Australia's mental health challenges demand transformative solutions if we are to shift the dial on mental health outcomes and see more people who can live their lives – able to reach their full potential.

### **An invitation to learn more about Open Dialogue**

The Open Dialogue Centre would like to invite the Productivity Commission and extended colleagues to an Open Dialogue Discovery Day, to explore its history, evidence-base, principles and how it is being implemented in Australia. This discovery day can be designed to suit attendees in-person or online.

Please contact Keith Bryant, CEO of the Open Dialogue Centre to find out more.