

Evaluation of the Stretch2Engage Framework Pilot Summary Report

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The Stretch2Engage Framework

Stretch2Engage¹ is a contemporary set of best practice principles to guide the engagement of people using mental health (MH) services and alcohol and other drugs (AOD) services, and their friends, families and supporters, in service design and re-design. Stretch2Engage acknowledges engagement as a human right fundamental to citizenship, as well as highlighting the benefits to services who engage effectively.

Meaningful engagement requires organisations to think and act differently. Stretch2Engage places the responsibility for engagement on service providers, not on people using services, and calls on services to ask the question: 'How can my organisation more effectively engage?' This approach changes how engagement is understood, resourced and implemented, and emphasises the need for organisations to build their engagement capability.

The Stretch2Engage Framework is a key resource that outlines principles and processes that organisations can adopt to offer more contemporary, inclusive and comprehensive engagement practice in direct service settings. Work to develop the framework was overseen by the **Queensland Mental Health Commission (QMHC)** and undertaken by the **Queensland Network of Alcohol and Other Drug Agencies (QNADA)**, the **Queensland Alliance for Mental Health (QAMH)** and **Enlightened Consultants**. The framework was developed in collaboration with the MH and AOD sectors, and through consultations with people who have a lived experience of MH and AOD problems.

Stretch2Engage's focus is not on therapeutic engagement, but on engagement in service design, improvement and evaluation. The framework identifies seven value domains: Stretch2Be Curious, Clear, Champion, Creative, Collective, Comprehensive and Committed. These domains are used to identify practice principles and ways that these can be applied in engagement activities.

House Model: Organisational Engagement Culture



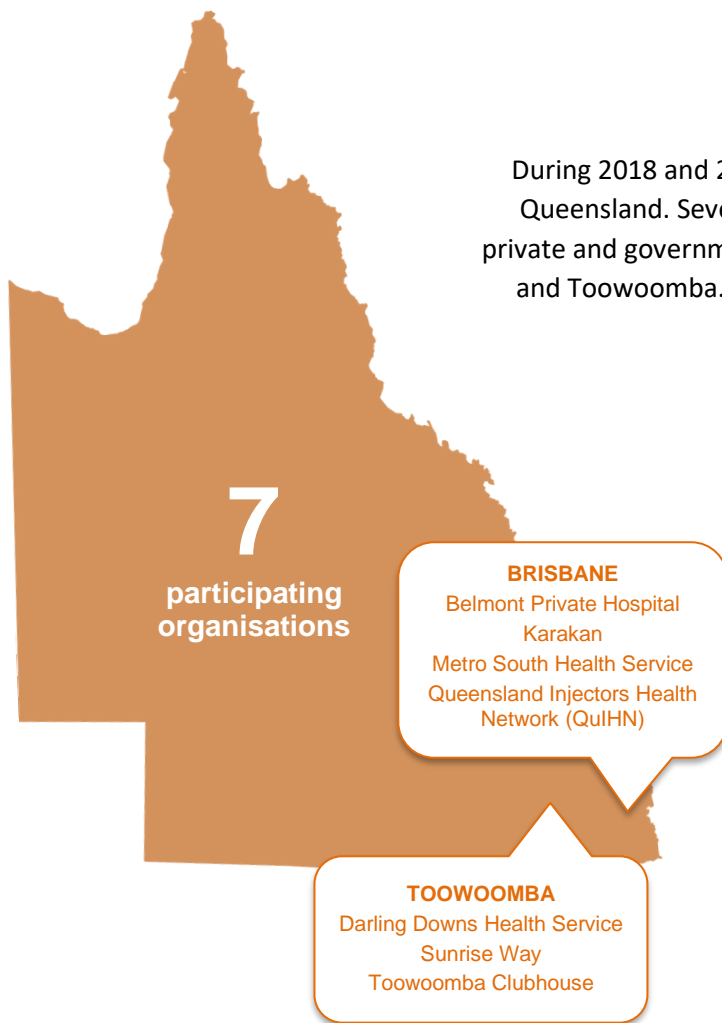
1. <https://www.qmhc.qld.gov.au/engage-enable/lived-experience-led-reform/stretch2engage>

Stretch2Engage pilot

During 2018 and 2019, the Stretch2Engage Framework was piloted in Queensland. Seven organisations participated, ranging across public, private and government AOD and MH services in metropolitan Brisbane and Toowoomba. The pilot was funded by QMHC and led by QNADA, QAMH and Enlightened Consultants.

The pilot tested the Stretch2Engage Framework to better understand its value in improving the service engagement capacity of AOD and MH services. The project introduced the framework to organisations and assisted them to implement it in their unique and diverse settings. A participatory, action learning approach was used to build shared understanding through workshops, coaching, reflection and peer learning. Organisations were provided with information, tools and training in technical engagement methods.

With guidance from the Stretch2Engage coaches, each organisation deepened its understanding of service engagement and implemented new engagement approaches.



Evaluation design

QMHC commissioned Lirata Consulting to evaluate the Stretch2Engage Framework in the context of the pilot. The evaluation had an action research focus with learnings developed during the evaluation shared with pilot organisations as the project progressed. The mixed-methods design included a literature scan, document review, key stakeholder interviews and focus groups, a pre- and post- survey of pilot organisation staff, collection of significant change stories, and collection of cost data. Data collection occurred in three rounds (baseline, midpoint and pilot completion). In total, more than 100 stakeholders were consulted, including management and staff of pilot organisations, people using services, Stretch2Engage coaches, and representatives of QMHC, QNADA, QAMH and Enlightened Consultants.

Key evaluation questions

1. How effective is the Stretch2Engage Framework in improving organisations' engagement capacity?
2. How effective is the Stretch2Engage Framework in improving organisations' engagement practice?
3. What other impacts resulted from the pilot project?
4. What are the enablers and barriers to implementing the Stretch2Engage Framework?
5. What are the success factors for sustainably embedding the Stretch2Engage Framework?
6. How do the costs compare to the benefits of Stretch2Engage as a service improvement tool?

Effectiveness: engagement capacity

An important assumption underlying Stretch2Engage is that improving service-user engagement in service design decision making requires services to review and re-frame key organisational cultural dimensions related to values, structures, systems, resources and practices. Enhanced engagement capacity should ultimately result in transitioning greater power and control for decision making to people using services.

To assess changes in engagement capacity, the evaluation used a capacity model that built on and extended Johnson and Scholes et al. (2011) 'Cultural Web'.² Data was analysed within six capacity domains: stories and symbols, organisational and power structures, control systems, values and attitudes, knowledge and skills, and priorities and resources.

The evaluation found that organisations developed significant new engagement capacities through participation in the pilot. Capacity changes were most visible in increased staff knowledge and skills. Project leaders reported increased confidence and capacity in using the Stretch2Engage principles, and broader engagement concepts, tools and practices. There was also evidence of emerging cultural changes in organisations, especially in staff values and attitudes regarding engagement, but also in prioritisation and resourcing of engagement activity, and in the development of control systems including clearer processes for gathering, reporting on and using feedback gathered.



We knew things were changing when staff started using the Stretch2Engage language & thinking.

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On balance, pilot organisations viewed the Stretch2Engage Framework as a necessary, but not sufficient, condition in building engagement capacity. The framework is an important scaffold to frame and progress engagement conversations. However, two key learning strategies—workshops and coaching—are also essential in enabling organisations to explore the key concepts and to experiment with new approaches and practices in their unique settings.

90%

of staff surveyed believed that project participation had increased their organisation's engagement capacity

75%+

of staff surveyed agreed that the Stretch2Engage Pilot Project changed the way their organisation thinks about engaging people who use services, and their families and friends

Key areas of increased capacity

- Increased knowledge of engagement principles, including the difference between participation and engagement
- Stronger engagement skills, for example question development, journey mapping and empathy mapping
- Changes in staff values and attitudes, such as less defensiveness in receiving feedback, and recognition that engagement is everybody's responsibility
- Organisations prioritising more resources to engagement activities
- Updated worker role descriptions including an engagement focus
- Increases in reporting and monitoring of engagement

2. Johnson, G., K. Scholes, R. Whittington & S. Pyle. *Exploring strategy. Text & cases (9th ed.)*. Harlow: Financial Times Prentice Hall; 2011.

Effectiveness: engagement in action

While the development of organisational capacity for service engagement can have benefits in itself, it is also intended to trigger further outcomes. Improved engagement capacity should lead to organisations undertaking stronger, more meaningful and more effective engagement practices.

The implementation of practical engagement activities during the pilot took longer than initially thought. However, later in the project, once engagement concepts were embedded, there was a marked increase in engagement activities. The evaluation found that all organisations trialled new and diverse engagement strategies, and this substantially improved engagement practice.

Important short-term outcomes resulted from these changes. A more diverse range of stakeholders were engaged, and people using services and their families provided more input. Staff were also more open to receiving feedback. This meant that pilot organisations received more useful feedback, and were able to act on it more effectively to improve services. Examples of improvements actioned during the project included more welcoming waiting rooms, better intake processes, and improved information for family members.

Suggestions for engagement activities were shared between organisations, and in some cases undertaken collaboratively. Participants believed the pilot project gave them permission to test innovative new ideas and develop those that showed promise. Organisations also believed that training in structured techniques, such as empathy mapping and journey mapping, assisted implementation of new engagement activities.



We have received feedback that our services need to be more flexible; we are working on this.

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Examples of new engagement strategies and activities

- Feedback to Action Groups—service users, project leaders, direct service and other staff triage feedback and emerging themes to identify immediate actions and areas for further consultation
- Focused consultations through World Cafés, High Teas, Family Open Days and focus groups, with iterative questioning and thinking about engagement
- Increased use of volunteers to gather feedback
- Inclusion of service users on interview panels and expert committees
- Introduction of engagement capacity building roles focused on workforce development

Significant change story—family members

We completed interviews with family members about our pre-admission process... It was good to hear family members' experience; we often forget our service also impacts them significantly.

There were a few small frustrations with family members that we were unaware of: pre-admission and during. This was mainly around not having enough information about the admission process and what to expect... Our admission process now has more information, and families know what to expect. Another frustration was around [service users] mail not being picked up regularly. We now pick up mail daily.

Implementation and sustainability

Stretch2Engage aims to generate lasting practice changes and more explicit service user control of decision making across the AOD and MH sectors. The ability of organisations to embed and sustain cultural change related to service engagement is therefore a key element of success for the model.

The evaluation found that improvements in service user engagement would likely be sustained following completion of the pilot. There is clear evidence that cultural and practice changes are continuing to evolve and that project leaders, managers and other organisational staff are motivated to maintain these changes. While some barriers were also identified by Stretch2Engage Partnership members and project leaders, these barriers largely relate to practical challenges that stakeholders believe can be overcome.

A wide range of factors were identified as supportive of sustainability, including levels of pre-existing organisational commitment, support from organisational leaders, the extent to which organisations build systematic approaches to engagement, the continued provision of Stretch2Engage resources, access to further training and coaching, and ongoing iteration of the Stretch2Engage Framework. The simplified House Model version of the framework (shown on p.1) is important in allowing a broader range of stakeholders to understand and engage with key engagement concepts.

Potential roadblocks to further implementation of engagement thinking and practice include the competitive funding environment many organisations experience, other competing organisational priorities, and difficulties in changing longstanding cultural values and attitudes in some settings. Resourcing is a significant issue, both within organisations and at a sector level, for training and coaching to embed engagement. In the absence of external support, organisations without substantial internal resources for service engagement are likely to be slower to develop and embed engagement capacity.

We need to expose our whole organisation to this stuff; more training and coaching would really help

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~70% of staff surveyed believe that sustaining changes made during the pilot will be 'somewhat' or 'very' easy

Engagement enablers

- Supportive organisational leadership
- Broad staff exposure to the Stretch2Engage Framework, through workforce development activities
- Staff motivation, enthusiasm and positive morale
- Opportunities for peer learning and collaboration
- Ongoing learning strategies and resources, including access to coaches
- Embedding engagement into systems and processes—business as usual

Engagement barriers

- Framework complexity
- Resourcing required from organisations—time and money
- Fixed cultural values and attitudes in some settings
- Competing organisational priorities
- Low organisational risk appetite

Other impacts

Multiple additional positive impacts for stakeholders were identified: improved service delivery and collaboration; improved staff morale, skill development and opportunities for career advancement; benefits for people using services and their families, friends and supporters through improved feedback mechanisms and better services; and increased organisational efficiencies through reduced absenteeism and more streamlined service provision. There was increasing recognition that small, cost-effective changes could make a significant difference to engagement practice and service-user experience. Positive impacts on broader sector thinking were evident through information sharing. No significant negative impacts of the pilot were identified, although stakeholders noted risks such as inability to action feedback received, or unintended consequences on service-user recovery. It is too early to assess long-term impacts.

[In Toowoomba] we kept each other honest, came up with solutions, and shared resources ... we had even greater outcomes as a result.

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Value for money

Overall, the evaluation found that the Stretch2Engage Framework and associated learning activities provided good value for money. The pilot involved substantial financial and in-kind investment by QMHC as well as the pilot organisations. For pilot organisations with available cost data, expenditure ranged from an estimated \$12,000–\$43,000; these figures included costs of project participation and the development of new engagement methods and practices within organisations. This investment has positioned organisations for ongoing, robust service engagement, which has already provided substantial benefits.

Conclusion

Although evidence is still limited, the Stretch2Engage pilot has been an important ‘proof of concept’, demonstrating the framework’s potential to drive organisational changes leading to substantially different ways of engaging people using services, their family members, friends and supporters in service design. The conceptual foundations of the framework and accompanying learning strategies have worked together to enable positive change. Stretch2Engage is an important advance over previous approaches to engagement and participation, and a useful tool to improve experience and outcomes for people using services.

Evaluation criteria	Summary ratings	Strength of evidence
Effectiveness—engagement capacity building	Good	Moderate
Effectiveness—engagement in action	Good	Moderate
Impact	(Not rated)	
Sustainability	Good	Low (short timeframe)
Value for money	Good	Low (incomplete data)

There are opportunities to broaden engagement capacity building across the AOD and MH sectors in Queensland, using existing resources and further developing them. The level of knowledge and motivation generated through the pilot project now represents a valuable resource to draw on during further rollout.

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