TOM TRAUER EVALUATION & RESEARCH ENTRY

PART B TEMPLATE

ENTRY TITLE:

Changing Lives: The Mental Health And Wellbeing Connect Centre Family Carer Lived Experience Workforce Story (2025)

NAMES OF APPLICANTS:

Deua Stojanovska (M.A), Dr Caroline Lambert, Assoc. Prof. Christina David, Assoc. Prof. Sharlene Nipperess, Professor Robyn Martin and Lucy Bashfield

ORGANISATION:

Family and Carer Research Advocacy Network (FaCRAN) and RMIT University

The *Changing Lives Project* is a large-scale, family carer-led study of the Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centre model across Victoria. Conducted across 2024 and 2025 by FaCRAN (Family and Carer Research Advocacy Network) researchers within RMIT's Social Equity Research Centre. The research examined the rapidly expanding mental health family carer lived experience workforce within Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centres, which are a novel, community-based, non-clinical and free service model established in response to recommendations of the Royal Commission. Using a participatory, creative and qualitative methodology, the project engaged 40 FCLE workers across all eight Connect centres through interviews, focus groups, co-location, survey and creative methods. Importantly, the research was led by researchers with family carer lived experience, ensuring epistemic authority remained with family carers rather than being mediated through traditional academic hierarchies.

The study mapped workforce characteristics, role diversity, lived experience-informed practices, and the organisational and systemic conditions required to sustain this workforce. It identified that over 80% of work tasks were directly informed by family carer lived experience, positioning family carer lived experience practice as a distinct and emerging discipline.

Key findings highlight the transformative nature of the Connect model, including:

- Enhanced employment pathways for unpaid carers, with many entering paid work for the first time or after long periods out of the workforce due to unpaid caring responsibilities
- Improved recovery and wellbeing outcomes for workers in their dual roles of workers and family carers
- The centrality of relational, peer-led approaches to service impact and effectiveness
- The importance of co-design, reflective practice, and 'relational time' as core practice principles

The project also identified systemic risks, including inconsistent supervision, workforce support gaps, and role ambiguity, and addressed these through 46 detailed recommendations spanning workforce development, policy, and service design.

The project has been integral in contributing to an improved understanding of peer-delivered wellbeing services, and the needs of the evolving FCLE workforce within community-based lived experience-led services.

The *Changing Lives Project* is a translational research initiative. It produced practical outputs including reflective practice tools for FCLE workers in Connect centres, which have had a strong uptake, and workforce guidance resources which are currently informing service delivery and policy development across Victoria.

This work represents a significant advancement in lived experience research methodology and mental health service evaluation, demonstrating how centring lived experience can reshape both knowledge production and service design.

Criteria

1. ***Evidence of contribution to, or potential impact on, mental health service improvement.***

The *Changing Lives* project provides Australia's first comprehensive investigation of a large-scale, community-based, family carer-led workforce embedded within a state-wide mental health reform initiative. It offers clear, evidence-based recommendations to strengthen workforce sustainability, improve service quality, and enhance access to wholistic support for mental health families, supporters and carers. Findings demonstrate that the Connect centre family carer lived experience-led services:

- Enhance recovery-oriented outcomes for family carer workforce members
- Increase workforce participation among unpaid mental health carers
- Invite the workforce to bring their lived and living experience to most of their work tasks, meaning they bring their whole selves to work, and this is valued

The project's 46 recommendations directly inform policy, workforce frameworks, and service design, and support ongoing reform of community-based mental health services in Victoria.

The significance of the project's contribution and mental health service improvement was emphasised by the Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Carer Commissioner, Jacqueline Gibson, at the launch of the project's groundbreaking report:

> *The report has 46 fascinating recommendations that build on that innovation... It signposts a future where families and carers and the lived experience workforce can be supported, nurtured and sustained in impactful ways.*
>
> Carer Commissioner Jacqueline Gibson,
> Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Victoria

The project's recommendations and outputs within the first one to four months following their delivery have had a substantial impact on the ground in Connect centres, and in the policy and service design context. The research findings were presented to the Deputy Secretary of the Victorian Department of Health's Mental Health & Wellbeing Division, Pam Anders. The Victorian Department of Health has since formed an implementation group to take action on the 46 recommendations the project made.

Beyond the demonstrated contribution that the *Changing Lives* recommendations are currently making in Victoria, the project's findings provide an important evidence base to guide and support the potential rollout of family carer lived experience-led community wellbeing support services across Australia.

2. *Evidence of research excellence.*

The *Changing Lives* project demonstrated research excellence across all aspects of the project, including its lived experience-led methodological innovation and rigour, contribution to the evidence base, and development of impactful translational research outputs.

The project demonstrated excellence in its research methods through:

- Both its research leadership and project advisory group being composed of individuals with family carer lived experience and expertise
- Its participatory research design, including Connect centre family carer workers advising on methods, validating emerging findings, and co-designing outputs
- Integration of qualitative, co-designed, and creative methodologies
- Rigorous thematic analysis with co-researcher validation processes
- High participant engagement across all Connect centres and service regions, with wide rural and regional uptake

The *Changing Lives* project is currently making a significant and ongoing contribution to the family carer lived experience workforce evidence base**.** A recent review found that while there has been some initial research into family carer lived experience work, the evidence base lacks breadth in comparison to other lived experience workforces and is even sparser in community mental health settings (Sellick 2024).

The project has also demonstrated excellence in knowledge translation, though a range of dissemination modalities, including:

- The co-designed *Coming Together* forum, which celebrated the Connect centres, disseminated the *Changing Lives* project's findings, and showcased a variety of traditional and creative research translation outputs to the family carer lived experience workforce nationally.
- The *Changing Lives* report, which formally presents the project's findings and 46 recommendations. The key audiences for this output are the Victorian Department of Health, Connect centre service leadership and members of the family carer lived experience workforce. The report is also publicly available to broader policy and research communities, and the interested public.
- The development of two peer-reviewed articles, based on key project findings.
- A public exhibition that presented visual and experiential aspects of the project's methodology and research findings. The exhibition was titled *Reflections of Family Carer Lived Experience Practice.*
- The co-development of two innovative practice tools that translate project findings into implementable resources for family carer lived experience workers:
    - *Family Carer Workforce Wisdoms – Reflective Practice Cards:* A set of cards to support and prompt curious and generative reflective practice.
    - *Drawing on Lived Experience at Work:* A tool for supervision and co-reflection that supports workers to examine how they draw on lived experience at work.

The project' outputs have been highly regarded and well received by Connect centre and other Family Carer Lived Experience workers:

> *I am so impressed with this outstanding piece of work... the practice cards –gorgeous – are the first time I've seen an actual product created that immediately gives back to the people being researched to support them doing what they do. Literally best thing ever.*
>
> Family Carer Workforce Development Coordinator, The Collective

3. ***Evidence of participation of mental health consumers in the planning, implementation and evaluation. There may be exceptions to the involvement of mental health consumers. If so, please address this when responding to this criterion.***

The meaningful participation of people with lived and living experience in this project is twofold.

Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centres are services established to support families, carers and supporters of people experiencing mental health challenges as their primary service users. The centres are led by a workforce composed of people with lived experience of such life roles. As such, this section responds to the project's involvement of people with family carer lived experience. Mental health family carers were not only involved in the project as participants and members of the advisory group but were central to the project's iterative design and governance, as outlined in the responses above.

The project was led by a team of 6 researchers of whom 4 are mental health family carers, including the two lead researchers. Members of the project team brought extensive lived experience expertise and research experience related to mental health family carers and the lived experience workforce. Drawing on that expertise, the project championed family carer lived and living experience and ensured that each element of the research process was thoughtfully designed. By 'researching alongside' (and not 'researching on') participating members of Connect family carer workforce, the project team paid close attention to known power imbalances, inclusion of intersectional and diverse perspectives, accessibility and psychological safety.

The project was guided by an advisory group made up of 8 family carer lived experience workers from across each Connect centre service and 2 emerging family carer researchers, who were FaCRAN members. The project's approach ensured genuine co-design, shared planning and decision-making throughout the project's lifespan. The group advised on data collection methods, prioritising accessibility and inclusion for family carer lived experience workers. The advisory group also validated emerging findings and co-designed the development of translational research products for their community. The group also played a key role as project champions promoting the research within their services.

By centring family carer lived experience in the planning, implementation, and evaluation phases, the project actively disrupted traditional power imbalances in research, and advanced epistemic justice by positioning lived experience as expertise.

One family carer advisory group member reflected at the launch of the project's final report:

> *I wanted to say just what a joy it was to be a part of this project, both from an advisory member point of view and contributing to the research as a participant as well. I really appreciate the different ways that the research was conducted, different activities, interactive ways to get staff involved, instead of, you know, pick a box. ... I really appreciated the innovative collaborative approach.*
>
> Project advisory group member and senior family carer peer worker

4. *Evidence of Partnerships and Linkages (collaboration for continuity between organisations).*

In addition to cross-organisational collaboration within the project team and advisory group, the project also collaborated with several key stakeholders. These partnerships ensured that the research was embedded in real-world service contexts and directly translatable into practice and policy. The groups and their relationships with the project are briefly outlined below:

Stakeholder title or organisation	**Relationship to the project**	**Nature of engagement**
Victorian Department of Health's Mental Health and Wellbeing Division	Project funder and funder of the Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centres	Monthly meetings to discuss project updates and progress
Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health and Wellbeing	Project administration and facilitation Partner for *Coming Together* forum	Monthly meetings to discuss project updates and progress
Connect centre staff and participants	Project process and outcomes directly impact these stakeholders Representatives from each of the Connect centres sat on the Project Advisory Group and were project champions within their centres.	Connection through bimonthly Project Advisory meetings throughout the project lifecycle Regular email updates, attendance and co-organisation of *Coming Together* forum, and distribution of research report and translational research tools
Connect Coordination Victoria (CCV) provided by Tandem	Project outcomes have informed the CCV's future work	Attendance at meetings and updates on project progress and emerging project findings
Connect Development Group (CDG)	Project outcomes are currently informing the CDG's work plan	Presentations updating on emerging project findings Ongoing engagement around the Connect Development Group's development of an implementation plan
FaCRAN members	Project provided capacity building opportunities for FaCRAN's emerging and established family carer researchers	Monthly updates at FaCRAN member meetings

5. *Verification and Evaluation of the research effectiveness in achieving the goals of the investigation(s).*

The *Changing Lives* investigation set out to meet the following three goals:

- Clearly define the Connect centre lived experience workforce in the context of the family carer lived experience-led service model across a range of dimensions
- Co-develop recommendations for resources, policy and practice, supports and strategies that can better support and grow this workforce
- Co-develop translational research outputs

How we met these goals

The project utilised multiple methods to ensure rigour in achieving the project's aims:

- Triangulation across interviews, focus groups, co-location, and survey data
- Engagement with 40 participants across eight centres
- Co-analysis and validation across lived experience researchers and advisory group members
- Alignment of findings with existing workforce data and service context
- Co-development of innovative and impactful translational workforce tools

The intentional co-design of the project provided the foundation for its effectiveness in achieving its aims of defining the family carer lived experience workforce, identifying best practices, and generating actionable recommendations for system improvement, as evidence in the *Changing Lives* report. As previously mentioned, the Victorian Department of Health has since formed an implementation group to oversee the implementation of the 46 recommendations made in the project's report.

In addition to the report, the project produced two innovative reflective practice tools for the family carer lived experience workforce: a set of reflective practice cards and a Drawing on Lived Experience at Work tool. The translational research outputs were co-developed from research engagement activities, and are having immediate impact and uptake as evidenced by the family carer workforce feedback below:

> *Our LLE team at [the] Connect had an amazing reflective practice session and used the cards. The whole team loved it! A++*
>
> Family carer peer worker

> *We are going to run the "drawing on LLE at work" reflective activity soon with our peers – to set the tone for 2026 and get the team really focused on purposeful sharing.*
>
> Lived Experience Practice Lead at a Connect

Conclusion

Ultimately this project highlighted the extraordinary value of a truly co-designed family carer-led community-based service, as well as the power of lived and living experience led methodologies and research approaches that are relational and care-filled.

The *Changing Lives Project* represents a paradigm shift in mental health research. By centring the expertise of people with family carer lived experiences across every element of the research, the project challenges traditional hierarchies of knowledge and methods, while also establishing a new standard for participatory, translational research.

Its impact extends beyond traditional or typical research approaches, as evidenced by the outputs including new concepts and tools such as 'the family carer relational time ethic' (Stojanovska et al. 2025, p. 51), reflective practice cards, and the Lived Experience Continuum. The findings from the research have already begun to inform policy direction, and ultimately strengthen the sustainability of lived experience-led services. The *Changing Lives project* demonstrates that when lived experience is genuinely centred in research, the '17-year gap' between investigation and impact on the ground (Morries, Wooding & Grant 2011), is a statistic that can remain in the past.

This work stands as a national exemplar of research excellence, collaboration, and innovation in mental health systems research and reform.

Appendix of Support Material

Publications & translational research outputs:

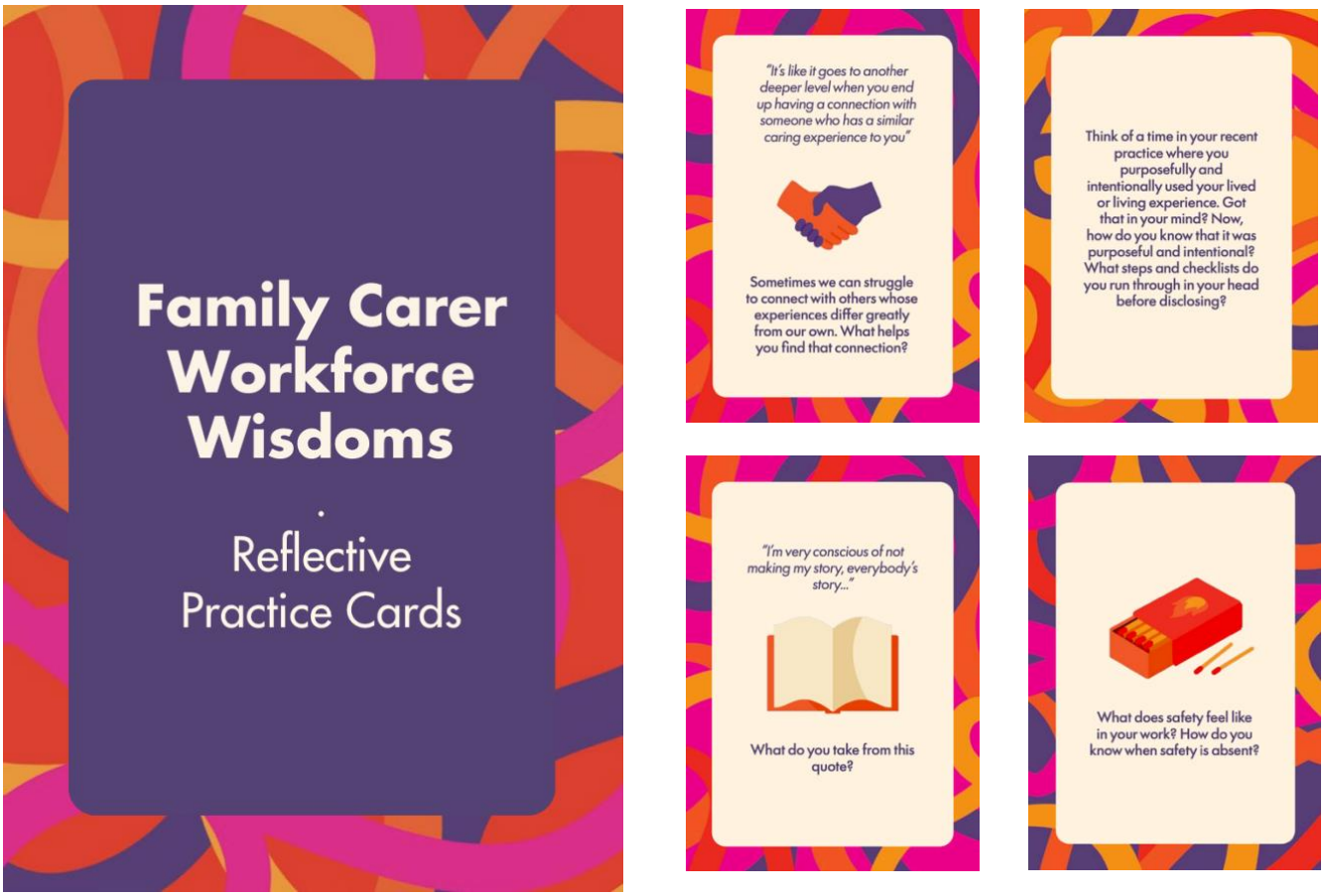
Final report **–** ***Changing Lives The Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centre family carer lived experience workforce story***



This 97-page research report presents the project findings and includes 46 recommendations to further support the workforce.

Citation:
Stojanovska, D., Lambert, C., David, C., Nipperess, S., Martin, R., & Bashfield, L. (2025). *Changing lives: The Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centre family carer lived experience workforce story*. FACRAN and Social Equity Research Centre, RMIT University. DOI: 10.25439/rmt.30727901

Family Carer Workforce Wisdoms – Reflective Practice Cards

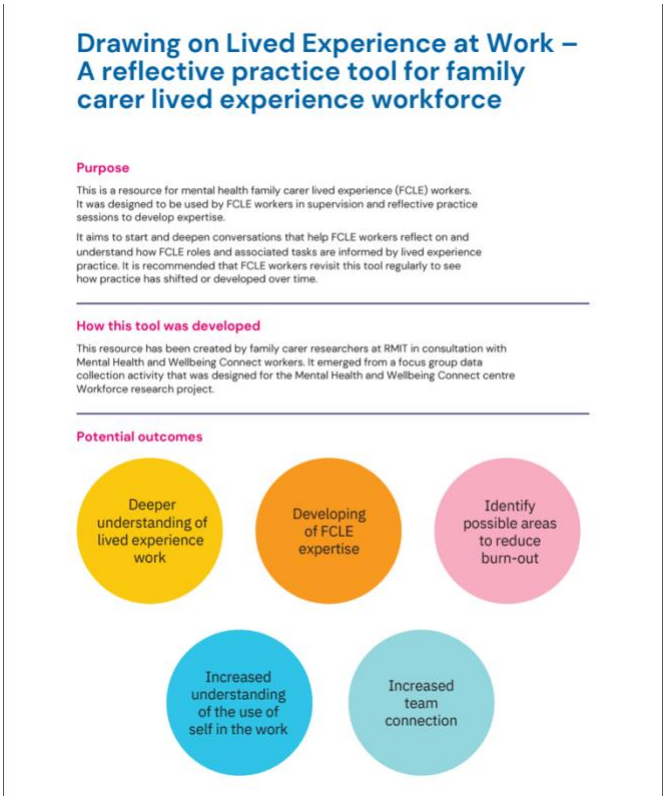


A resource for mental health family carer lived experience workers, co-developed through the *Changing Lives* research project.

This set of 28 cards include quotes shared during the project and is designed to encourage curious and generative reflective practices. The resource provides guided opportunities to learn from family carer wisdoms, think deeply, imagine, reimagine, and build on existing capacity and expertise. This resource was codesigned by family carer lived experience workers and family carer perspective researchers. Created by FaCRAN, RMIT and funded by the Victorian Department of Health.

Each Connect centre received hard copy sets, but a **digital version of the cards can be viewed here**.

Drawing on Lived Experience at Work – A Reflective Practice Tool



Drawing on Lived Experience at Work – A reflective practice tool for family carer lived experience workforce

Purpose

This is a resource for mental health family carer lived experience (FCLE) workers. It was designed to be used by FCLE workers in supervision and reflective practice sessions to develop expertise.

It aims to start and deepen conversations that help FCLE workers reflect on and understand how FCLE roles and associated tasks are informed by lived experience practice. It is recommended that FCLE workers revisit this tool regularly to see how practice has shifted or developed over time.

How this tool was developed

This resource has been created by family carer researchers at RMIT in consultation with Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect workers. It emerged from a focus group data collection activity that was designed for the Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centre Workforce research project.

Potential outcomes



Drawing on Lived Experience at Work – A reflective practice tool for family carer lived experience workforce

This activity is expected to take approximately 45 mins – 1 hour.
Begin by following the steps below:

Step 1

Get a group of two or more FCLE workers together.

Step 2

Write down on individual sticky-notes or on a virtual whiteboard all the activities/tasks that you do in your role. These can be things you do when working one-on-one with carers, making cups or tea, or admin activities like phone calls, emails, case noting.

10 mins

Step 3

Once you have all your activities/task written down locate where you think they sit across the Continuum of Lived Experience Practice below – ranging between not using lived experience, sometimes using lived experience, and fully and purposefully using lived experience in a task.

10 mins

Step 4

Share with others in your group why you chose to put the different tasks in certain places across the continuum. You may notice that others put the same task in a different place along the continuum. Your placement of tasks may move as you reflect together as a group.

35 mins

Conversation prompts:

– Describe what each activity looks like in your day-to-day practice.
– Does this reflect what you thought you were doing?
– Is there something that surprised you?
– Is there anything else you notice?

This is a resource developed for mental health family carer lived experience workers.

It was designed to be used by family carer workers in supervision and reflective practice sessions to develop expertise. The concept for this tool was developed from a focus group activity designed as part of the *Changing Lives* research project and refined by members of a Project Advisory Group.

The tool aims to start and deepen conversations that help family carer lived experience workers reflect on and understand how their roles and the tasks carried out are informed by lived experience practice.

It is recommended that FCLE workers revisit this tool twice a year to see how practice has shifted or developed over time. **A digital version of the tool can be viewed here**.

Coming Together, Changing Lives Forum

The Coming Together forum was a public hybrid event celebrating the launch of *Changing Lives* research report. The event explored the project key findings and the launched two innovative lived experience practice tools and an exhibition. The event was hosted by FaCRAN and RMIT in collaboration with the Victorian Collaborative Centre & the Victorian Department of Health.

Research project forum program





Event attendees hearing from Michelle Swan, Acting Director, Lived Experience (carer) Victorian Department of Health, addressing the forum about taking the *Changing Lives project* findings forward.



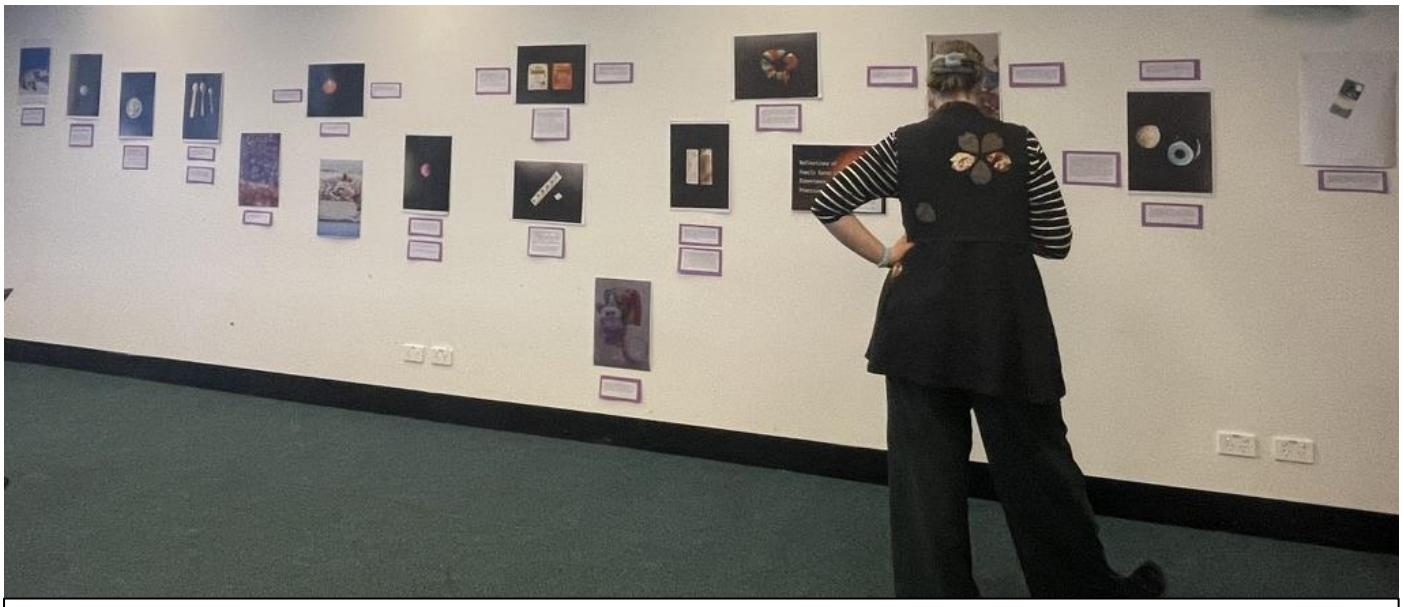
Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission Carer Commissioner Jacqueline Gibson, providing an opening address at the launch of the *Coming Together, Changing Lives project forum*.

RMIT UNIVERSITY FaCRAN

Exhibition: Reflections of Family Carer Lived Experience Practice

The project also produced an exhibition of research artefacts. Connect Centre Family Carer Lived Experience workers who participated in focus group workshops as part of the Changing Lives project were presented with the selection of everyday objects, participants were asked to items that they felt best represented how they drew from their lived and living experiences in their roles.

Examples of participants' reflections from that research activity were shared in a photo exhibition of the objects and related participant quotes you see pictured below.



Pictured Reflections of Family Carer Lived Experience Practice Exhibition

Peer reviewed articles

The *Changing Lives* project team currently has the following 2 peer review journal articles in development:

- 'Creative methods Lived Experience Leadership in research' *The Journal of Creative Research Methods*
- 'Intentional Relational Practice in family carer lived experience service design and delivery', *Qualitative Health Research*

Conference papers:

- Lambert, C., Stojanovska, D., David. C., Nipperess, S. & Martin, R. (2026, August 6) *Drawing on Lived Experience at Work: A reflective practice tool for family carer lived experience workforce* [Paper presentation]. The Mental Health Services Learning Network (TheMHS) Conference 2026, Sydney, Australia. https://themhs.eventsair.com/TMHEventInfoSitePortal/conference2026/themhs-conference-program-2026/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=1fa5accc-4265-43f5-b78e-5c14d0edd730
- Stojanovska, D., Lambert, C., David. C., Nipperess, S. & Martin, R. (2026, August 7) *Intentional Relational Practice in family carer lived experience service design and delivery* [Paper presentation]. The Mental Health Services Learning Network (TheMHS) Conference 2026, Sydney, Australia. https://themhs.eventsair.com/TMHEventInfoSitePortal/conference2026/themhs-conference-program-2026/Agenda/AgendaItemDetail?id=c7189f0a-8fb7-4743-b103-30710ea27471

News clippings:

Victorian Collaborative Centre News, Dec 5, 2025:

Changing lives: The Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centre family carer lived experience workforce story

A new statewide research report, Changing lives: The Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centre family carer lived experience workforce story, has been released by RMIT University and the Family and Carer Research Advocacy Network (FaCRAN), with funding from the Victorian Department of Health and support from the Collaborative Centre.

The report captures the voices, experiences and expertise of Family Carer Lived and Living Experience workers across Victoria's eight Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centres. Drawing on interviews, focus groups, workforce surveys and on-site engagement, the research explores who makes up this workforce, how Lived and Living Experience informs practice across diverse roles, and what supports are needed to sustain and grow this vital part of the mental health and wellbeing system.

Findings highlight the unique value of Family Carer Lived and Living Experience–led practice in strengthening access to care, supporting worker wellbeing and recovery, and building trust with families, carers and supporters. The report also outlines practical, evidence-based recommendations to guide workforce development, supervision, training, leadership and service design into the future.

This research provides a strong foundation for improving how Family Carer Lived and Living Experience is recognised, supported and embedded across community and clinical settings in Victoria.

Tandem E-News, Jan 27, 2026:

Launch of the Changing Lives report and Tandem's contribution

"In December 2025, the report Changing Lives: The Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect Centre Family Carer Lived Experience Workforce Story was launched at RMIT.

Produced by FACRAN, RMIT, and the Victorian Collaborative Centre for Mental Health, this report shines a light on the development, role, and impact of the Family Carer Lived Experience workforce within Victoria's Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centres."

RMIT School of global urban and social studies Linkedin post

A Powerful Gathering for the Family Carer Workforce

Thank you to everyone who joined us on December 5th, 2025, for the launch of the Connect Centres Lived and Living Experience Workforce Project "Changing Lives" Report, including two new family carer lived experience reflective practice tools. We're thrilled to share that the research launched was well received by mental health family and carers, family carer peer workforce, and other key stakeholders. The project focused on lived and living experience family carer workers based across the eight Victorian Mental Health and Wellbeing Carer Connect Centres. These Centres were developed in response to Recommendation 31 of the 2021 Royal Commission into

Victoria's mental Health System. Launch attendees recognised the research process and outcomes as a standout case study in authentic and thoughtful collaboration, bringing together the strengths of Family Carer Research Advocacy Network (FaCRAN)/ RMIT University, the Victorian Collaborative Centre, and the Victorian Department of Health. The event was formally opened by Carer Commissioner Jacqueline Gibson, setting a tone of deep respect and recognition for family carer lived experience workforce. Family carer perspective researchers, Dr Caroline Lambert and Deua Stojanovska (RMIT / FaCRAN) launched the final report, highlighting the importance of translational research shaped with and for families, carers, supporters and kin. The report includes detailed findings and a series of 46 recommendations, including suggested minimum standards. It is available to read here Attendees unanimously agreed that all research should be as grounded, accessible and actionable as this report and the two reflective practice tools. The energy in the room—and online—affirmed just how vital and valued the family carer workforce is across Victoria. Thank you to our partners, presenters and every Connect Centre participant who made this such a meaningful celebration of lived experience leadership, knowledge and collaboration.

References:

Morris, Z. S., Wooding, S., & Grant, J. (2011). The answer is 17 years, what is the question: understanding time lags in translational research. *Journal of the Royal Society of Medicine*, *104*(12), 510–520. https://doi.org/10.1258/jrsm.2011.110180

Sellick, K., Gor, D., Girdwood, A., Robinson, B., Romanin, L., Davidson, J., Alvarez, A., Edan, V., & Downes, L. (2024). Beautiful but fragile: The experiences of family/carer lived experience workers within mental health services. *Advances in Mental Health*, 1–26. https://doi.org/10.1080/18387357.2024.2423953

Stojanovska, D., Lambert, C., David, C., Nipperess, S., Martin, R., & Bashfield, L. (2025). *Changing lives: The Mental Health and Wellbeing Connect centre family carer lived experience workforce story*. FACRAN and Social Equity Research Centre, RMIT University. DOI: 10.25439/rmt.30727901