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EXECUTIVE SEARCH & ADVISORY

Candidate Briefing Pack



Chief Executive Officer

Women's Health in the South East: the regional women's health service for Melbourne's Southern Metropolitan Region

September 2026

ABOUT WHISE

Women's Health in the South East (WHISE) is the regional women's health service for Melbourne's Southern Metropolitan Region. Founded in 1992, it is a not-for-profit incorporated association registered with the ACNC, and one of twelve women's health services funded through the Victorian Government's Victorian Women's Health Program.

WHISE is a proudly feminist organisation working within a social model of health. The majority of its work sits in primary prevention: translating the evidence base into action for positive social change, promoting gender equality, and advocating for the structural, systemic and attitudinal change that addresses the drivers of health inequity for women. A substantial part of the work is capability building, working alongside partners, stakeholders and the organisations WHISE supports so they apply an intersectional gendered lens in councils, health services, workplaces, education and community settings.

Vision. A region where gender equality is everybody's experience, empowering women and girls to be safe, healthy and thriving.

Values. Curiosity, Collaboration, Authenticity and Feminist leadership.

Operating principles. Intersectional feminism, compassion and lived experience.

The region

WHISE's catchment is the Southern Metropolitan Region: around 2,888 square kilometres and 1.3 million people, roughly a quarter of Victoria's population, of whom approximately 689,000 are women. It stretches from Cardinia Shire and Casey in the outer south east, through Greater Dandenong, Kingston and Frankston, out to the Mornington Peninsula, and inwards to Glen Eira, Bayside, Stonnington and Port Phillip. It is one of the most demographically varied catchments in the state: high-growth outer corridors with young families and thin service infrastructure alongside established, affluent inner suburbs, and culturally diverse communities throughout. The Bunurong and Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation are the Traditional Owners and Custodians of these lands, and sovereignty was never ceded.

WHISE by the numbers

- Around twelve staff, carrying a regional prevention mandate across ten local government areas and 1.3 million people.
- 3,543 people took part in WHISE-led sessions, events and initiatives in 2025-26, up from approximately 1,000 the previous year.
- 136 capacity-building sessions, events and initiatives delivered, and 56 partner organisations actively supported.
- Combined program funding of approximately \$1.76 million, within total revenue of \$2.66 million in 2024-25.
- An independently evaluated return of \$3.15 in community benefit for every dollar invested.
- Participation by priority area in 2025-26: gender equity 1,035 participants, prevention of gender-based violence 1,003, sexual and reproductive health 999, mental health and wellbeing 428, prevention of chronic disease 78.
- A return to surplus in 2024-25 of \$155,676, following a deficit of \$346,346 the prior year, with net assets of \$437,157.

THE WORK

WHISE's program of work is regionally negotiated and partnership-based, evidence-informed and evaluated. Current areas of activity span the prevention of violence against women, sexual and reproductive health, gender equality, women's health and wellbeing more broadly, lived experience leadership, and advocacy and policy.

The important point here is the range of the work, not the volume. A single year's activity runs from a workshop in a neighbourhood house delivered through an interpreter, to a national convening, to a submission shaping national policy. With twelve staff, the Chief Executive has to be close to all of it.

- **Regional strategy and partnership architecture:** two new four-year regional strategies launched with partners, Promoting Respect and Equity Together (PRET) 2025-2030 and Good Health Down South 2025-2030, with sixty partners engaged in PRET work, alongside regional networks and think tanks.
- **Culturally specific community health education:** cervical screening and self-collection sessions across ten local government areas; a menopause, healthy ageing and bone health series with women from African backgrounds; sexuality and body-safety education with Cambodian, Nepalese, Indian, Vietnamese and Chinese mothers, delivered with interpreter support; pelvic floor and menopause education, including webinars co-delivered with local government.
- **Workforce capability building:** affirmative consent training for disability support practitioners; recognise, respond and refer training on family violence and elder abuse for neighbourhood house staff, where confidence in responding to a person using violence rose by an average of 69 per cent; 16 Days of Activism workshops with council staff; Respectful Relationships work with schools and school councils.
- **Lived experience leadership:** the PRET Lived Experience Framework, the first of its kind for the primary prevention of gender-based violence; a cross-sector Community of Practice engaging 45 practitioners; and Elevate: Voices for Change, a standing leadership group of twenty women and gender-diverse members aged 25 to 74 from First Nations, Afghan, Indian, Pakistani, African and Anglo-Australian communities.
- **Policy influence:** From Inquiry to Action on women's pain, provided to five Members of Parliament, the Minister for Health, the Parliamentary Secretary for Women's Health and the Department; a regional women's pain workforce forum; state budget and election advocacy.
- **Convening beyond the region:** Weaving Change, a national gender equity unconference conceived and brokered by WHISE with GEN VIC and NWEA alongside Women Deliver 2026, convening 110 practitioners.
- **Youth and community-led change:** Project Respect with the City of Casey, where 28 Year 10 students pursued commemorative justice, producing a systemic outcome in the Lady Casey mural.

What partners say

WHISE's 2025-26 Partner Survey drew responses from 52 stakeholders across 43 partner organisations. More than four in five rated their organisation's engagement with WHISE (82 per cent) and commitment to the partnership (84 per cent) as high or very high. Eighty-two per cent reported change in their own organisation's capacity to promote gender equality, reduce discrimination and foster respectful relationships, with no respondent reporting no change at all. Asked which words they associate with WHISE, partners chose collaborative (92 per cent), inclusive (91 per cent), professional (73 per cent), feminist (71 per cent), supportive (71 per cent), intersectional (69 per cent) and empowering (62 per cent). For an organisation whose influence rests on trust, that is the finding that matters most.

STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Women's health has moved to the centre of Victorian policy

- The Inquiry into Women's Pain, the first of its kind in Australia, drew contributions from more than 13,000 women, girls, carers and clinicians. Its 2025 report, Bridging the Gender Pain Gap, made 27 recommendations and has been described by the Department of Health as a potential turning point for women's health in Victoria.
- The Victorian Government is rolling out Women's Health Clinics and Sexual and Reproductive Health Hubs, with further clinics opening from late 2026.
- A Victorian Women's Health Advisory Council now oversees the rollout of investment in women's health, including funding for the women's pain gap and preventative sexual health.
- The Gender Equality Act 2020 (Vic) has embedded gendered analysis and Gender Impact Assessments across the Victorian public sector, driving demand for the expertise women's health services hold.

A sector, not just an organisation

WHISE is one of twelve women's health services operating collectively as the Victorian Women's Health Services Network, which has shaped Victoria's women's health and gender equality landscape for four decades. Victoria is the only state or territory with gendered health promotion infrastructure in every region. WHISE's Chief Executive leads an independent organisation and is also a member of a collective that negotiates, advocates and reports as a sector.

Recognition is not the same as security

The Victorian Government continued sector funding in the 2026-27 State Budget, but on a one-year commitment, so the incoming Chief Executive takes carriage of the case for ongoing investment almost immediately. WHISE has reached a capacity ceiling: it receives more requests for community outreach than it can fulfil, and declines work squarely within its remit. The constraint on WHISE's reach is funding, not community appetite.

The region

Greater Dandenong is among the most culturally diverse municipalities in Australia, with residents from more than 150 birthplaces and around 64 per cent born overseas, and it is where structural disadvantage in the region is most concentrated. Casey is one of the fastest-growing municipalities in the country, while established, comparatively advantaged inner suburbs sit at the other end. WHISE cannot deliver a single regional program of work: it works through interpreters, in trauma-informed and culturally specific formats, in settings from a neighbourhood house to a council executive.

Contested ground, and a change of government cycle

Progress on gender equality is real but contested. National attitudinal research consistently finds that a substantial minority of Australians mistrust women's accounts of violence and believe gender inequality is exaggerated, and ANROWS points to sustained backlash and organised misinformation. The next round of national data reports during this appointment.

The state election will be held on 28 November 2026, with caretaker commencing 3 November. Whatever the outcome, the incoming Chief Executive will build relationships with a ministry, a department and policy settings that may differ from those in place at appointment.

Link to Strategic Plan: https://whise.org.au/assets/docs/reports/2023-28_whise_strategic_plan.pdf

THE BOARD AND WHISE'S CULTURE

The Board

WHISE is governed by a Board of nine non-executive directors, supported by the People, Quality, Governance and Risk Committee and the Finance and Audit Committee. Directors are drawn from across sectors and typically serve five or six years. The Board meets every two months, and the Chair and Chief Executive speak informally a couple of times a week and formally each fortnight.

It is a supportive Board that is clear about its own role. It holds a firm line between governance and operations, will have the robust discussion when one is needed, and lands well with its decisions. The Board describes this appointment as the single most consequential decision it will make, and has designed a process built around what the role actually requires.

The culture

WHISE works as a fully remote team, with place-based in-person work as the role requires. The model is relatively new and it is working: outcomes and impact matter more than visibility or hours worked, staff work to their own strengths, and feminist and decolonising practice is applied internally as well as externally.

The management team has asked to contribute to this appointment, and the Board is designing a process that will give candidates the chance to potentially meet the people they would lead, without compromising the responsibility of the Board in deciding on the appointment. The team has been explicit about what it values in a Chief Executive.

What the team values in a Chief Executive

- **Intersectional gender transformation and values-based leadership:** leading systemic change to advance gender equality and social justice, applying intersectional feminist, equity and decolonising principles across strategy, advocacy, culture and practice.
- **Inclusive culture and people leadership:** creating a positive, inclusive and high-performing culture where diverse perspectives, lived experience and ways of working are valued, leading with trust and adaptability, and developing people through coaching and shared leadership.
- **Strategic leadership, innovation and systems thinking:** strategic foresight that anticipates emerging trends, risks and opportunities across policy, funding, social and political environments, positioning WHISE to influence change over the long term.
- **Outcomes-focused leadership and accountability:** fostering accountability, autonomy and flexibility, focused on outcomes and impact rather than visibility or hours worked, with high performance supported through trust and collaboration.
- **Lived experience and relational leadership:** recognising lived experience as a critical source of expertise and leadership, embedding it in decision-making and advocacy, and leading with integrity, humility and self-awareness.

What the Board is looking for

The Board has also been clear about the things that will decide this appointment:

- Feminist practice credibility. Candidates must be able to hold a feminist analysis publicly and in front of government, not merely tolerate one. This is a requirement of the role, not a preference.
- Equally strong outside and in. The Board was explicit that the role asks for both: the public authority to represent WHISE to government, funders and the sector, and the discipline to keep the organisation itself running well. With twelve staff and no executive layer, there is nowhere to delegate the second half.
- A fresh perspective. The Board is not looking for a replica of the outgoing Chief Executive. It expects the next one to be different, and to bring new ideas, innovation and a fresh read of what WHISE can be. A capable or emerging first-time chief executive will be considered.
- Funder and sector fluency. Confidence with Department of Health and DFFH relationships, short funding cycles, acquittal discipline, and the collective dynamics of the Victorian Women's Health Services Network.
- Public voice. WHISE takes public positions, including on contested matters and in response to misinformation. The Chief Executive needs to do that without destabilising funder relationships.
- Intersectional practice in fact, not policy. The Board wants leadership that reflects the communities WHISE works with and for, and welcomes applications from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from migrant and refugee communities, women with disability, and LGBTIQ+ and gender-diverse people.

THE OPPORTUNITY

Reports to. The WHISE Board of Management, through the Chairperson.

Direct reports. Manager, Business and Finance; Manager, Gender Equality and Capability; Manager, Women's Health and Wellbeing. The role also works closely with, and oversees the work of, the Advocacy Lead.

Scale. Approximately twelve staff, total revenue of \$2.66 million and combined program funding of approximately \$1.76 million, serving a region of 1.3 million people across ten local government areas.

Employment type. Permanent, full time.

Location and working arrangement. WHISE operates as a fully remote workforce. The Chief Executive is expected to spend time across the Southern Metropolitan Region, building relationships and partnerships and representing the organisation.

Remuneration. To be negotiated within a range. The current package comprises base salary and superannuation, not-for-profit salary packaging, and a fully maintained hybrid or electric vehicle available for work and private use, with fuel, servicing and insurance provided. WHISE is open to structuring the package to suit the appointee, including folding the vehicle component into base salary where a vehicle is not required.

WHISE is seeking a Chief Executive with the ability to represent women's health in state and national conversations, the feminist practice credibility to hold that position under contest, and the discipline to run a small, high-performing organisation sustainably while doing it.

What the incoming Chief Executive will do

- **Hold WHISE's public position:** represent the organisation to government, media and the sector, including on contested matters and in response to misinformation, without destabilising the relationships WHISE depends on.
- **Lead within the Network:** operate as a member of the Victorian Women's Health Services Network, which negotiates, advocates and reports as a sector, while leading an independent organisation with its own regional mandate.
- **Engage the funders and make the case:** manage the relationships with the Department of Health and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing, take carriage of the argument for ongoing investment given the one-year commitment in the 2026-27 State Budget, and build the profit-for-purpose and philanthropic pathways the strategic plan calls for.
- **Deliver the strategy:** drive WHISE's strategic direction, maintain and refine the strategic plan, and lead the next planning cycle as the current plan approaches its end.
- **Protect and grow the culture:** sustain a trusting, outcomes-focused remote workplace through a leadership transition, build workforce capability and embed succession planning.
- **Steward the partnerships:** hold and deepen relationships across ten councils, health services, Primary Health Networks, education providers, employers and community organisations, protecting the partner trust the 2025-26 survey reflects and the social licence WHISE has built over three decades.
- **Deliver on funder commitments:** achieve the service targets set by funding bodies, manage short funding cycles and acquittal discipline, and secure financial sustainability within agreed budgetary provisions.
- **Deepen the community relationships:** WHISE's connection to the communities it works with is already a strength, and the Board wants it deeper still. Sustain culturally specific, trauma-informed and lived-experience-led practice across a region no single program of work could cover.

WHAT YOU WILL BRING

We actively encourage you to apply if you meet the essential criteria, even if you do not meet every desirable one. Research consistently shows that women and candidates from marginalised communities hold themselves to a higher bar than others do. We would rather that bar did not stop you. Please contact Michael Holdway for a confidential conversation to explore this further.

Essential

- Senior leadership experience in a health, community or women's organisation within the not-for-profit sector, in the order of eight years. The Board is open to a capable first-time chief executive.
- Demonstrated feminist practice, and the ability to hold a feminist and intersectional analysis publicly, including in front of government.
- Deep understanding of women's rights, women's health and primary prevention, consistent with WHISE's philosophy and values.
- Excellent influencing, engagement and communication skills, with the ability to work comfortably with executive-level leaders and in public forums.
- Proven ability to build trusted relationships with government departments, community agencies, corporate entities and industry bodies, and to work effectively with complex stakeholders.
- Financial and commercial judgement sufficient to manage funding, budgets and acquittals in a small organisation, and to secure financial sustainability.
- Strong strategic thinking, with the ability to adapt and pivot in response to changes in legislation and policy.
- Resilience, and the ability to deliver under pressure when the stakes are high and the work is publicly contested, with a Board that stands alongside its Chief Executive when it is.
- Demonstrated experience managing a portfolio of services, programs and projects, and leading engagement, change and communications to tight timeframes.

Highly desirable

- Post-graduate qualifications in management, public policy, public health or a related field.
- Knowledge of the Southern Metropolitan Region and its communities.
- Familiarity with the Victorian Women's Health Program, the Victorian Women's Health Services Network, and Department of Health and DFFH funding relationships.
- Working knowledge of the Gender Equality Act 2020 (Vic) and Gender Impact Assessments.
- Experience leading a fully remote or distributed team.

Working at WHISE

- Genuine commitment to diversity, inclusion and intersectional practice, and to WHISE's operating principles of intersectional feminism, compassion and lived experience.
- Leadership that recognises lived experience as a source of expertise, and shares power rather than concentrating it.
- Comfort leading in a fully remote organisation while being visible and present in the region.
- Commitment to WHISE's values of Curiosity, Collaboration, Authenticity and Feminist leadership, and to its reconciliation and decolonising commitments.
- Appointment is subject to reference checking, verification of qualifications and right to work, and relevant probity checks, which may include a Working with Children Check and a police check.



THE RECRUITMENT PROCESS

HOW TO APPLY

Please upload a CV and a short cover letter setting out what you would bring to WHISE through the website portal link: <https://searchlightgroup.com.au/jobs/chief-executive-officer-6/>

Closing date for applications is midnight on **Sunday 27 September 2026**. If you would prefer to test your interest before applying, Michael Holdway would welcome a confidential conversation.

WHISE and Searchlight Group are committed to a candidate experience that is non-discriminatory, culturally safe and accessible. If you need an adjustment at any point in this process, please tell us and we will arrange it, and we will schedule conversations around caring responsibilities. Applications are particularly welcomed from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women, women from migrant and refugee communities, women with disability, and LGBTIQ+ and gender-diverse people.

About Searchlight Group

Searchlight Group is a Melbourne-based executive search firm working exclusively in the public and for-purpose sectors, and active in the women's health and gender equality space. Michael Holdway leads this engagement personally, from briefing through to appointment, and every conversation is confidential.

Contact

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This pack is provided in confidence for candidates considering the Chief Executive Officer role at WHISE. It remains the property of Searchlight Group.

POSITION DESCRIPTION

Purpose

- Drive and deliver WHISE's strategic direction.
- Hold end-to-end accountability for organisational governance and ensure WHISE operates within its legislative and statutory obligations.
- Oversee the efficient and effective running of the WHISE team and the day-to-day management of the organisation.
- Achieve the service targets set by funding bodies and secure WHISE's financial sustainability.
- Build the reputation and profile of WHISE across the Southern Metropolitan Region and beyond, and increase WHISE's reach through influence, research, collaboration and advocacy.
- Provide thought leadership across women's rights, women's health and primary prevention.
- Make WHISE a great place to work.

Key accountabilities

› Strategy and Board partnership

- Partner with the Board and key stakeholders to manage and deliver WHISE's strategic direction, vision and plan, and ensure the strategic plan is maintained and refined.
- Collaborate closely with the Chair, and provide sound, proactive advice and reporting to the Board on operations, financial management, risk, legislative compliance and policy.

› Financial sustainability and funding

- Provide strategic and commercial advice and actively manage WHISE's funding through partnership with key stakeholders.
- Ensure financial sustainability in line with agreed budgetary provisions.
- Review programs on an ongoing basis to ensure benefits realised align with the business case and the strategic plan.

› People and operations

- Oversee day-to-day management of the organisation.
- Build an inclusive organisational culture where diverse perspectives and lived experience shape decisions, and ensure the team is supported and motivated to perform at a high level.
- Build workforce capability, including embedded succession planning.

› External leadership and partnerships

- Lead, inspire and make a difference across all areas of primary prevention in women's health.
- Develop and maintain key external relationships, including collaborative alliances and effective partnering across government departments, funding bodies, local government, policy makers, Primary Health Networks, service providers and community.
- Work effectively with complex stakeholders to achieve outcomes.

Key selection criteria

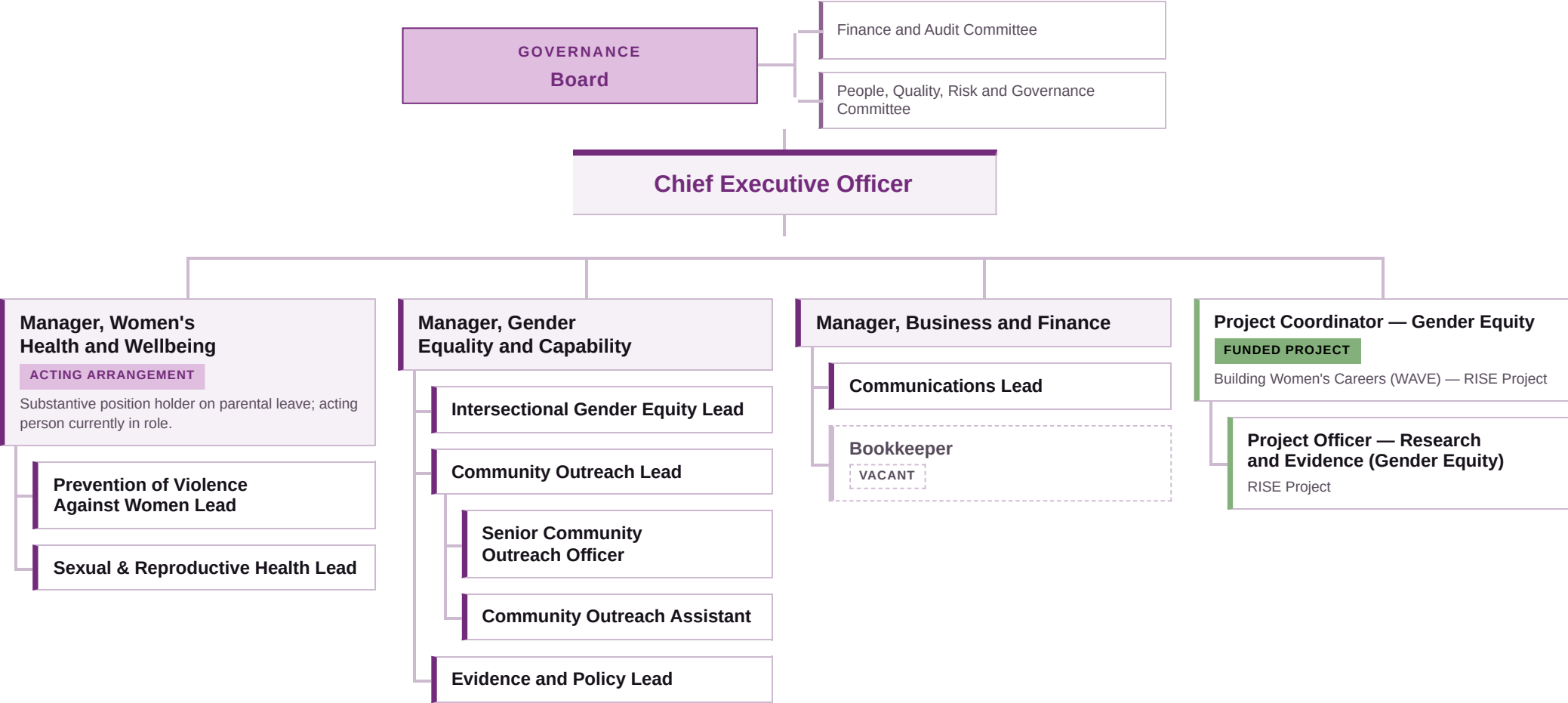
- Senior leadership experience in a health, community or women's organisation within the not-for-profit sector, in the order of eight years. *
- Experience across all aspects of women's health, consistent with WHISE's philosophy and values, incorporating a gendered perspective within a feminist framework. *
- Deep understanding of women's rights and primary prevention health initiatives. *
- Excellent influencing, engagement and communication skills, with the ability to work comfortably with executive-level leaders and in public forums. *
- Ability to build trusted relationships with government departments, community agencies, corporate entities and industry bodies. *
- Strong strategic thinking, with the ability to adapt and pivot in response to changes in legislation and policy. *
- Strong resilience, and the ability to deliver under pressure when the stakes are high. *
- Genuine commitment to diversity, inclusion and intersectional practice. *
- Excellent listening skills, with the ability to draw out underlying issues and align multiple stakeholders.
- Ability to lead engagement, change and communications, and to work within tight timeframes.
- In-depth knowledge of the not-for-profit sector, and of people, planning and program management.
- Demonstrated experience managing a portfolio of services, programs and projects.
- Post-graduate qualifications in management, public policy, public health or a related field.
- Knowledge of the Southern Metropolitan Region.

An asterisk () denotes a must-have requirement.*

Organisational structure

Internal reference chart. Positions only — no names or employment fractions — with the current vacancy, the acting arrangement and the funded project stream marked. Fifteen positions across three teams and one funded project, reporting through the CEO to the Board.

15 positions 3 teams 1 funded project 2 Board sub-committees 1 vacancy



HOW TO READ THE CHART

-  Board and its sub-committees
-  Executive and management positions
-  Lead and operational positions
-  Funded project positions
-  Position currently vacant

Current as at 3 September 2026

STILL TO CONFIRM

- Reporting lines for the Lead positions.** Drawn here as direct reports to their manager. If any Lead is line-managed by one manager but works across all three teams, that is better drawn as a dotted line.
- Whether any other Lead has direct reports.** Only the Community Outreach Lead is shown with a fourth tier.
- The project title as written.** Shown as "Building Women's Careers (WAVE) — RISE Project". Worth checking against the funding agreement, and deciding whether the funded period should appear on the chart.
- Advisory and partnership structures.** Bodies such as the PRET Partnership are not shown alongside the Board or the CEO.