

# MULTICULTURAL FRAMEWORK REVIEW

## CITY OF MELBOURNE SUBMISSION SEPTEMBER 2023

### INTRODUCTION

This submission is provided on behalf of the management of the City of Melbourne. It responds to the following areas outlined in the review's terms of reference: the effectiveness of existing federal policy settings and programs, strategies to promote multiculturalism, social cohesion and inclusion, and services designed to support multicultural Australia.

The City of Melbourne is a multicultural city, where people can freely express their identity and be proud of where they have come from. The demographic profile of the municipality reflects this, with over 54 per cent of residents born overseas and the last census identifying the following characteristics of residents:

- Residents were born in over 115 different countries.
- 46 per cent of residents speak a language other than English at home with more than 5 per cent of these residents identifying they do not speak English well, or at all.
- Over half of the non-English speaking community members settled in the municipality after 2016.
- Community identify with over 130 different cultural backgrounds.
- 49 per cent had no religion, however over 40 different religions are practiced by City of Melbourne residents.

In addition, each year more than 170,000 international students from over 170 countries come to Victoria to study and as an educational hub, Melbourne welcomes students from all over the world. We are committed to creating a safe and inclusive city for international students through fostering community cohesion, promoting cultural diversity and supporting the city's international engagement.

Creating an environment for social cohesion across the municipality's diverse community requires ongoing commitment across policy, planning and service delivery in partnership with residents, community organisations, businesses and all levels of government.

The City of Melbourne has developed a ten-year [Inclusive Melbourne Strategy](#) which is our overarching strategy for inclusivity and outlines how we will embrace the diversity of cultures, ages, genders, sexualities, backgrounds, religions and abilities of all who live, work, visit and study in the city. The strategy is also a Major Initiative in City of Melbourne's [Council Plan](#).

The institutional settings that support Australia's multiculturalism haven't been reviewed in almost a generation and the City of Melbourne commends the current government's commitment to this review.

## 1. RELEVANT POLICY SETTINGS AND PROGRAMS

### 1.1 National Policy

Australia's approach to multicultural affairs has long been the subject of public debate, one that is often clouded by anti-immigrant rhetoric. It is time to move the conversation away from "us and them" and embrace multiculturalism as central to our national identity.

In the absence of a national social cohesion policy there is inconsistent commitment and resourcing of social cohesion initiatives from local and state governments. The City of Melbourne is a member of national networks such as the Refugee Welcome Zone and Welcoming Cities Network. These are positive initiatives, but their potential impact is limited by inconsistent engagement across local governments. A strong national policy would enable all levels of government to support multicultural inclusion, respond to racist rhetoric and shift community sentiment, with aligned commitment and focus.

In addition to a national social cohesion policy an anti-racism plan is needed to sit alongside it that recognises the intersectional experiences of racism. City of Melbourne research has identified racism continues to be an issue towards groups that present as visibly different, like those of Asian and African origin, and towards Muslim women. Racism also increased towards those of Chinese background during the pandemic.

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In addition, the Department of Home Affairs encompasses several functions with competing and at times conflicting priorities. The current positioning of the multicultural affairs and social inclusion functions alongside functions such as national security and border protection limits the ability of the department to meaningfully lead and progress social cohesion public policy.

### **Recommendation**

*That the federal government develop a national policy that focuses on social cohesion of our multicultural country and strengthening Australia's multicultural identity. A national social cohesion policy should demonstrate leadership at a national level, reduce fragmentation, and improve coordination of effort across local and state governments.*

*The policy should be appropriately resourced for implementation and should commit to inter-governmental, cross portfolio leadership and collaboration. Successful implementation would be supported by alignment of multicultural affairs and social cohesion functions within an appropriate government department.*

*In addition, a national anti-racism plan should be developed that provides the platform for all levels of government to commit actions that combat racism across community and institutions.*

### **1.2 National Settlement Framework**

The National Settlement Framework provides a foundation for inter-governmental collaboration, outlining roles and responsibilities for the different tiers of government and organisations, but lacks resourcing and leadership at a national level to make it effective.

In 2021 and 2022 when Melbourne experienced a sudden influx of refugees from Afghanistan and Ukraine, the City of Melbourne worked in partnership with settlement services and local organisations on arrival settlement. Unfortunately, support was always reactive due to a lack of information about when people would be arriving and their support needs. Providing the following information to settlement services or local government as a mandatory minimum data set would enable proactive planning to provide a positive initial arrival settlement experience and reducing the possibility of inflicting further trauma.

- Number of weekly arrivals expected
- Age range (including children)
- Gender
- Family composition
- Language spoken
- Other immediate needs e.g. chronic health conditions

### **Recommendation**

*That the review considers stronger governance around the National Settlement Framework that actively engages local, state and federal government representatives. In addition, adequate resources must be allocated to improve implementation of the framework for this to work effectively across all tiers of government.*

## **2. STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE MULTICULTURALISM, SOCIAL COHESION AND INCLUSION**

### **2.1 Inclusive and accessible information**

In 2022 the City of Melbourne undertook research on the needs of our culturally diverse communities. This identified that awareness of and access to information on available services and programs was a key gap, particularly for refugees, asylum seekers and recent migrants. There is no clear point of entry into the system for people looking for a central source of information on services, resources and amenities. The key services identified included federal systems like Medicare, Centrelink and the ATO, as well as health care, childcare, family services, language programs and employment programs. Most information discovery currently happens

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organically through referrals, word of mouth or community outreach. A central space could provide both information and connection opportunities, especially for new arrivals, and as a capital city local government, there is an opportunity for City of Melbourne to play a role in raising awareness and facilitating digital access for communities.

The COVID-19 pandemic also exposed gaps in the government's ability to effectively communicate with linguistically diverse communities. Migrants were less likely to receive public health information because of sporadic government engagement, increasing their risk of contracting COVID-19 and transmitting it unwittingly.

During the lockdowns in Melbourne and particularly the hard lockdowns of public housing towers in the municipality, staff and community organisations adapted their communication methods and worked with community leaders to circulate messages primarily through WhatsApp groups. These relationships with community leaders were critical to ensuring accurate information about COVID-19 was distributed.

More recently, we have had success with communication regarding free HPV vaccines for international students. Conventional attempts to gain the attention of students had limited impact, but a change to our approach to utilise students themselves saw 800 bookings in seven days after one student posted the information on a "WeChat group" and another on a Chinese webpage.

### **Recommendation**

*That the Australian government work with local governments, starting with capital city governments, to designate and establish centrally located and easily accessible spaces as a source of information, resources, and local networks for new arrivals.*

*That the Australian government establish a central digital space that provides information and resources for new arrivals to ensure people can access information and resources on the services that they require in one place. This should be able to be translated into languages other than English.*

*That the Australian government also work with local government and community to understand the different methods and tools that community members use, and develop localised communication strategies for critical government information that needs to be delivered and understood across all populations.*

### **2.2 Enhancing economic access**

Securing paid employment is critical to many people's ability to fully contribute and participate in social and economic life. Research by the City of Melbourne also identified that our multicultural communities face multiple barriers to economic participation.

Many migrant jobseekers are unable to gain employment despite their efforts, due to issues of systemic racism and discrimination in the workplace. Organisations are failing to provide employment opportunities for culturally and racially marginalised jobseekers, and many do not have the cultural competency to provide a working environment that is safe and supportive for everyone.

The City of Melbourne has worked in partnership with job service providers and community organisations on programs and initiatives to improve readiness for work and employment outcomes for diverse community members. A common denominator across programs is a lack of tangible and ongoing employment outcomes in the form of people getting and staying in jobs.

Individuals participate in training programs and obtain qualifications which haven't eventuated in employment outcomes. Young people have told us that job service providers send jobseekers off to obtain more qualifications with some having multiple certificates. Qualifications, workshops and job expos don't always lead to work. Many migrant jobseekers direct their efforts to entrepreneurial activities out of necessity, with language barriers, lack of skill recognition, racism, and discrimination limiting their participation in Australian workplaces.

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There is a growing expectation from community members, employees, customers, suppliers, and shareholders for organisations to address racism and discrimination in the workplace, but many organisations often do not have the tools or capability to do this, despite their legislated requirement to do so under the Fair Work Act.

Organisations would benefit from stronger direction and support to comply with the Act and create safe and inclusive workplaces. Provision of initiatives to build the capability of organisations would help them to address racism and discrimination in the workplace and support national priorities regarding economic participation.

In addition, international students and graduates are often excluded from equal employment opportunities in Australia and there is a disparity in graduate outcomes between international and domestic students. In 2022, only 58 per cent of Australia's international undergraduates had obtained full-time employment 4-6 months after graduation, compared with 79 per cent for domestic graduates. City of Melbourne has joined the Victorian Government's Commitment to Action: Improving international student employment outcomes, which encourages Victorian employers to pledge to take meaningful action to improve the employment outcomes of international students in Victoria.

### **Recommendation**

*That the federal government implement and fund national initiatives to address racism and discrimination in the workforce experienced by people who are culturally and racially marginalised.*

*That the federal government ensure that Australia's post study work rights aim to improve economic outcomes for international students and make Australia an even more attractive destination for international students.*

### **2.3 Digital inclusion**

A 2020 report by the Settlement Council of Australia found that there is a 'digital divide' between newly arrived migrants and refugees and the rest of Australia. Newly arrived migrants and refugees face barriers to digital inclusion such as affordability, access to devices and infrastructure, digital literacy and low English proficiency.

This aligns with our experience in library digital literacy programs, with participants reporting challenges accessing devices and reliable internet connections at home. In addition, limited digital capability and language barriers make it difficult for people to access services and information online for services such as Centrelink, Immigration and Medicare.

### **Recommendation**

*That digital inclusion for newly arrived migrants and refugees be prioritised and improved by acting on the recommendations made in the 2020 report by the Settlement Council of Australia "Supporting the digital inclusion of new migrants and refugees".*

## **3. SERVICES DESIGNED TO SUPPORT MULTICULTURAL AUSTRALIA**

### **3.1 Status Resolution Support Services (SRSS)**

The current structure of the SRSS system is restrictive and provides limited support for people seeking asylum. The significant cuts to the SRSS in 2018 resulted in individuals being exited from the program who no longer met the high threshold for support.

As the closest tier of government to community, local government delivers services and programs that are place based and respond to local needs. The changes to the SRSS have left people seeking asylum with inadequate income and supports to settle and integrate into community, and local government has finite resources to respond to these additional needs in the community.

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City of Melbourne funds and works in partnership with many not-for-profit organisations supporting people seeking asylum. These organisations who are not funded by the federal government have experienced increased demand for material aid and other supports. The organisations have also observed increasing rates of depression, distrust of services, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorders and increased levels of poverty amongst community members who are no longer eligible for support through the SRSS.

### **Recommendation**

*That a review of the SRSS program be undertaken to understand the current challenges experienced by individuals seeking asylum in Australia and expand access to essential settlement support services.*

### **3.2 Immunisation program for migrant children**

The current service delivery model of immunisation in Australia is not meeting the needs of migrant children, who experience a higher burden of vaccine preventable disease and lower immunisation rates compared to non-migrant children.

Understanding the experiences of immunisation providers is critical for designing effective and tailored interventions to improve this service. In 2021, the City of Melbourne participated in a study to understand the key challenges in immunisation service delivery for migrant children in Australia. The study found that longer time is needed with migrant families to source vaccination history, explain the Australian health system, address repeat vaccination concerns, and navigate language barriers. Furthermore, creating catch-up vaccination schedules is complex, time consuming and resource-intensive for providers and the current funding is inadequate to support the time needed to perform this service effectively.

### **Recommendation**

*That the National Immunisation Scheme is allocated specific funding to develop and deliver a comprehensive immunisation program for migrant children, responding to the existing challenges.*

### **3.3 Culturally appropriate mental health services**

As Australia's population continues to grow and change, our mental health care system must adapt and respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse population with services that are culturally inclusive and appropriate. There are considerable gaps in data and information on mental health outcomes for people from multicultural communities. Mainstream data collection mechanisms offer a limited view of cultural diversity and when this data is collected, multicultural communities remain underrepresented in national mental health research. For example, many government research activities rely on variables such as 'country of birth' and 'primary language other than English spoken at home' to identify and classify cultural diversity. When these variables are used in isolation, they fail to capture the considerable diversity of experiences of multicultural Australians which makes it impossible to evaluate the effectiveness of mental health services for different multicultural communities. There is also limited monitoring and reporting on mental health outcomes for these communities and their access to and uptake of services.

What we do know is that first and second generation migrants, refugees, and people seeking have unique mental health experiences and outcomes relative to the broader Australian population. There is generally poorer uptake of mental health services amongst these communities, and they are overrepresented in involuntary admissions to acute inpatient mental health units. Refugees and people seeking asylum are at particular risk of developing mental health problems and suicidal behaviours when compared with the broader population, and there is an association between prolonged detention and poor mental health outcomes. International students are another community that is of greater risk of experiencing mental health issues due to language barriers, academic stressors and isolation from family.

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There are many barriers that limit the access to and uptake of mental health care by multicultural communities. They include attitudes and perceptions towards mental health and illness, language barriers, lack of knowledge or understanding about mental health services, and cultural differences between health care providers and consumers leading to cultural misunderstandings and broader systemic issues of racism and discrimination.

In engagements and conversations with staff, the community has told us that improved access to mental health care is important to them, but we also know that there is a lack of awareness amongst multicultural communities, and much of the broader community, about the mental health support services that are available. As a local government, we play an important role in connecting our community to and partnering with mental health support services, but without reliable data that takes into account the cultural and social diversity of mental health care consumers, their unique needs, and guidance on culturally responsive care, service planning is challenging.

### **Recommendation**

*That the federal government improve representation of multicultural communities in mental health research, ensure that national mental health data collection applies the ABS Standards for Statistics on Cultural and Language Diversity. That as a priority, research is conducted on the determinants of mental health and illness, and the beliefs, knowledge and attitudes towards health services and help-seeking among migrant and refugee communities.*