



## **Whittlesea Community Connections' Submission to the Australian Multicultural Review**

Whittlesea Community Connections (WCC) welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Australian Multicultural Review.

WCC is a place-based community based organisation that works to ensure those experiencing complex barriers have the information, resources and opportunities they need to meaningfully participate in community. To do this WCC delivers a number of services including settlement support for new arrival migrants and refugees, volunteering, training and employment services, community information and legal advice. WCC also works with community to identify and respond to community needs in ways that promote resilience and empowerment. This includes primary prevention of family violence with multicultural communities, informed and guided by multicultural women's groups and a Community Leaders Working Group.

WCC is based in the City of Whittlesea, in Melbourne's outer-north, one of Australia's fastest growth corridors. Whittlesea is proud of its cultural diversity and continues to welcome new arrival migrants and refugees in large numbers. Based on WCC's experience working with multicultural communities we propose the following principles as key to the Australian Multicultural Review.

### **1) Multiculturalism embedded in the recognition of and engagement with the First Nations people of Australia**

Working towards the inclusion of migrant, refugee and asylum seeker communities in Australia cannot occur without the recognition and reparation of injustices, past and present, experienced by our First Nations people. Our journey towards reconciliation could be strengthened by multicultural Australia yet is hampered by lack of accurate and accessible information compounded by lack of engagement between and across multicultural and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Strategies that increase access to culturally and linguistically appropriate information, raises awareness of and develop opportunities to build relationships with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are needed. Australia's story of multiculturalism and pathway to Reconciliation are intertwined and can provide unique learning opportunities that strengthen community harmony and resilience.

### **2) Integrating Multiculturalism and Intersectionality**

Australia's multicultural community is large and diverse within itself and inter-sectional approaches are needed to ensure policy and service settings continue to evolve to ensure they are appropriate

accessible and non-discriminatory. It is well established that LGBTIQ+ communities experience disproportionate mental and physical health inequities compared to the general population, this is exacerbated for multicultural and multi-faith community members. Awareness of intersectionality will improve our collective understanding of multicultural Australia and the potential impact on those who experience a more marginalised sense of identity. By understanding and acknowledging the impact of co-occurring characteristics of identity, we can improve our understanding of and contribute to improved policy and service outcomes. This includes Government leadership that incorporates an intersectional lens and inclusive strategies across government.

### **3) Commonwealth, targeted and place-based services**

In 2021, just over 7 million people in Australia were born overseas, representing 27.6% of the population. In some areas this proportion is much higher, in the City of Whittlesea for example, 37.6% of people were born overseas and two thirds of residents had at least one parent born overseas. Our changing and increasingly diverse national and local demographics show that multicultural Australia is a significant part of our population that should not just be reflected in targeted multicultural policies, frameworks or services alone.

Australians with multicultural backgrounds intersect with multiple policies and services including employment, education and training, family violence, social security payments, the National Disability Insurance Scheme and My Aged Care. Each of these settings should be inclusive of and responsive to multicultural communities.

Policies and services that address particular barriers experienced by multicultural, new arrival and asylum seeker communities in more targeted ways are also needed. As immigration continues to drive increasing diversity corresponding support services such as the Settlement Engagement and Transition Support Program should continue to be strengthened. Increasing investment in SETS and targeted support services that have the flexibility to respond to changing migration patterns will enhance and maximise outcomes for and with new arrival communities across Australia.

This would be further enhanced with a focus on local, place based approaches where settlement, migration patterns and local infrastructure vary significantly. Macro level policy settings are played out in local communities where there is much greater potential for change. Place based approaches embedded in community also enable community led solutions leading to improved service planning, delivery and outcomes.

### **4) National Anti- Racism Strategy & Human Rights Charter**

WCC commends the Australian government for committing to \$7.5 million to the Australian Human Rights Commission to complete its National Anti- Racism Framework and implement a national anti-racism strategy. To support implementation of the national strategy and based on WCC's experience, involving and empowering communities will be integral to its' understanding, reach and engagement. WCC therefore recommends an additional approach that resources multicultural groups and place-based organisations to deliver community education and awareness initiatives.

WCC also supports a legislated Human Rights Charter that strengthens the human rights of everyone in the community and covers the human rights Australia has already promised to uphold under international law including civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights.

## **5) Building a diverse and skilled workforce**

The COVID-19 pandemic taught us that we need to do better to engage and support multicultural communities. As a result of the failure to engage migrant communities early in disaster planning and our reliance on a low-skilled migrant essential workforce there were 2.3 Covid-19 deaths per 100,000 people born in Australia, compared with 6.8 for those born overseas (ABS 2022). In response WCC worked with Northern Health and Melbourne Polytechnic to involve multicultural communities in the planning and delivery of local COVID19 information via upskilling and employment opportunities.

The Bi-cultural Health Navigators project trained people with migrant and refugee backgrounds interested in working in the health sector to better understand and navigate the health system in Australia. Trained Bi-Cultural Health Navigators were employed to deliver reliable and accurate COVID19 information to multicultural communities in Whittlesea. A total of 24 Bi-cultural Health Navigators were employed, for most this was their first job in Australia and the experience facilitated securing further work including with project partners. The project also provided an opportunity to strengthen the local professional workforce. Cultural knowledge and understanding enhanced engagement with the health care system and built the capacity of organisations to reflect the diverse local community it serves.

This is just one example of an innovative approach to developing skills, opportunities and employment pathways for people with migrant and refugee backgrounds particularly in industries where Australia is experiencing significant skill shortages. Opportunities to scale up what we know works in partnership with industry and employers are needed.

## **6) Remove approaches that exclude and adversely impact multicultural communities**

People with migrant, refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds make overwhelming positive contributions to Australia's economic productivity, creativity, culture and social fabric of our community. In recognition of this Commonwealth policies and services should be embedded in values and approaches that aim to support transitions and integration into Australian community, rather than seek to reinforce barriers to exclusion and marginalisation.

Examples of where government policy has negative impacts on inclusion occur in multiple spheres and include different and extended eligibility for and waiting periods for Commonwealth services such as Centrelink, the high cost of overseas qualification recognition, extended waiting periods and pathways to permanent settlement and resolution and the most punitive of all, Australia's approach to offshore processing.

These barriers to inclusion and integration have significant costs not only in the systems required to administer and uphold them but also in the financial and human costs of lost productivity.