

The SC●A Review: *Community*

June 2026

The Future of Settlement in Australia: How Diversity, Policy, Leadership and Innovation are Reshaping Communities for Generations to Come

A Lens on Whittlesea
Community Connections



Why It Matters

Strong communities are built through trusted relationships, local leadership and settlement systems that enable participation, belonging and opportunity

Implications for Practice

Effective settlement is relational, place-based and strengths-focused, connecting people to opportunity through trust and community partnerships.

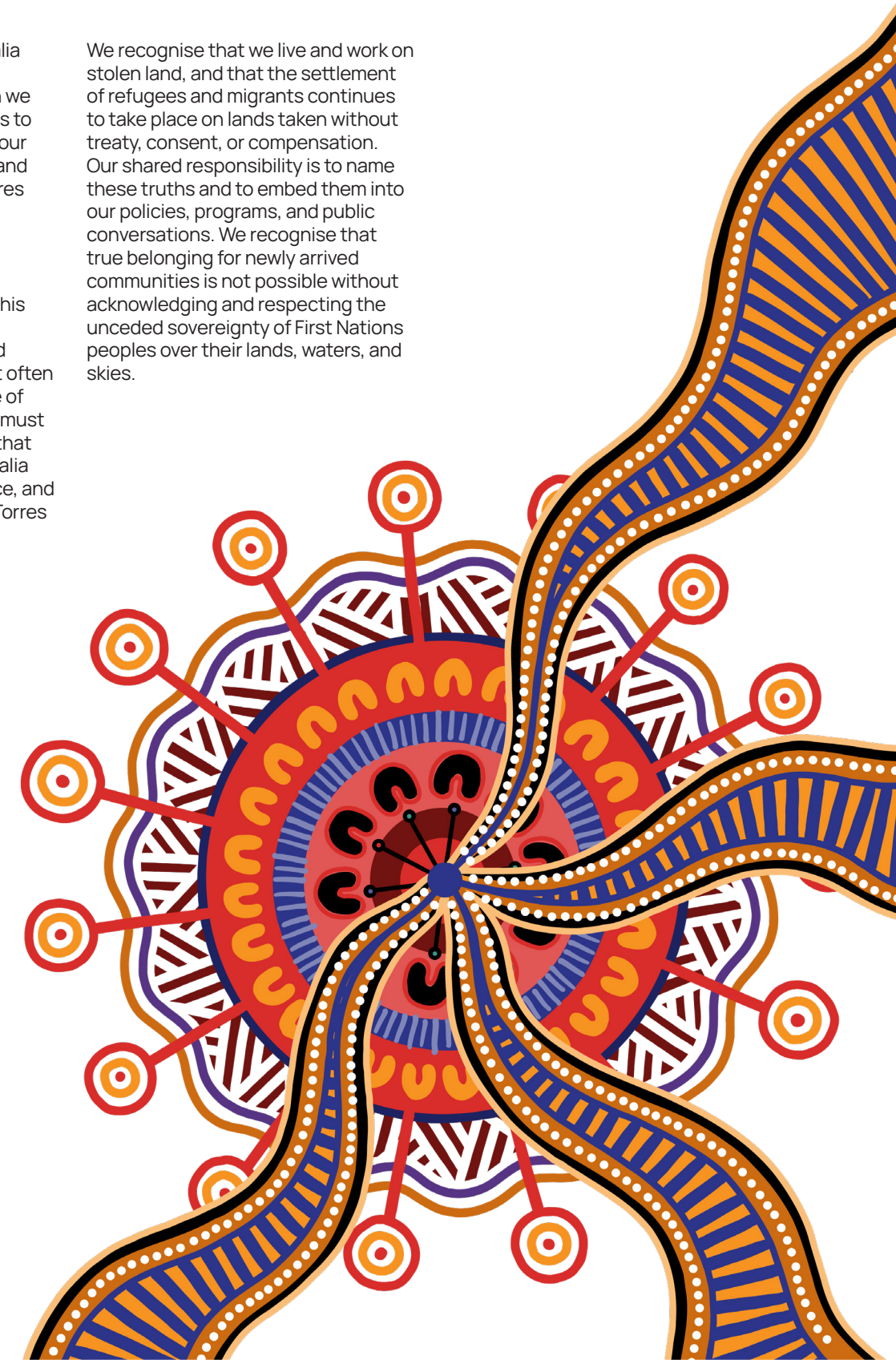


● Acknowledgement of Country

The Settlement Council of Australia acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands on which we live and work. We pay our respects to Elders past and present, and honour the enduring strength, cultures, and sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We recognise that settlement in Australia has never been neutral. The experience of settlement in this country holds contrasting truths and complexities. For refugee and migrant communities, settlement often represents hope and the promise of belonging. Yet alongside this, we must hold and honour another reality: that the history of settlement in Australia began with displacement, violence, and profound loss for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

We recognise that we live and work on stolen land, and that the settlement of refugees and migrants continues to take place on lands taken without treaty, consent, or compensation. Our shared responsibility is to name these truths and to embed them into our policies, programs, and public conversations. We recognise that true belonging for newly arrived communities is not possible without acknowledging and respecting the unceded sovereignty of First Nations peoples over their lands, waters, and skies.



The **SCOA Review** is SCOA's national thought leadership series, reflecting our role as a steward of Australia's settlement ecosystem. It brings together evidence, policy, practice, community voices and global perspectives to foster shared learning, inform national conversations and support the systems, relationships and leadership that enable people and communities to thrive. Each edition explores the ideas and innovations shaping the future of settlement and an intercultural Australia.



Community

Voices, lived experience and community leadership shaping belonging and participation.

Community explores settlement through the voices, leadership and lived experience of refugee and migrant communities, highlighting belonging, participation, culture and community-led change.



Global

International trends and protection frameworks informing Australia's settlement future.

Global examines international trends, humanitarian protection, displacement and resettlement, connecting global developments to Australia's settlement system and practice.



Policy

Evidence and analysis on the systems, reforms and decisions shaping settlement.

Policy analyses the policies, systems and reforms shaping settlement, migration and social cohesion, providing evidence-informed insights to influence national debate and decision-making.



Practice

Innovation, evidence and practical insights that strengthen settlement outcomes.

Practice showcases innovation, evidence and emerging practice across the settlement sector, sharing ideas that strengthen services, improve outcomes and support continuous learning.

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● About This Series

The SCOA Review: Community covers lived experience leadership, community voices, refugee and migrant perspectives, belonging and participation. It documents the civic infrastructure of settlement.

Australia's settlement story is written every day in community organisations across the country. It is written through trusted relationships, practical support, local leadership and the quiet confidence that grows when people are recognised for what they contribute rather than defined by what they need. It is written by volunteers, bicultural workers, youth leaders, teachers, lawyers, employment mentors, community development practitioners and thousands of people whose work strengthens neighbourhoods and expands opportunity.

Much of this contribution remains largely invisible. It is rarely reflected in economic indicators, media narratives or public debate, despite its profound influence on the social, cultural and economic life of the nation.

The SCOA Review: Community is a national initiative of the Settlement Council of Australia that seeks to make this work visible. Through a series of place-based profiles, the project documents the organisations, partnerships and community leadership that underpin successful settlement across Australia. It explores how local knowledge, lived experience and sustained investment create pathways into employment, education,

volunteering, civic participation and community life.

Each publication begins with a simple proposition: settlement is not a standalone program delivered to a defined cohort of people. It is civic infrastructure.

Settlement organisations connect government with community, policy with lived experience and newcomers with the institutions that shape everyday life. They support families to navigate unfamiliar systems, create opportunities for participation, strengthen relationships across cultures and generations and build the trust upon which resilient communities depend.

The organisations featured in this series demonstrate that belonging is not produced through policy alone. It is built locally through relationships, shared responsibility and participation. These profiles are therefore more than organisational stories. They are contributions to a national conversation about the kind of Australia we are building and the institutions that make that possible.

They challenge narrow understandings of settlement that focus only on arrival or early intervention and instead present settlement as a long-term investment in democratic participation, social cohesion and economic contribution. They recognise refugee and migrant communities not as passive recipients of services but as

neighbours, workers, entrepreneurs, volunteers, artists, parents and leaders whose knowledge and experience enrich Australian society.

Every profile is grounded in conversations with the people who undertake this work every day. Staff, volunteers, community leaders and people with lived experience speak not only about programs and services, but about trust, reciprocity, creativity and the practical realities of building communities where everyone has the opportunity to participate.

Taken together, these local stories reveal a national truth; Strong communities do not emerge by accident. They are created through sustained investment in organisations that connect people to one another, expand opportunity and cultivate leadership.

This series is both a celebration of that work and an evidence base for its future. It affirms that investment in settlement is investment in Australia's social infrastructure, economic resilience and democratic life, and that the strength of our national story can be found in the relationships being built every day within communities across the country.



● A National Story Told Through One Local Organisation



INTRODUCTION

Whittlesea Community Connections offers one of the clearest examples of what settlement looks like when it is grounded in place, trust and community leadership.

This profile draws on a listening conversation with staff and leadership at Whittlesea Community Connections, alongside organisational and program material including settlement practice examples, EPRI evaluation material and public reporting. The purpose is not to produce an annual report or a catalogue of services. It is to capture the deeper contribution of a member organisation whose work demonstrates why settlement agencies are indispensable to Australia's social, economic and democratic future.

The consultation did not feel like a formal interview. It felt like entering a community in motion. There was coffee, food, humour, interruption, affection and the easy movement between languages, histories and roles that characterises trusted community organisations. Staff spoke not in the language of outputs, but in the language of relationships. They described people who arrived as clients and returned as volunteers. Volunteers who became workers. Workers who had once navigated the same systems they now help others understand. Families who came for one issue and found a wider community. People whose first contact with the organisation became the beginning of confidence, work, study, safety or leadership. At the centre of the conversation was a powerful idea: settlement is not a narrow program. It is a bridge. As one staff member explained,

"We are like a coordinator between you and services. We have the knowledge, and we have the culture, and we have the language. You don't know the services. We know the services. Tell us your problem and we will work on that problem."

That sentence captures the heart of the work. Settlement agencies translate more than language. They translate systems, expectations, rights, responsibilities, institutions, opportunities and relationships. They help people move from uncertainty to confidence, from isolation to participation, from navigating alone to knowing where they can turn.

Whittlesea Community Connections demonstrates that this work produces value far beyond the individual client. It strengthens families, schools, workplaces, local institutions, public trust and community cohesion. It is prevention, participation and public infrastructure at once.

1 The First Principle: Settlement Begins With Trust

Throughout the consultation, staff returned again and again to trust. They did not describe it as a soft or incidental outcome. They described it as the condition that makes everything else possible.

One worker spoke about outreach at Melbourne Polytechnic. The outreach was not described as a funded extra or a programmatic innovation. It was described as common sense. People were already attending English classes. They were busy, uncertain, carrying family responsibilities and trying to learn a new language while managing housing, children, appointments and systems. Rather than waiting for people to find their way back to the office, Whittlesea Community Connections went to where they were.

As one staff member put it, outreach “gives them an opportunity to access our service out of the office... they can directly come to us without any appointment or anything and ask for help or support.”

The significance of this should not be underestimated. For newly arrived communities, especially those who have lived with conflict, displacement or distrust of institutions, a service is not accessible simply because it

exists. It becomes accessible when it is trusted, familiar and located within relationships.

Another worker described how people arrive from camps or from places where formal services were scarce, unfamiliar or unsafe. In Australia they encounter a dense system of government, law, education, health, welfare, employment and documentation. Much of daily life depends on knowing how to engage with institutions. Settlement workers become the bridge into that world.

One staff member described settlement as a program that “prevents people from being abused by other services,” explaining that without trusted assistance people may pay private operators to complete forms, provide advice or navigate systems that should be accessible to them. “Our doors are open,” he said. “We can do this and that for them for free and in a professional way.”

This is settlement as prevention infrastructure. It prevents exploitation, misinformation, disengagement, avoidable hardship and mistrust. It also prevents the much larger public costs that arise when people are left to navigate complex systems without support.

The consultation made clear that Whittlesea Community Connections does not treat trust as a sentiment. It treats trust as practice. It is built through being present, being consistent, employing staff with lived experience, working in community languages, responding flexibly and refusing to reduce people to a single presenting issue.

One of the most striking examples involved Centrelink. Staff described clients who felt anxious about attending Centrelink directly but were willing to attend an appointment when it was held at Whittlesea Community Connections. One woman, when offered an appointment with Centrelink at WCC, preferred to reschedule another appointment because the opportunity to engage with Centrelink in a trusted setting mattered so much.

The policy lesson is profound. Trust does not simply help people feel welcome. It changes institutional access. It enables people to engage with government through a community organisation that has already earned legitimacy. That is why settlement agencies matter.



2 Lived Experience as Expertise



One of the clearest themes from the consultation was that lived experience is not incidental to the workforce. It is one of the sector's great sources of knowledge, credibility and skill.

One worker described beginning in settlement work during the Syrian and Iraqi refugee intake. He started as a volunteer, motivated by the opportunity to support his community. He had experienced the difficulty of settlement himself and wanted to “pass this experience to other people” and “mitigate the adverse effect of the settlement journey for them.”

He described his work with clarity and humility. He connects people to services, supports citizenship learning, works with students and shares knowledge about culture, community needs and settlement circumstances. He brings formal qualifications and extensive professional experience, but he also brings something that cannot be taught in a manual: the ability to recognise the emotional and practical terrain of settlement because he has travelled it.

Another staff member described arriving in Australia with no English and beginning at Melbourne Polytechnic. Years later, he now supports others in that same environment. He understands what it means to hear someone speak your language in a shopping centre and feel it as “a very big gift.” He understands the relief of being understood. He understands the significance of someone helping you book an appointment, fill out a form or speak to a service when everything feels unfamiliar.

One worker had practised law overseas for many years before arriving in Australia and starting again. She studied, volunteered, worked across programs and eventually became a leader in the organisation. Her story demonstrates a pattern repeated across the settlement sector: people arrive with skills, qualifications and professional identities, and then work through systems that do not always know how to recognise them. The settlement workforce often contains this layered expertise: formal training, professional history, cultural knowledge, language, lived experience and community trust.

This is not a story of deficit. It is a story of capability being redirected, re-expressed and shared.

A further worker described beginning as a client, then student, then volunteer, then employee. Another spoke about starting as a volunteer in 2016 after repeated unsuccessful attempts to enter the workforce despite holding a degree and believing deeply in her own skills. She described wanting “that little push” and “the starting point.” Whittlesea Community Connections became that place. She began facilitating groups, then moved into settlement work, youth work, COVID-era community activation and eventually multicultural team leadership.

Her reflection was one of the most important in the consultation:

“Settlement is different for everyone. It's not just when people arrive and the plane lands.”

She explained that people may feel settled at one point, and then life circumstances draw them back into needing support. Parenthood, discrimination, schooling, family responsibilities, trauma, conflict overseas, housing, employment and safety all reshape the settlement journey.

This matters because policy often imagines settlement as a time-limited process. The consultation challenged that assumption repeatedly. Settlement is not completed by arrival. It is not completed by citizenship. It is an evolving relationship between people, place, institutions and community.

As one worker put it, “Settlement will not finish when you get your citizenship certificate.” She reflected that citizenship may provide rights, but it does not automatically resolve isolation, discrimination, parenting challenges or the need to understand school systems. “What about me as a person?” she asked.

“Now I'm a parent, and now I'm out of settlement. How am I going to navigate all of this?”

That question should sit at the centre of national settlement policy.

3 The Whittlesea Model: A Whole Person, Whole Community Approach

Whittlesea Community Connections is not structured around a narrow understanding of settlement.

It has developed an ecosystem in which settlement, legal assistance, employment, volunteering, emergency relief, youth work, family violence prevention, digital literacy, health promotion, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander programs and community development sit in relationship with one another.

Staff described this not as theory, but as daily practice.

A person may first meet a staff member through outreach at Melbourne Polytechnic. They may then need legal assistance for a statutory declaration, help with fines, support with a mobile phone contract, emergency relief, employment support, a women's driving program, youth engagement for their children or family violence assistance. At Whittlesea Community Connections, these pathways are not remote referrals into unfamiliar systems. They are connected through an organisation where people already have relationships.

One staff member described the strength of the model by comparing it with larger specialist providers where education, employment and settlement may sit in separate departments with limited interaction. At WCC,

settlement is embedded within a diverse community organisation. People can move into legal services, youth programs, volunteering, employment or emergency relief through trusted internal pathways.

This is why the organisation is able to respond to the whole person.

As one worker said, settlement is not simply "connection to services and schools." It is asking, "You're here now. What's going on? How do we help the whole person?"

That whole-person orientation is the foundation of the organisation's impact. It also explains why its work cannot be measured adequately through narrow activity counts. Numbers matter, but they do not capture the relationship between a citizenship class, a legal appointment, a driving lesson, a volunteer opportunity, a health session and a first job. The outcomes arise because these pieces connect.

One staff member described it beautifully, "There's lots of puzzles that you add to settlement."

That phrase should be understood as a practice framework. Settlement is not one intervention. It is the careful assembly of many supports, opportunities and relationships that enable people to build confidence and choice.

This approach is particularly important in Whittlesea, where transport, geography, family responsibilities and service access can shape whether people are able to participate. The women's driving program, for example, is not simply about transport. It is about safety, independence, parenting, employment, study and participation. Digital literacy is not simply about devices. It is about avoiding scams, accessing services, communicating with schools, applying for work and maintaining connection. Legal assistance is not simply about resolving a document or fine. It is about rights, trust and the ability to move forward.

The organisation's model is powerful because it understands that settlement outcomes are interdependent. Employment is connected to transport. Transport is connected to confidence. Confidence is connected to language. Language is connected to community. Community is connected to trust. Trust is connected to participation. Participation is connected to belonging. This is the heart of the Whittlesea model.



4 Economic Participation Begins with Belonging



The Economic Pathways to Refugee Integration program is one of the strongest examples of how Whittlesea Community Connections translates belonging into economic participation. EPRI supports humanitarian entrants who are often furthest from mainstream employment systems because of low English, limited formal skills recognition, interrupted education, caring responsibilities or unfamiliarity with Australian workplaces. At Whittlesea Community Connections, EPRI is not treated as a standalone employment program. It is woven into settlement, volunteering, social enterprise, English learning, employer partnerships and community trust.

Staff described the importance of creating people's "first step" into work. That first step may be casual work, volunteering, facilitating a group, supporting digital literacy, translating community material, helping deliver a program or building enough confidence to take the next opportunity. The point

is not only the job itself. The point is exposure, reference, confidence and recognition.

One worker explained that the organisation is "really good at getting underneath" to identify what a person is actually good at, even when English is limited. Someone may have health experience, teaching experience, legal experience, agriculture expertise, business skills or community leadership capacity. The work is to recognise that capability and create a setting where it can be used.

This is a sophisticated employment model. It does not begin with compliance. It begins with capability.

The consultation included the story of a cabinetmaker who had been in Australia for about a year and a half. He had strong skills overseas and was supported to establish his own business in Australia. When Whittlesea Community Connections later needed

work done in its own kitchen, staff called him. He was attending an English class but immediately came to help. That moment matters. It shows the circular nature of settlement done well. A person is supported to rebuild economic participation, then returns as a contributor to the very community that supported him. This is not dependency. It is reciprocity.

The EPRI material also includes the story of a Syrian woman who arrived with high levels of education and limited English. She had been a teacher. Through WCC's support she remained connected with English learning while exploring a new pathway through driver mentoring and training. She became a qualified driving instructor, contracted with WCC's DriverED social enterprise and moved toward running her own driving school. Her story illustrates the way WCC recognises transferable skills rather than allowing professional identity to disappear.

It also includes a newly arrived individual from Eritrea who was not eligible for HSP or Centrelink in his first twelve months. He self-referred after hearing about EPRI through friends. WCC rapidly connected him to an employer partner and continued support beyond placement, including English, workplace forms, superannuation, tax, safety requirements and white card training. The significance of this is not only that he gained work. It is that the pathway was held around him long enough for employment to become sustainable. This is where return on investment becomes clear. The public value of EPRI is not simply an employment outcome. It is the conversion of community trust, local knowledge, employer relationships and settlement expertise into economic participation. It is productivity built through belonging.

When a person gains work, the benefits flow to family income, local business, taxation, confidence, children's aspirations and community

participation. When a person establishes an enterprise, the benefits extend even further. When a former participant becomes a mentor, translator, cultural navigator, employee or volunteer, the investment multiplies again.

Whittlesea Community Connections shows that economic participation is strongest when settlement agencies are trusted to work relationally, flexibly and creatively. The program's impact sits in the very thing that standard employment systems often struggle to value: the relationship between confidence, community and work.

5

The consultations gave concrete examples. Staff spoke about people receiving incorrect information from community rumours about travel, visas or government systems. They spoke about people paying private providers for help with forms that trusted settlement workers could assist with for free. They spoke about parents who need help understanding schooling, children who take on adult responsibilities because language support is not available, families with children with disability who need careful navigation, and people who have experienced conflict overseas who may be carrying deep worry about phone calls from home.

The story of a Kurdish woman arriving under a Women at Risk visa category demonstrates this. She was a mother



6 Measuring What Matters

The consultation exposed a recurring tension between how government measures settlement and how communities experience it.

Staff understand the need to report numbers, sessions, participants and outputs. They also know these measures do not fully capture the work.

One worker put it simply:

“It’s not about, yeah, we need to see four clients a day. No, no, no. It’s how you see those clients. Are you creating the safe space for them? Are you helping them understand their rights, how to belong here, how to live their life here?”

This is a critical insight for national settlement policy. The quality of settlement is not measured only by service volume. It is measured by whether people gain confidence,

agency, trust, rights literacy, social connection and the ability to make choices.

Another worker described impact as “one by one equals community.” That phrase captures the cumulative logic of settlement. One person supported to drive can study, work, parent and participate. One person helped into employment can support a family and mentor others. One young person supported to remain engaged in school can change the trajectory of a generation. One trusted appointment with Centrelink can shift a person’s relationship with government. One volunteer experience can become a first Australian reference, a job, a leadership role or a lifelong civic commitment.

This is why a return-on-investment approach must include social capital and prevention. The value of settlement agencies is produced across multiple portfolios. Health, employment, education, justice, housing, family violence prevention, social cohesion, youth participation and democratic trust all benefit from the same local infrastructure.

Whittlesea Community Connections also demonstrates the importance of what might be called system agency. Settlement success is often framed as individual effort: learn English, find work, understand the system, adapt. The consultation told a different story. People thrive when systems are connected enough to recognise them, flexible enough to respond and trusted enough to be accessed. The work is not only to build individual capacity. It is to build community and system capacity around people.

This is the distinctive value of placebased settlement agencies. They see patterns early. They know when a community is struggling with misinformation, transport, health screening, school engagement, racism, housing, disability support or employment exclusion. They also know who is already trusted, who can translate more than words, who can facilitate a conversation and which partnership will unlock the next step.

That knowledge is public value.



● The Heart of the Work



The consultation at Whittlesea Community Connections revealed an organisation that is profoundly resourceful, deeply relational and clear about the dignity of the communities it serves.

It is led by people who understand that settlement is not a transaction between a client and a service. It is a long process of building trust, recognising capability and creating the conditions for participation.

One staff member described the organisation's approach in a sentence that could stand as its practice philosophy: "We're led by the people, not the funding or the programs or the KPIs. Anyone can come in here and we'll find a way to help them."

That does not mean the work is informal or unstructured. It means the structure begins with people's lives rather than program categories. It means the organisation understands that someone may come for a form and need legal help, employment support, food relief, English practice, a driving pathway, family violence advice, a volunteering opportunity or simply the reassurance that they are not alone. It means settlement is understood as a relationship between the person, the family, the community and the systems around them.

Whittlesea Community Connections should be recognised as one of the member organisations demonstrating the real value of Australia's settlement sector. Its impact is not limited to the people who walk through its doors. It is carried into schools, workplaces, families, neighbourhoods, local businesses, public institutions and future generations.

It shows that settlement agencies are not peripheral to Australia's social infrastructure. They are among the institutions that make multicultural democracy work. They build trust where systems are unfamiliar. They create pathways where talent has been overlooked. They strengthen safety, participation and belonging. They honour First Peoples and invite newly arrived communities into a deeper understanding of Country, responsibility and shared future.

At a time when governments are asking how to measure impact, Whittlesea Community Connections offers a powerful answer. Measure the employment pathway that began with trust. Measure the child who stayed connected to school because a parent understood the system. Measure the woman who gained a licence, safety, study and volunteering. Measure the refugee entrepreneur who returned to contribute. Measure the health screening that occurred because the message came through someone trusted. Measure the public value of people feeling confident enough to participate.

This is the heart of settlement. It is careful, skilled and relational work. It is sophisticated civic practice. It is prevention, participation and democracy in action. And in Whittlesea, it is being built every day.



SCOA builds belonging, and belonging is national infrastructure.

The Settlement Council of Australia (SCOA) is the national peak body for the settlement sector. We strengthen and steward the relationships, evidence and shared infrastructure that enable Australia's settlement ecosystem to thrive.

Working across communities, service providers, governments and institutions, we connect people, build capability, amplify the sector's collective voice and drive evidence-informed policy and practice. Through collaboration, innovation and national leadership, we help create the conditions in which people and communities can participate fully, build belonging and contribute to Australia's shared prosperity.

Our vision is an intercultural Australia where everyone has the opportunity to shape our shared future and belong.

