



3 February 2020

Committee Secretary
Joint Standing Committee on Migration
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600
migration@aph.gov.au

Dear Sir/Madam,

Re: Inquiry into Migration in Regional Australia

Thank you for the opportunity to appear before the Committee's public hearing in Canberra on Wednesday, 27 November 2019. Please find below our response to the questions on notice arising from this hearing.

Local governments' views on the provision of migrant services

Attachment A provides more detailed comments from NSW and Victoria local governments about Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs). In general, the operations of the MRCs are supported by councils and there is good interaction between the MRCs and local governments.

Below are some additional services that local governments consider should be available or improved to assist newly arrived migrants in regional areas:

- **Transport**
Particularly in regional areas, councils have identified that transport is a key concern of refugees and humanitarian migrants in terms of their integration, participation and engagement in the community. Where public transport is not available, new migrants often require assistance not only acquiring a vehicle, but also obtaining a driver licence (and often do not have a network of licensed drivers to assist them in this process).
- **SRSS payments for asylum seekers**
Many councils and community organisations have expressed concern regarding the Australian Government's decision to cut the Status Resolution Support Service (SRSS) program funding that provides a basic living allowance (typically 89% of Newstart allowance), casework support, assistance in finding housing, and access to torture and trauma counselling. This affects asylum seekers who are living in the community and waiting to have their claim for refugee status determined. While asylum seekers are awaiting their refugee status determination and are perhaps beyond the scope of this question, they are predominantly clustered within the same LGAs that host refugees and humanitarian entrants. Where asylum seekers' basic needs are not met by the federal government, councils and community organisations have found themselves increasingly stretched in providing referral services, settlement services and promoting social cohesion and inclusion.

- **Translation Services**

Councils currently have access to free interpreting services for clients through TIS National (Department of Home Affairs). However, translation of documents can come at significant cost. Councils are interested in ways they can provide more inclusive forms and notices for their communities at reasonable cost, or options to draw on economies of scale across LGAs for translation of forms and notices that are similar.

Other general issues relating to services for migrant communities:

- **Community infrastructure**

State and Commonwealth Governments should provide additional resources for community infrastructure alongside services in local government areas that settle large numbers of migrants.

- **Population Planning**

Local government must be included in population planning, including the settlement of refugees and humanitarian migrants, in acknowledgement of the role of local government in facilitating community cohesion and providing community infrastructure and services at a local level and

- **Longer term funding**

State and Commonwealth Governments tend to provide short-term grants for fostering integration in local communities. Local governments and other community service providers require longer term funding that will allow for better planning, the development and retention of expertise and refinement of programs;

Local governments' role in housing in regional areas

One of the issues raised at the committee hearing related to the provision of housing and local government's role. Local government as the level of government closest to the community, plays an important role in engaging with and planning for the needs of communities in regional areas. This includes planning to ensure there is an appropriate supply of land and mix of housing to meet the community's diverse and changing needs.

In addition, many local governments continue to do some "hard lifting" in their communities, to deliver affordable housing within financially constrained environments including cost shifting, rate capping and rate concessions for community housing.

The diversity of engagement by local government with housing and homelessness in regional locations depends on issues such as state/territory government requirements, other priorities of council, the nature of housing challenges in the locality, resources and capability.

State/territory governments legislate or have policies in relation to planning and housing requirements for implementation by local governments. These requirements vary across jurisdictions but can include measures such as mandated housing affordability/housing density targets, the use of inclusionary zoning requiring a percentage of affordable housing dwellings, requirements for preparation of regional and local housing plans, requirements for forecasting population growth to facilitate sufficient land supply and infrastructure and faster housing approvals.

Some councils in regional areas choose to extend their involvement in housing beyond the traditional planning requirements for example by using excess council land or buildings for housing, collaborating with local community service providers, hosting local housing forums, or providing information about homelessness services. Councils often support innovative solutions to homelessness which include prevention, supporting crisis and other services and assisting with pathways out of homelessness.

The range of housing issues addressed by councils in regional areas in Australia is significant but also diverse such as - residential land development and supply, housing affordability, population change, urban design, energy efficiency, liveability, social and public housing, the impacts of Airbnb, overcrowding and second homes, housing for the elderly, student housing, key worker housing and specialist forms of supported housing for people who are homeless or at risk of being homeless.

If you require clarification or further information on any of the above issues, please contact Liz de Chastel, Senior Policy Adviser on [REDACTED]

Yours sincerely

[REDACTED]
Adrian Beresford-Wyllie
Chief Executive

ATTACHMENT A

NSW Local Governments specific comment

Employment support programs for refugees

Currently, the NSW Government's Refugee Employment Support Program (RESP) is only available in Western Sydney and the Illawarra. Employment is key to the retention of refugees in regional resettlement areas and regional councils have called for RESP or similar initiatives to be rolled out to their areas. There are substantial refugee regional settlement populations in areas such as Albury, Armidale, Coffs Harbour, Newcastle, Wagga Wagga and Wollongong; and

Victorian Local Government input - Migrant Resource Centres and services required to support newly arrived migrants

There are 9 MRCs in Melbourne and 1 in Gippsland:

- [Migrant Information Centre](#), Box Hill and Ringwood
- [Migrant Resource Centre North West Region](#), St Albans and Broadmeadows
- [New Hope Migrant and Refugee Resource Centre](#), several [locations](#) across Western Metropolitan Region, Inner Melbourne, the Southern Metropolitan Region and on the Mornington Peninsula
- [Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre](#), Dandenong
- [Spectrum Migrant Resource Centre](#), Preston

Councils in Victoria have enjoyed significant and long-standing relationship with MRCs supporting the health and wellbeing outcomes for local communities. MRCs have helped inform and shape Councils' integrated service delivery model supporting settlement needs for newly arrived migrants taking into account diversity of needs, circumstance, experience and aspirations for over many years. The breadth of engagement with local councils includes provision of pathways to service supports such as Maternal and Child Health, Early Years/Pre-school, Family Services and programs such as Libraries, Recreation and Leisure, Community Hubs and community events such as civic welcome for newly arrived residents and participation in festivals and events – all strengthening the social fabric of local communities including newly arrived migrant communities.

The Victorian Local Government Issues Networks believe MRCs play a key role in provision of essential settlement services and supports for newly arrived residents at the local level working directly with community, local agencies and councils. Typically located in suburbs/municipalities where a high concentration of newly arrived migrants live, MRCs deliver a range of integrated programs and services aligned with the local government mandate to improve the wellbeing of local communities through a community centred model.

Uniquely, the MRC has remained adaptive and agile in the face of successive government immigration policies and migration trends (economic and humanitarian) and continues to successfully contribute to the building of local communities by:

- Assisting new arrivals to build self-reliance and integrate into the local community
- Assisting new arrivals to understand and access the Australian labour market programs
- Promoting inclusivity and equity among all members of communities
- Empowering new communities to identify and address settlement challenges

Regional coordination

Councils benefit from participation in local/regional Settlement Networks led and coordinated by MRC to support service coordination and response. An example is the North East Region Settlement Information Network. Both Darebin City Council and Banyule Councils attend these network meeting which include agencies such as Brotherhood of St Laurence, local educational providers such Melbourne Polytechnic , Department of Human Services, Neighbourhood Houses and Victoria Police. These meetings are an essential platform for enabling collaboration and partnerships supporting more responsive service delivery on the ground.

Another example of the relationship between Councils and MRCs is highlighted through the work of Melton City Council which chairs the Melton New and Emerging Communities Network which is well attended by representatives from MRCs and other organisations providing services to newly arrived and emerging communities.

Melton City Council also provides office spaces at Melton and Caroline Springs Libraries for MiCare which provides settlement services.

Through its Community Grants and Community Partnership Program Melton Council provides funding and fosters partnership with the MRC's in the west.

Maribyrnong, while not having direct engagement with MRCs, has a relationship with the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre (ASRC) in its region. Over 2019 their Youth Services facilities were made available at no cost to support a range programs delivered by ASRC.

Wyndham City Council and Hobsons Bay City Council are active members and provide substantial support to both the Wyndham Settlement Network and the Hobsons Bay Settlement Networks.

Sector Advocacy

Whilst MRCs may not have funding independence to advocate politically around certain issues, they are values based organisations aligned with the humanitarian position of peak bodies such as the Australian Human Rights Commission, Refugee Council of Australia and Local Government Mayoral Taskforce Supporting Asylum Seeker. As such, they help inform and are strategically aligned to human rights commitments local councils have made in protecting the human rights of refugee and asylum seekers and through initiatives such as Welcoming Cities promoting equity and inclusion for all members of the community, recognition of First Nations people and fostering of social cohesion between receiving and newer communities.

Education

MRCs have played an active role in providing education and building cultural competencies of local government staff through delivery of workshops information sessions in relation to population groups and cross-cultural engagement.

Challenges

MRC has evolved over the years to remain an agile and responsive agency meeting contemporary settlement needs within an increasingly complex environments - political, social, economic and physical at local, regional, national and global level.

Challenges include:

- Accruing adequate/sustained funding within a competitive funding environment
- Ensuring the business model remains responsive and agile to meet settlement needs.
Building capacity to meet increase service demand
- Maintaining strong/collaborative sector partnerships including local councils.