

Parliamentary Inquiry into Multiculturalism – City of Whittlesea

Introduction

The City of Whittlesea values cultural diversity, through a whole of community and whole of Government approach within a human rights based framework and is committed to a culturally inclusive mandate advocating for multicultural policies to be endorsed as common practice across three tiers of government.

Like other Councils, the City of Whittlesea is well placed to promote and support diversity and foster an inclusive community. Importantly, Councils' understanding of their communities and local context means that initiatives can be tailored to the needs of their municipality.

Two programs of work undertaken by the City of Whittlesea to promote and support diversity and an inclusive community include the development and delivery of the Multicultural Plan *Many Faces One Community Valuing Diversity 2007 - 2011* and more recently the Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity (LEAD) Project (to be completed 2012).

The two projects underline the importance of working with minority communities to ensure engagement and participation of all residents in our community, whilst working with the wider community to foster understanding, acceptance and valuing of diverse communities.

In 2007 the City of Whittlesea developed the inaugural Multicultural Plan, *Many Faces One Community Valuing Diversity 2007 – 2011*. The Plan has been acknowledged as best practice by a number of Victorian based local government agencies laying the foundation for ongoing work, affirming the Council's commitment to cultural diversity. The Multicultural Plan outlines Council's commitment to the large culturally diverse community it serves, over 50% of whom identify as culturally diverse. The policy statement values cultural diversity through inclusion and leadership, and recognises the benefits and contributions of cultural diversity to the local context. The Plan provides 62 actions within a framework of key themes, goals and measures.

The Multicultural Plan was developed in collaboration with local stakeholders in an extensive consultative process that identified key themes and goals that have been implemented over four years.

The City of Whittlesea supports a multicultural policy at the Federal government level that will support the development of local government policies and action plans. With the development of policy the consideration of how policy is enacted and resourced must also be considered in order to make the policy applicable to a local context.

The issue of 'multiculturalism' needs to include and address the issue of racism.

The VicHealth *More than Tolerance: Embracing Diversity for Health* report highlighted that local governments have considerable potential to play a lead role in addressing race-based discrimination and supporting cultural diversity at a local level. The City of Whittlesea's ability to trial new and innovative approaches to complex social problems was recognised in 2009 when it was one of two Councils funded by VicHealth to undertake a three year pilot project, LEAD. The development of this project was informed by the *More than Tolerance* report and VicHealth's *Building On Our Strengths: a framework to reduce race-based discrimination*

and support diversity in Victoria. The LEAD Project is fostering community understanding and acceptance of cultural diversity in order to reduce interpersonal and systemic discrimination against people from migrant, refugee and Aboriginal backgrounds. In response to the *Terms of Reference* stipulated by the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Multiculturalism*, the City of Whittlesea submits an argument in favour of *multiculturalism* as follows.

Multiculturalism, Social Inclusion & Globalisation

1. Role of multiculturalism in the Federal Government's social inclusion agenda

The Social Inclusion agenda is very much centred on disadvantage. It acknowledges that disadvantage and social exclusion tend to be higher amongst certain groups of people and highlights priority areas for government policy, specifically: *children at risk of long term disadvantage; jobless families with children; locations of greatest disadvantage; people with disability or mental illness; homelessness; indigenous Australians.*

Multicultural communities are alluded to in the comment - "in developing programs for increasing participation by the above priority groups, the Government is also committed to helping vulnerable new arrivals and refugees."

- Where 'multiculturalism' is addressed within the government's social inclusion agenda, it is likely to be framed as an issue of disadvantage and social exclusion. While multicultural communities are certainly vulnerable to disadvantage, this should not be the basis for discussing them. Multiculturalism needs to be framed in the context of how we value and appreciate cultural diversity. There is much to value in relation to cultural diversity, the skills, talents and world-views that new migrants bring to this country in search of a 'better life' bring with it a tenacious spirit that seeks to belong and to contribute to the wider populous.
- Cultural diversity in the Australian context is a fact. For example, in the City of Whittlesea, over 50% of the residents identify as being culturally diverse. We embrace this cultural diversity as a defining feature of our identity, where we have come from, our history and our common future that we share as one community.
- The broader Australian community needs to investigate what 'culturally diverse' means to them and how this can be utilised to define Australia's future. As a community we need to explore what 'being culturally diverse' and 'multicultural' means for the broader community outside the policy context. The Australian identity needs to be explored with all people regardless of background.
- Cultural diversity challenges traditional ideas established by an historic 'white Australia policy', that establishes 'white privilege' as the dominant favoured culture. National narratives of "Australian identity" pose challenges that can lead to conflict if they are not planned and managed effectively. There is a need to shift the focus on cultural diversity from threat to opportunity and promote and recognise the benefits for all of us as part of the multicultural society.

- ➔ Policies are needed that support a shift in the broader understanding of Australian identity – from a mono-cultural, Anglo identity – to a culturally diverse identity. Perhaps from what it meant to ‘be Australian’ in the days of the white Australia policy to what it means in reality today.
- ➔ Multiculturalism or cultural diversity needs to be framed as an asset from which there are benefits for all people, economically, socially and personally - at the local, national and international level. Starting from a human rights framework that acknowledges cultural diversity as necessary to the development of humanity as bio-diversity is to the survival of the planet, and grounded in the first people of this land, Aboriginals, we can then rebuild our identity as Australians.
- ➔ Policies are needed that promote the role of cultural diversity in building vibrant, cohesive, collaborative and resilient communities that seek to learn from one another about each other through cultural exchange in the spirit and recognition of all people as one common humanity that we share – we are all the same in that we are all human.
- ➔ Social inclusion and multiculturalism are different concepts and need to be treated as separate issues.
- ➔ Often the discourse presented by ‘multiculturalism’ insinuates ‘us’ and ‘them’ and that one must be *ethnically* diverse to subscribe to ‘multiculturalism’. Everyone is part of a multicultural society, including the Anglo demographic.

In relation to the *Challenging Racism Project* based at the University of Western Sydney the discourse surrounding ‘multiculturalism’ needs to include a national framework on addressing racism that can filter down at the local level. The *Challenging Racism Project* is a research project that was established in 1998 to collect data that mapped racism in NSW. In 2001 the project extended research to the NSW and QLD and then a third phase in 2006 mapped the geography of racism across Australia.

- ➔ Research from a national study into attitudes towards diversity (the *Challenging Racism Project*) has shown that while 87% of Australians are supportive of diversity, a significant number of Australians have a level of anxiety or discomfort about cultural difference.
- ➔ The *Challenging Racism Project* found that the vast majority of people in Australia are supportive of multiculturalism and cultural diversity. However, despite this widespread support for diversity, people from Aboriginal, migrant and refugee backgrounds continue to experience high rates of discrimination in everyday life.
- ➔ It is important that this discomfort or level of anxiety towards people from different cultural backgrounds is addressed. The City of Whittlesea is working proactively through the LEAD Project to build positive attitudes and behaviours towards cultural diversity.
- ➔ The LEAD Project was a key recommendation from the VicHealth *More than Tolerance: Embracing Diversity for Health Report* and has been developed in response to the Victoria-wide *Challenging Racism* data. The research has found that

attitudes towards cultural diversity vary substantially from place to place which supports the idea that the best way to tackle racism is at the local level. Local government in particular therefore has an important role to play. To strengthen initiatives at the local level, a nation-wide commitment to challenging racism is required.

2. Contribution of Diaspora Communities to Australia's relationship with Europe, the UK, Middle East & the immediate Asia Pacific region.

Diversity provides social, economic and health benefits for the community.

Australian society is made up of migrants from various parts of the world, many maintain strong links with their country of origin and continue to practice the language and cultural heritage of their origins. These diaspora communities contribute greatly to Australia's international relationships.

- ➔ There is an existing pool of bilingual/ multi-lingual people in Australia with an understanding of the culture and practices of other countries. These people create business relationships between Australia and their countries of origin. There are many import/ export businesses in Australia based on this relationship, building Australia's wealth globally and acknowledging Australia as a great place to visit, as a place to study, or as a place to live and work and make a successful life.
- ➔ Diaspora communities are also keen to contribute towards their countries of origin. They build relationships with government and non-government organisations, which strengthen Australia's relationship with these countries.
- ➔ Diaspora communities visibly practicing their culture here promotes Australia to the world as an accepting, vibrant, diverse, cosmopolitan, exciting place to be.

Settlement & Participation

3. Innovative ideas for settlement programs for new migrants, including refugees, that support their full participation and integration into the broader Australian society

As the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) has the mandate to accommodate and provide settlement support services, it is often seen as a Federal Government's responsibility. Local Government could be doing a great deal more to support the settlement of new migrants, refugees and international students into the wider community. Local Government is closely affiliated with the local community and has a role to play in the settlement process at the local level.

There are successful models of services that are already working. Instead of defunding services DIAC needs to invest more funds into programs that work and keep them going. For example the AMES Community Guides project is a successful orientation program that provides intensive six month settlement support to new arrivals. Linking Community Guides directly to local government as part of the orientation program would make it easier to connect, engage and include new migrants and refugees into the local government context providing a sense of belonging and connection for newly arrived people. As part of

orientation an understanding of local government can be included up front for newly arrived communities.

- ➔ Local Government is an ideal resource for work experience offering a range of career options in one place that can be tapped and utilised as a way to improve the integration of newly arrived communities into Australian work-place culture.
- ➔ Local Government facilitates Citizenship ceremonies and with this could include a Welcome Program that enables people who are becoming citizens to better understand the role of local governments, its services, how it is different to State and Federal Government and how people can become well informed citizens by taking an active role in shaping their local council. New citizens can better understand that they can play a role in their local community.

Other items of consideration include:

- ➔ Consistent and easy to use Language Services that are appropriately funded for local government from the Federal Government level.
- ➔ Investment in training up and resourcing local government bilingual staff to be able to use their second language in the work place and to be recognised and remunerated.
- ➔ Training programs that are available to local government for staff to better understand how to use Federal interpreting and language services.
- ➔ Linking local government with local newly arrived people who can be the experts of their own culture and therefore present to Council about their backgrounds to enhance and improve awareness, understanding and connection with the local community.

4. Incentives to promote long term settlement patterns that achieve greater social and economic benefits for Australian society as a whole

The Federal Government needs to investigate incentives that have worked in the past in relation to promoting long term settlement patterns that achieve greater economic benefits for Australia - to inform future ideas that can be trialled, evaluated and implemented.

At the local government level there is the potential to harness the talents of local community members, to pool resources and to develop partnerships to assist the promotion of long term settlement patterns.

Some ideas to consider at the Federal Government level are:

- ➔ Documentation of settlement patterns and how society and the economy have been improved as a result. Tools to assist this process.
- ➔ Existing community leaders of emerging communities already play an important role in assisting new arrivals in the settlement process. This happens in an informal way with little or no resources. Government can invest in community leaders and create opportunities for leadership programs that strengthen this informal settlement support

process. It is important to recognise and reward community leaders as valuable social capital.

- ➔ Media campaigns that celebrate and promote the economic and social benefits of migration settlement.
- ➔ Orientation programs that provide opportunities for newly arrived migrants and refugees to better engage and interact with their locality. This type of program promotes long term settlement patterns because it enables people to connect to the broader community and develop a sense of belonging.
- ➔ One of the greatest challenges to long term settlement for new migrants is lack of appropriate employment. Investment in local social enterprises that enable communities to participate in new business opportunities while learning new skills, will be a powerful way to improve pathways to employment.

6. The profile of skilled migration to Australia and the extent to which Australia is fully utilising the skills of all migrants

Australia is a multicultural society and is becoming increasingly diverse with one in four Australians identifying as culturally diverse. Harnessing diversity is therefore essential to face new challenges in terms of productivity, skill shortages, global labour market competition and an ageing population.¹

- ➔ The Federal Government needs to address race based discrimination in the workforce to ensure that Australia is utilising the skills of all migrants, as this could also be true for other people who migrate to Australia, such as refugees and international students. Research has shown that race-based discrimination in employment and in the workplace is common place.² In Australia, race-based discrimination may affect almost one in five Australians.³ The majority of race-based discrimination complaints received by the Australian Human Rights Commission relate to employment settings.⁴ There is also some evidence that racism at work is on the rise in Australia.⁵ This is relevant to this point because race based discrimination in the workplace is a barrier to employment for skilled migrants. The basis for their employment becomes limited because of their cultural background and not their skills set.

¹ Berman, G., Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission, et al. (2008). Harnessing diversity: addressing racial and religious discrimination in employment. Melbourne, Victorian Multicultural Commission and the Victorian Equal Opportunity & Human Rights Commission

² Berman et al.; Dunn, K. (2003). Racism in Australia: findings of a survey on racist attitudes and experiences of racism. The Challenges of Immigration and Integration in the European Union and Australia. University of Sydney; Shannon, C. A., K. M. Rospenda, et al. (2009). "Race, Racial Discrimination, and the Risk of Work-Related Illness, Injury, or Assault: Findings From a National Study." J Occup Environ Med Apr 51(4): 441-448.

³ Dunn, K.

⁴ Australian Human Rights Commission. (2009). Annual Report 2008-2009. Australian Human Rights Commission.

⁵ Markus, A., (2009). Mapping Social Cohesion 2009: The Scanlon Foundation surveys summary report. Monash University.

- ➔ Skilled migrants are being called to Australia with services indicating that there is a skills shortage and a need for skilled migration programs. However skilled migrants often face multiple barriers to entering the work force. Skilled migrants are required to have their skills recognised in Australia and to also have local work experience in order to achieve employment. It is not such a clear cut process of having a skills shortage and filling it.
- ➔ The Federal Government also needs to invest in the facilitation of linking skilled migrants to the relevant areas of skills shortage. Mapping of needs and matching of skills to those entering the country is needed. Local Government provides a wide range of career options that can be tapped and utilised as a resource for the development of work experience programs for skilled migrants, refugees, international students and other migrants who struggle to access employment. The Federal Government could invest in a systematic approach that enables skilled migrants to access work experience at the local government level as a precursor to employment in the particular skills shortage area.

7. Potential government initiatives to better assist migrant communities establish business enterprises

Federal Government has a role to play in developing policies that can filter down through all levels of Government in relation to enterprise and business. Policy or program support could be provided in a number of areas including:

- ➔ The development of social procurement and social enterprises in the local context to enable local community members to gain work experience, learn new skills, acquire qualifications and go on to either work in the industry in which they have trained and or establish their own business to address a community need. A positive outcome of social enterprise is that it acknowledges that people who do not have English as a first language may struggle to learn through the traditional methods of study, reading, writing and arithmetic and that learning through the practical application of skills can be achieved and accredited. This is an effective way that people of migrant and refugee background can learn new skills, retrain and or develop skills to assist with employment prospects.
- ➔ The Federal Government needs to look at developing a social procurement strategy for all levels of Government supporting social enterprise as part of its core business. Social enterprise provides an alternative to skills development for newly arrived communities as mentioned earlier.
- ➔ There needs to be more opportunities for communities to explore their potential in a supportive environment. The Centrelink's NEIS program for example supports people to establish a business plan as a way of starting their own business. Support such as mentoring programs could assist with implementing the business plan. Local Government economic development departments have links with local business and

could play a role in brokering mentorships. The establishment of business mentors and business development officers who support newly settled communities to establish their own business and guide them through the process in a more practical way is an effective initiative for the Federal Government to implement.

- ➔ A program that provides start - up costs and or investment in an enterprise that supports migrants and refugees to start their own business, such as a micro-credit program that might provide the funds to start a business as a no interest loan that the business owner pays back when starting to make a profit.
- ➔ The establishment of local employment pathway networks, for example Whittlesea Community Connections a local service provider has established a local employment pathways network partnership. The partnership aims to link refugee and migrants to local business through bringing together Federal and State based agencies such as Centrelink, job service networks, local government economic development departments and other local service supports to improve and increase opportunities for newly arrived communities to achieve employment. The network has established a newsletter, a bi-monthly meeting and an annual event that brings potential employers and employees together. This model could be replicated to help bridge the gap between newly arrived residents and employment opportunities.
- ➔ The need for migrants and refugees to achieve their drivers licence is an issue that needs to be addressed and is often a barrier to those seeking employment. A licence is often a pre-requisite for jobs that work in the Home and Community Care sector, a growing sector that is experiencing a skills shortage.

Conclusion

City of Whittlesea appreciates the opportunity to submit a comment to the *Parliamentary Inquiry into Multiculturalism*. In summary the City of Whittlesea views multiculturalism in terms of cultural diversity that needs to be valued by the community at large not as a deficit of the social inclusion agenda. We see multiculturalism as a defining feature of the Australian identity and something that we all share as well as our humanity and our common future. When we look at multiculturalism we must also address racism. Current best practice examples can inform a National multicultural framework that can be integrated and used to inform planning and policy development at the local level. We welcome the opportunity to work further with the Federal Government to address the multicultural agenda at the local government level.