



Municipal Association of Victoria

Submission to the Federal Parliamentary Inquiry into Multiculturalism

Local Government and Multiculturalism

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The MAV would like to acknowledge the contribution of those who provided their comments and advice during preparation of this submission. While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils. This submission has been endorsed by the MAV Board. For further information contact:

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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND MULTICULTURALISM

The Federal Parliamentary *Joint Standing Committee on Migration* is inquiring into the economic, social and cultural impacts of migration in Australia and making recommendations to maximise the positive effects of migration.

This *Municipal Association of Victoria* (MAV) submission seeks a sharper focus by the relevant federal portfolios responsible for local government and multicultural affairs on:

- a more clearly articulated, strategic and mutually agreed position on the respective roles and responsibilities of federal, state and local governments around settlement and cultural diversity policy and programs;
- greater inter-governmental engagement and co-ordination from the federal government;
- access to DIAC-funded settlement services for skilled migration entrants;
- more effective delivery of settlement support for new arrivals to regional municipalities;
- a modest investment in collaboratively developing a national good practice handbook and related resourcing to guide Australia's 560 local councils in
 - developing multicultural, settlement and related community relations (including inter-cultural engagement) policy, programs and services, and
 - diversifying the local government workforce to better reflect local community demographics.
- consideration being given to conducting a national biennial "local government and multiculturalism" conference to progress policy development, program design and service delivery; with a balance between metropolitan and regional foci.

Introduction

The MAV is the peak body for Victoria's local government (under legislation) and therefore the representative and lobbying body for the sector. The Association acts as a facilitator of local capacity development and an information hub for Victorian local government in relation to a wide range of issues including social policy.

Local government is the government closest to the people and plays a significant role in influencing the economies and the communities at the local level. The purpose of a council as defined by the Victorian Local Government Act 1989 Section 6 is to:

- Provide for the peace, order and good government of its municipal district;
- Facilitate and encourage appropriate development of its municipal district in the best interest of the community;
- Provide equitable and appropriate services and facilities for the community;
- Ensure that those services and facilities are managed efficiently and effectively;
- Manage, improve and develop the resources of its district efficiently and effectively.

The communities represented by local government across Victoria are among the most culturally, linguistically and religiously diverse in Australia; a diversity embraced, nurtured and celebrated by the MAV and the seventy-nine Victorian local councils. Local government is a significant supporter of federal initiatives such as the annual *Citizenship Day*, *Harmony Day* and *A Taste of Harmony* campaigns and actively participates in related federal community relations schemes.

In turn, the Australian Government has recognised good local government practice through Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) sponsorship of the “Unity in Diversity” category of the Australian Government’s *National Local Government Awards* (last won by *Wodonga City Council* in 2010). DIAC also regularly showcases good local government practice in its annual access and equity reporting to the Commonwealth Parliament.

DIAC is also a funding partner with the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation (*VicHealth*) in two significant municipal pilot projects known as “LEAD” – *Localities Embracing and Accepting Diversity*. These projects are now well advanced in the Cities of Whittlesea and Greater Shepparton and include local “See Beyond Race” media campaigns launched this month.

This year, the MAV is working closely with other government and community sector representatives, and the United Nations Alliance of Civilizations (UNAOC), to hold an October forum in Melbourne around the theme – *Integration: Building Inclusive Societies* (IBIS). Details will be available shortly.

Home and Community Care (HACC) and many other federal programs are delivered primarily in partnership with Victorian local councils, which also undertake Citizenship conferrals on behalf of the Commonwealth Government.

The MAV looks forward to continuing a positive engagement with the Federal Government on multicultural public policy development and a continuing partnership in delivering better coordinated settlement and community relations outcomes for the benefit of all of the Victorian community.

The Challenge of Diversity

Many societies around the world have culturally diverse populations – that doesn't make them "multicultural" in a public policy sense. The challenge for good government is to develop multicultural policy, programs and services that positively address this diversity to optimise good outcomes for individuals, local communities and the wider society.

Since the Department of Immigration was established in 1945, Australian Government policy has sought to systemically grow our population through its immigration and humanitarian programs. Optimisation of the societal return on this huge investment in people calls for effective initial settlement programs, institutional responsiveness to cultural and linguistic diversity, and good community relations practice. These policy foci position Victoria and Australia to more fully realise the potential economic and social dividends of an increasingly diverse population.

The MAV, and the local councils it represents, have a strong partnership with the Victorian Government which, through the Victorian Multicultural Commission, has supported the *Standing Committee on Local Government and Cultural Diversity*, supported recent biennial local government and multiculturalism conferences in 2007 and 2010 and facilitated numerous other forums and professional development opportunities for local government councillors and officers.

The MAV similarly maintains a positive relationship on settlement and multicultural affairs with the Australian Government. However more formal inter-governmental engagement has waned over the past five years with the demise of the DIAC-lead former *Victorian Settlement Planning Committee*; and its successor forum, the *Victorian Settlement Co-ordination Committee*, which has yet to achieve momentum.

MAV position on Cultural Diversity

In 2007 the MAV's "Statement of Commitment to Cultural Diversity" was formally adopted by its Board and publicly launched - its aim is to promote and facilitate good multicultural practice in local government across Victoria and build strong and healthy communities free of inequity by harnessing and nurturing the richness of cultural diversity.

To achieve this, the local government sector must be supported and resourced to fully realize the development and implementation of sustainable policies and strategies addressing cultural diversity in our multicultural communities. Federal and State Governments need to support local

government more, and strengthen and further develop the role that can be played by peak bodies such as the MAV in facilitating a more consistent state-wide approach to cultural diversity.

The 2003 Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) report *Local Governments' Response to Cultural Diversity in Victoria – Access, Services, Support, Respect* highlighted that both a state-wide approach and a response by the individual councils is required to ensure good outcomes are achieved. These themes were most recently progressed at Victorian local government multicultural policy development conferences in November 2007 (at *City of Whittlesea*) and August 2010 (at *Rural City of Wangaratta*).

No matter how large or small the culturally diverse population is in any one municipality, councils need to have mechanisms in place that respond to the needs of all members of their communities in an inclusive and meaningful way.

In the future our local government sector, particularly in regional Victoria, is going to be faced with more rather than less cultural diversity challenges. It is paramount that current good practice is built upon and a sustainable framework is developed to effectively coordinate the implementation of responsive policies and initiatives.

Role of Local Government

Notwithstanding that local government is not acknowledged, the MAV supports the general future direction of multicultural policy for Australia as set out in the Australian Government's "The People of Australia – Australia's Multicultural Policy", released in February this year.

However, the MAV proposes that the federal government provide more effective support for the role local government does and can play in addressing settlement, multicultural affairs and community relations issues arising from cultural, religious and linguistic diversity. In particular, the MAV suggests that this be directly addressed in relation to Federal Government funded local council and community services. That is, ensuring federal program design and delivery adequately addresses and is resourced to achieve culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) access and equity performance objectives; particularly around language services.

A clearer, agreed, and more systemic framework for addressing migrant and humanitarian settlement and broader community relations issues would be helpful to all three spheres of government and enhance prospects for a more collegiate collective approach by the government sector.

Greater recognition and resourcing of the key role local government can play in fostering good community relations is sought. Additional resourcing doesn't necessarily need to be for stand-alone projects but can piggy-back on existing sports, arts, leisure and cultural activities at the local level, particularly where

activities can bring people from a range of backgrounds together. Sporting activities are widely recognised as an under-utilised medium for engaging recently arrived migrant and refugee youth with the wider community. For example, the MAV works closely and collaboratively with the *Sports without Borders* organisation to deliver its programs through local councils. These sorts of pathways and opportunities for CALD communities to engage, participate and contribute to the wider community are strongly supported.

Focus of the Inquiry

1. Multiculturalism, social inclusion and globalisation

Multicultural public policy responses need to be, and to be seen to be, owned by and for all Australians, not just those communities that are commonly referred to as culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD). A genuine sense of collective ownership, valuing and perceived benefit from cultural diversity is considered to be the best way to nurture it.

The MAV believes that the best way to nurture Victoria's heritage of diverse cultures is to foster in the wider community a sense, value, ownership and embracing of a *shared* diverse social history. Increasing recognition of diversity as the norm and as fundamental to community prosperity and well-being optimises wider support for the maintenance and development of individual ethnic cultures under a broader community umbrella. Conversely ethnic communities inviting the wider community to learn about, celebrate and enjoy their heritage demonstrates their willingness to contribute to the enrichment of our collective sense of who we are as a society.

Recognition of contribution to and sharing with the wider community, respecting and valuing that contribution, appreciating and realising the social, cultural and economic dividends of diversity are all important steps to enhancing community support for maintaining and developing the cultural heritage of Victoria's individual ethnic communities within a framework of broader social cohesion in both an inter-cultural and multi-cultural sense.

Given that Citizenship is almost wholly auspiced through local councils, and conferred by mayors, the government sector collectively could use conferral ceremonies to greater effect as a vehicle for promoting respect, inclusion and understanding of cultural diversity as well as understanding of the benefits multiculturalism brings to the whole community at the local level. Citizenship conferral ceremonies regularly bring together representatives of the three spheres of government in a spirit of bi-partisanship, and their potential for getting stronger messages out to the wider community ought to be looked at more closely.

Government, corporate and community leadership and management structures increasingly recognise the need to reflect in themselves the diversity in the community.

Individuals and communities need to have the opportunity, and hold a reasonable aspiration that they can participate and contribute to public life. Otherwise there is a risk of social alienation, disengagement, disaffection and resultant social tensions. Federal resourcing to guide local government on good multicultural practice and in developing a more diverse workforce is sought.

Access to civics education in schools and elsewhere, through adult education opportunities, are additional possible ways of enhancing this participation. Another option may be to engage successful community and business leaders to work across communities, perhaps in a mentoring capacity, to encourage wider participation. Clearly ethnic community leaders can also have an important role in fostering positive engagement with and between CALD communities. Leaders from communities, who have arrived in Australia from parts of the world where they have previously been in conflict, could be facilitated and supported through funded community relations programs so they can play a greater reconciliatory role in the Australian community context.

The MAV supports establishing cultural competence as a performance criterion across all government and related “generic” or “mainstream” services. Cultural competence should be regarded as a measure of quality in service delivery which fosters continuous improvement.

A particularly important aspect is not only the use of interpreters where needed, but ensuring the service provider has the skills to use an interpreter effectively through regular periodic training.

Conversely there needs to be more investment in equipping new arrivals to be culturally competent in the broader Australian community, particularly the workplace. It is important to distinguish the varying reasons for differing service take-up rates between CALD communities and to establish an appreciation of the extent to which language or cultural differences play-out in determining program performance with particular communities.

Where federal government departments and agencies are funding third parties such as local government, the community or private sectors to provide services on its behalf, performance benchmarks and accountability requirements need to specifically address the effectiveness of delivery to and take-up by CALD communities.

Newly arriving refugee communities are particularly vulnerable to being located in low-cost housing well away from existing service and community hubs. This compounds already huge challenges in learning to live in a new and unfamiliar society. This is a particular issue for humanitarian entrants settling in rural and regional Victoria. Settlement planners, program designers and service providers all need to weigh-up the cost-benefit of where they are initially placing new humanitarian entrants. Transport infrastructure and usability is a key consideration in the physical accessibility of key settlement

services. To facilitate regional settlement, targeted programs need to better off-set service accessibility barriers.

Support for “multicultural hubs” such as the ones established in the City of Melbourne and in the City of Greater Geelong (financially supported by the three levels of government) is a model that warrants consideration in other appropriate locations.

2. Settlement and participation

Without effective settlement of migrants and refugees, without healthy community relations and without optimising economic and social development outcomes, potential dividends from our huge investment in post-war migration go unrealised.

There needs to be a better articulation of the respective settlement and community relations roles and responsibilities of the three spheres of government. Furthermore, the competitive regime for funding community-based settlement service delivery militates against a more collaborative, collegiate approach. Some councils have also advised the MAV that fragmentation of DIAC-funded settlement services thinly spread across multiple agencies is a “bits and pieces” approach and that consolidation ought to be considered.

Many local councils in regional and rural Victoria actively seek new arrivals through the migration and humanitarian programs, but are hamstrung by the challenges of attracting adequate federal settlement support for their municipalities. The MAV is recommending that consideration be given to making settlement of new arrivals in regional and rural areas more attractive and more sustainable; including for skilled migrants.

Twenty-three municipality-based *Local Settlement Planning Committees* (LSPCs) are currently convened across metropolitan Melbourne and regional Victoria. In some instances local councils are the convenors. Composition varies but typically includes key government and community sector human services providers and advocacy groups such as regional ethnic communities’ councils. The MAV understands that generally, as the primary funder of settlement services, the Department of Immigration and Citizenship is represented at LSPC meetings. LSPCs are intended to provide local stakeholder agencies the opportunity to share information, coordinate service delivery and collectively plan more strategically. Local council issues arising that need to be escalated are referred to the MAV’s *Multicultural Policy Adviser* who follows-up with relevant State or Federal government agencies.

It would be a help to local settlement planning by Victorian LSPCs, and local government authorities around Australia for that matter, if the *Settlement Grants Program* documentation on the DIAC website could include more precise municipal coverage for each settlement services grant. Some

Victorian local councils report that they currently struggle to know what DIAC-funded settlement services are available to their residents.

The MAV encourages consideration of a federal multicultural policy unit in the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet (PM&C) similar to the former *Office of Multicultural Affairs* (1987-1996). This would mirror the Victorian Government's inclusion of the VMC and the new Office of Multicultural Affairs within the Department of Premier and Cabinet. The Federal Government's location of this essentially cross-portfolio policy coordination function in the Immigration and Citizenship portfolio since 1996 has not proved as effective in achieving federal cross-portfolio engagement on multicultural issues. It requires the leverage of a central policy-coordination portfolio such as PM&C.

Opportunities, particularly for newer and emerging communities, to develop leadership and community organisation governance skills in the Australian context ought to be encouraged through government sector funding programs. In this context, promotion of forums with local councils and CALD communities has proved beneficial in mutual understanding and exposure of CALD communities to civic structures in Australia.

There needs to be a continuing focus on improving the accessibility of government services, and of government-funded services delivered by third parties (including local government).

Federally-funded programs and services in particular need to include a cost component for language services; and require accountability for ensuring access and equity in delivery, take-up and retention of CALD clients.

Cultural competence and culturally responsive service delivery needs to be part of core business in all public service planning and delivery. Culturally responsive service delivery requires adequate resources for service development, communication strategies, diversity training and the ongoing development of cultural competence.

3. National productive capacity

The full potential of dividends back to business and the community from migration are too often unrealised.

Post-war population growth through the migration program has largely been driven by economic considerations which are not always well articulated back to the general public. It may be that carriage of this aspect of community education ought to be taken-up more by leaders and spokes-people in the business sector, or other people who are seen to have "economic" credentials, rather than primarily by those in government and the community who may be seen to be coming at the issues from a social justice or human rights perspective. For example there may be opportunities to showcase employees and labour market leaders with linguistic and cultural skills who

have and can open up new domestic and overseas markets to their companies with consequent returns to the whole community.

A number of local councils in regional Victoria have looked to attract recent migrants and humanitarian entrants to stimulate population growth and to address labour market shortages. The MAV seeks to work with Federal and State Governments and those councils who are seeking to attract new arrivals to:

- (a) encourage the Federal Department of Immigration and Citizenship to move beyond limited regional humanitarian settlement to routinely settle new arrivals in regional Victoria in a well-supported manner; and
- (b) explore options for off-setting some relocation costs to regional Victoria for recent arrivals, particularly where movement is motivated by job opportunities.

An ability to speak languages other than English, and to engage professionally and socially with diverse communities is a valuable personal and community asset. Vocational education in schools is well placed to promote the value of linguistic and cultural skills in business and the workplace. Promotion of its applications in marketing and customer service, both domestically and globally can make them much-valued and more sought-after skills. Greater recognition of linguistic and cultural skills in schools and the workplace has the potential to promote appreciation of cultural diversity, as well as understanding of the benefits multiculturalism brings to the whole community.

There is strong anecdotal evidence that a good proportion of people entering Australia under the *Skilled Migration Program* do not secure placement in the labour market in their trade or profession at a consequent huge cost to individuals and the wider community. The extent to which a skill-vised new entrant fails to be placed in his or her trade or profession needs to be more openly monitored as a visa category performance indicator. The possibility of better post-arrival support to facilitate entry into the identified occupational field targeted by the visa category might be worth exploring as a means of securing the labour market public policy outcome sought by the governmental sector.

Another example of avoidable costs is the health, social and economic costs to individuals and communities where there are cultural and/or linguistic barriers to accessing services and experiencing equitable outcomes. Targeted research undertaken co-operatively on an inter-governmental basis would position policy, programs and services for better informed development.

Infrastructure issues, particularly in health and medical service provision, have in the past been cited as barriers to direct settlement of humanitarian program entrants to regional Victoria. The MAV would like to see the Commonwealth and State Governments more routinely facilitate settlement of new arrivals in

to regional Victoria where this is sought and supported by local councils as a growth and development strategy.

Many regional areas have small (but often growing) numbers of CALD residents - sometimes only a few families from a particular ethnic background. These new arrivals are often isolated from supports and what they feel are culturally appropriate activities. Consequently they may over time gravitate to the metropolitan areas to be closer to their own ethnic communities despite efforts to support and retain them in regional areas that are actively seeking sustainable population growth. While acknowledging the need for greater support for municipalities with high CALD populations, there also needs to be some recognition for creative initiatives to support smaller CALD populations in regional areas.

A considerable amount of research was commissioned up until the mid-nineties at the Federal level through the former *Office of Multicultural Affairs* (OMA) and the *Bureau of Immigration, Multicultural and Population Research* (BIMPR). This focus has waned over the past decade or so. One cost is that the potential dividends from our huge national investment in population growth through the Migration and Humanitarian Programs are not optimised.

For example, much more work could be done at the Federal and State levels to develop the available current research base on aspects such as community relations and well-being. Focus could address key social and economic returns on managing diversity well; such as recognising the contribution of CALD skills in the work-place and in business (particularly marketing).

Notwithstanding that many international students, *Skilled Independent Regional* and employer-sponsored visa holders eventually become permanent residents and Australian citizens, they are not adequately targeted by federally-funded settlement services and community relations initiatives. Public policy needs to be more engaged with the unmet needs of these cohorts to circumvent the potential social costs of unaddressed human services and community well-being issues further down the track.

General Conclusion

Australian society is culturally diverse. Our multicultural public policy response needs to be, and be seen to be, owned by and for all Australians, not just those communities commonly referred to as culturally and linguistically diverse. We need to find ways to move away from a perception that multiculturalism is primarily a matter of interest to community groups with a more recent history of migration. A genuine sense of collective ownership, valuing and perceived benefit from cultural diversity by all Australians is the best way to nurture this part of our collective heritage and future.

Australian national identity is not a static entity; it evolves. In addition to an ancient Indigenous culture and a colonial history, Australia has a young and evolving national and cultural identity. Over the past few decades our

demographic reality and multicultural public policy arising to address it, have dramatically changed the way Australians of all backgrounds see and think of themselves. Our culturally and linguistically diverse communities all contribute to this evolving national identity and landscape and they define themselves within this shared view of ourselves as a diverse society with diverse communities. Regardless of our different heritages, Australians, of whatever background, increasingly see themselves collectively within a broader shared multicultural identity.

Australia's post-war migration program has essentially been an investment in nation-building through building the nation's population base. The growing diversity of source countries over those decades, and the public policy response to address issues arising from that broadening diversity, are critical to reaping the optimal societal return on what is by far our biggest national investment extending over more than half a century.

Main Recommendations

The MAV recommends:

- a more clearly articulated, strategic and mutually agreed position on the respective roles and responsibilities of federal, state and local governments around settlement and cultural diversity policy and programs;
- greater inter-governmental engagement and co-ordination from the federal government;
- access to DIAC-funded settlement services for skilled migration entrants;
- more effective delivery of settlement support for new arrivals to regional municipalities;
- a modest investment in collaboratively developing a national good practice handbook and related resourcing to guide Australia's 560 local councils in
 - developing multicultural, settlement and related community relations (including inter-cultural engagement) policy, programs and services, and
 - diversifying the local government workforce to better reflect local community demographics.
- consideration being given to conducting a national biennial "local government and multiculturalism" conference to progress sectoral policy development, program design and service delivery; with a balance between metropolitan and regional foci.

Local government recognises that it has a responsibility to address issues arising from cultural diversity and looks forward to working collaboratively with the Federal and State governments to achieve good community-wide outcomes.