

MULTICULTURAL FRAMEWORK REVIEW – SMRC SUBMISSION

About SMRC

The Southern Migrant and Refugee Centre (SMRC) is a not-for-profit community-based agency providing services to migrants and refugees living in the southeastern region of Melbourne. SMRC supports the settlement of newly arrived refugees through the provision of integration and community-based services. Established in 1993 by migrants and refugees unable to source the supports they needed from mainstream services, the organisation has grown over the years to a 200+ multilingual workforce delivering 31 funded in-language social, economic, aged care, health and wellbeing programs designed to meet the changing needs of the communities we support. SMRC also provides a multicultural labour hire service, which for 19 years has delivered a culturally sensitive and in-language alternative to in-home care.

Our workforce is truly reflective of the culturally diverse communities in which we work, with our staff and volunteers collectively speaking more than 55 languages and the vast majority having lived experience of the refugee or migrant journey.

SMRC's vision is to ensure that migrants and refugees are enabled to achieve their goals and aspirations and we strive to support and empower migrants and refugees through delivery of services that are innovative, inclusive, and impactful.

Introduction

SMRC welcomes the Federal Government's decision to support a cohesive multicultural society and advance a vibrant and prosperous future for all Australians through its Multicultural Framework Review.

With 2021 Census Statistics indicating more than half of Australian residents are born overseas, a strong and robust framework that works to celebrate and further strengthen the contributions and value that migrants and refugees bring to Australia, and the vast benefits that cohesion across cultures demonstrates, is vital.

Whilst the intent of the current Multicultural Statement and the Government's Multicultural Access and Equity Policy are to be commended, SMRC hopes to see an increased spotlight on and commitment to multicultural affairs across government sectors, one that more meaningfully drives policy and practice and holds to account a wide range of sectors and players.

We hope to see this review translate into meaningful policy and program developments that tangibly improve the structures and systems required to enable a sense of belonging, as well as better establish an environment conducive to people from all cultural backgrounds achieving their goals and aspirations.

The following submission contains recommendations based on 30 years' work with migrants and refugees as they arrive and settle within Australian communities.

SMRC considers the following six recommendations should be taken into consideration as part of the multicultural framework review:

Recommendation 1

Ensure that recommendations from the review are inclusive and articulated as a shared responsibility, rather than government-centric, with clearly identified accountabilities and

mechanisms to track and measure progress. This must include building the cultural competency of mainstream Australia.

Recommendation 2

Enable the delivery of generational change by reforming the funding mechanisms that are currently driving short-sighted, disconnected services, and contributing to duplication, and competition across agencies supporting people from CALD backgrounds.

Recommendation 3

Data on diversity is critical if we are to effectively achieve the reform to multicultural policy and programming that is needed. More effort needs to be put into collecting and collating data that better helps us to understand the complexities and nuances across CALD communities to inform design of programs that will deliver meaningful outcomes.

Recommendation 4

One size does not fit all. Reform to key programs is needed immediately in order to better tailor activities to the needs of people from a CALD background and empower them to achieve the goals and aspirations that they have identified for themselves. Current program frameworks are not successfully addressing the barriers facing people from a CALD background, or their needs.

Recommendation 5

Recommendations from the Multicultural Framework review must explicitly address issues of discrimination and prejudice.

Recommendation 6

All efforts must be placed on improving the leadership literacy and opportunities for individuals from a CALD background. Leadership must come from within diverse communities, not on behalf of.

Further detail on each of these recommendations is included below.

Multiculturalism as a shared responsibility

The Terms of Reference for the review are very government centric. The multicultural framework must be articulated as a shared responsibility across Australian society, where all sectors, groups and individuals have a role to play in promoting and celebrating the many and varied benefits of cultural diversity and the responsibility to uphold inclusive behaviours and practices.

As per the Settlement Council of Australia's March response to the draft terms of reference for the review, a multicultural framework should inform how we all operate, not just government. This includes articulating the role and value of sectors and groups who will play a key part in the framework's success, including multicultural communities themselves.

Responsibility for upholding a framework that promotes fair, equitable and inclusive practices should not be the responsibility of government alone. Nor should it be the responsibility of people from a CALD background.

The framework must also include reference to the role of mainstream Australia in better supporting cultural needs, and learning from and celebrating the customs, knowledge, traditions and skills that migrants and refugees bring with them.

Improved access to cultural competence training for mainstream providers and supporting further development and employment of qualified and well-remunerated bicultural workers across government, health and education sectors, as well as generally within Australian workplaces, will contribute to creating environments supportive of embracing and nurturing cultural diversity in the workforce.

As per the recommendations identified by the Joint Standing Committee on Migration in their 2013 Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism in Australia, and still yet to be achieved, the government needs to further explore standardisation and official accreditation for both cultural competence training and a bicultural workforce.

Migrant-led organisations are best placed to deliver this training. SMRC delivers a successful Cultural Insights training program that has successfully built the capacity of a range of businesses and local governments and has an active bicultural workforce established with the dual purpose of providing newly arrived refugees and migrants with employment opportunities, whilst delivering culturally appropriate services within mainstream organisations.

Recommendation: Ensure that recommendations from the review are inclusive and articulated as a shared responsibility, rather than government-centric, with clearly identified accountabilities and mechanisms to track and measure progress. This must include building the cultural competency of mainstream Australia.

Reform of funding mechanisms needed

Current funding mechanisms are not currently conducive to achieving sustainable and impactful outcomes that create the generational change needing to occur for people to truly feel valued and meaningfully contributing within a community.

Migrants and refugees continue to navigate a system made up of disconnected services offered by a wide range of providers competing for short-term funding from government. The current competitive tender process has significantly contributed to duplication, with multiple agencies offering similar services, making it difficult for consumers to connect with integrated supports.

A symptom of current funding structures is the necessary emergence of navigational supports now commonplace within many sectors, including settlement, health and aged care. These navigational supports are necessary to address a growing number of people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities 'slipping through the gaps' and are indicative of a system that is confusing and complex.

The multicultural framework review should include consideration of a review and overhaul of funding structures supporting the programs currently being delivered to migrants and refugees. Emphasis must be placed on funding mechanisms that support client-centric, integrated, longer-term, impact-orientated programming delivered collaboratively across multicultural, ethno-specific and mainstream agencies.

Consideration should also be given to reverting to reestablishing (and better connecting) geographical migrant resource centres as the first port of call for newly arrived migrants and refugees, where they have one consistent place of welcome and connection to local services and supports. By nature, these centres provide an information hub and navigational support to ensure individuals are supported in a way that matches their cultural and language needs.

Recommendation: Enable the delivery of generational change by reforming the funding mechanisms that are currently driving short-sighted, disconnected services, and contributing to duplication, and competition across agencies supporting people from CALD backgrounds. Consider reverting to geographical resource centres as the first port of call for newly arrived migrants and refugees.

Investment needed into building our understanding of diversity through data and research

CALD communities are diverse and one size does not and will not fit all. We need to better understand the complexities and nuances across CALD communities to inform design of programs that will deliver meaningful outcomes. This could be achieved through improvements to population measurements by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), as well as key research institutions, in collaboration with community agencies and groups.

Recommendation: Data on diversity is critical if we are to effectively achieve the reform to multicultural policy and programming that is needed. More effort needs to be put into collecting and collating data that better helps us to understand the complexities and nuances across CALD communities to inform design of programs that will deliver meaningful outcomes.

Reform to programming is needed to meaningfully remove barriers facing people from CALD backgrounds

The current funding environment rewards the delivery of outputs over outcomes and impact, which often converts to tick box exercises undertaken to ensure compliance with contracts. This is not an empowering system.

Reform is needed to ensure that programs being delivered to people from a CALD background are cognisant of the additional barriers migrants and refugees face, that have the ability to be tailored in order to address each person's context, and that are effective.

Examples of where reform to programming should be considered:

English proficiency

While we support the continued availability and promotion of in-language information and materials and translation/interpreter services, an ability to understand and speak English is key to being an active participant in Australian life.

The Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) is identified in the Multicultural Statement as a key program designed to support and sustain our unity. In SMRC's experience, English language proficiency remains the number one critical barrier preventing newly arrived migrants and refugees

from achieving their goals and aspirations, despite the existence of the AMEP and many English courses available across our region. Despite having attended the AMEP prior to connecting with SMRC, we are finding that we need to integrate English classes into most of our service offerings in the settlement space.

The feedback we continue to receive from individuals taking part in the AMEP is that the English being taught is too formal and difficult to apply to real-life scenarios, class sizes are too big, the program doesn't cater well to people with low literacy and materials are provided that are difficult to understand and are commonly not completed.

English supports for newly arrived migrants and refugees must better take into consideration existing literacy levels and be more appropriately tailored to the learning style and English needs of participants.

SMRC's language classes are tailored to the language and literacy needs of individuals through small group work supported by volunteers, undertaken within the context that the person will be using English (i.e. English for driving, English for connecting with services such as a GP, and English for general day-to-day activities – shopping, speaking with their child's teacher etc), promoted across peer groups so that peer learning can take place, and include real life application of learnings, with outings incorporated into learning so that participants are applying their learning in real-life scenarios.

Employment

Financial security is one of the most cited goals by SMRC clients. Being able to find sustainable and meaningful employment is a critical component of being able to fully participate in Australian society.

The Employment Services sector needs to be more responsive to the unique needs of individuals from CALD backgrounds and cognisant of the complexity that comes with migration.

It is SMRC's observation that current employment programs often do not empower clients to achieve meaningful and sustainable employment outcomes as they do not address the significant barriers that people from a CALD background face when attempting to join the Australian workforce, and they are not flexible to the unique needs of individuals.

Employment programs must be cognisant of the time it will take to work with migrants and refugees to prepare and support them to engage within the Australian workforce. This includes building an understanding of the culture inherent in the Australian workforce, building English proficiency specific to the workplace, building confidence and establishing the soft skills required for employment and support once in employment to ensure they are able to effectively transition into their new environment and that the organisation is able to support their cultural needs.

Driving courses that allow for practical on- the-road lessons and support individuals to both gain their licence and purchase a car, are a critical contributor to an individual's ability to find work.

For Skilled Migrants, recognition of prior skills is often time-intensive and expensive, leading individuals who possess significant skillsets to toil, often for a number of years, in manual labour roles before being able to step back into their area of expertise. Consideration must be made for programs that better support people to quickly and inexpensively gain recognition for prior skills/experience and that support individuals to continue to engage in some capacity in their sector whilst awaiting an outcome or re-training.

Mental Health and Wellbeing

Culturally appropriate and tailored mental health and wellbeing supports for refugees is a key need for the communities SMRC works with. The trauma experienced by refugees fleeing from conflict and oppression is compounded by the challenges facing refugees as they establish a life in a new country. We need supports that are appropriate and safe for refugees to access, despite having limited language, and that are cognisant of stigma and are culturally sensitive. Some of the issues we continue to see include:

- Services that do not consider or address culturally specific issues.
- Interpreters being too expensive to use when employing private therapists, and for some languages, interpreters being inappropriate and/or negatively impacting the client experience, i.e. where the interpreter is known to the client in a small community.
- Situational pressures exacerbating negative mental health outcomes, i.e. cost of living, lack of affordable housing, racism and discrimination, and barriers in accessing support services, such as digital and language literacy.
- Ongoing trauma, vicarious and direct, histories of torture, resulting from war and persecution and loved ones still residing in dangerous circumstances in home countries continue to contribute to ongoing stress experienced by refugee and migrants living in Australia.
- Adjusting to a new life and culture raises many challenges impacting mental health, for example shifts in traditional patriarchal family dynamics, language, social capital, support networks etc. This is often exacerbated by a mismatch of expectations and a period of adjustment, with some families and clients adjusting and settling differently to others.
- Many adult clients find themselves isolated, without access to their usual support systems and may turn to substances and other unhealthy coping mechanisms. The mainstream support services don't provide culturally specific or in language supports, the same can be said for family violence services, gambling, family supports and others.
- Young clients find themselves in between cultures of their peers and their families, are often burdened with additional responsibilities such as translation for their parents, liaising with schools, finding housing etc. in addition to schooling pressures.

SMRC continues to advocate for mental health and wellbeing services and is engaged in a number of mental health programs, including the Embrace Multicultural Health Program and our Suicide Prevention Initiative with Better Place Australia.

These programs are targeted at a particular audience, are codesigned alongside community representatives, are delivered where possible in-language with messages that are tailored to communities in an appropriate way that makes sense for them.

Although there is funding for mental health services in the mainstream system, we need more mental health supports that acknowledge the above barriers.

We have also observed an increase in chronic health issues and poor physical health outcomes as migrants and refugees adopt our Western lifestyle here in Australia. Support for programs that are tailored to specific issues facing people from a CALD background are critical if we are to improve and maintain healthy communities.

Recommendation: One size does not fit all. Reform to key programs is needed immediately in order to better tailor activities to the needs of people from a CALD background and empower them

to achieve the goals and aspirations that they have identified for themselves. Current program frameworks are not successfully addressing the barriers facing people from CALD backgrounds, or their needs.

Addressing discrimination and racism

Australia's multicultural framework must explicitly address both overt and implicit racism, prejudice, discrimination, and harassment. At SMRC we continue to hear from clients their experiences of racism and discrimination based on culture, faith and appearance and it saddens us to hear stories of people's fear of engaging with mainstream Australia due to not feeling accepted or being considered too different.

While it is commendable that the current statement and policies emphasise cultural diversity and celebrate difference, we cannot ignore the fact that people from CALD backgrounds continue to be held back by prejudice, racism and discrimination.

The framework review offers an opportunity to ensure stronger measures and mechanisms are put in place to combat racism, including implementing policies that hold individuals and institutions accountable for discriminatory actions.

Recommendation: Recommendations from the Multicultural Framework review must explicitly address issues of discrimination and prejudice.

Leadership must come from within diverse communities, not on behalf of.

All efforts must be placed on improving the leadership literacy and opportunities for individuals from a CALD background; through employment services at the very commencement of an individual's journey into employment, through to the boardroom, at the executive table and across management in all sectors.

Multiculturalism must be more than a sidebar within a Government Department's portfolio. The barriers and challenges facing diverse communities, as well as the strengths and benefits of diverse communities, must be acknowledged and mainstreamed through federal and state-wide strategies and plans, and diversity should be a critical component of good practice recruitment strategies across sectors.

Youth leadership opportunities must continue to be available and supported by government to ensure that a culture of leadership and the development of leadership literacy commences from a young age.

Recommendation: All efforts must be placed on improving the leadership literacy and opportunities for individuals from a CALD background. Leadership must come from within diverse communities, not on behalf of.

Conclusion

The Multicultural Framework Review provides an excellent opportunity to re-invigorate policies and practices that will contribute to building a stronger and fairer multicultural Australia.

Accountability must be built into any future multicultural framework. This includes a move away from policies and statements that allow self-determined responsibilities and contributions, to non-negotiable accountability for contributing to a more equitable system.

We hope to see commitment to ensuring policies and programming are evaluated and mechanisms are established to build upon limited data sets and to inform shared learning.

Improved accountability and evidence will help agencies improve their practices and better enable migrants and refugees the opportunities to achieve their goals and aspirations. On their terms.