

FINAL TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds

Melbourne—Friday, 18 February 2022

MEMBERS

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Ms Emma Kealy

Mr Brad Battin—Deputy Chair

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Neil Angus

Mr Meng Heang Tak

Ms Christine Couzens

WITNESSES *(via videoconference)*

Ms Kim Howland, Manager, Community Services, and

Ms Jan Bruce, Positive Ageing Policy Adviser, Municipal Association of Victoria.

The CHAIR: I declare open the Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee public hearing for the Inquiry into Support for Older Victorians from Migrant and Refugee Backgrounds.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we are meeting. I pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of any other communities who may be here today.

I welcome this morning Kim Howland, the Manager of Community Services, and Jan Bruce, the Positive Ageing Policy Adviser, from the Municipal Association of Victoria.

I also acknowledge my colleagues participating today. We have Meng Heang Tak, the Member for Clarinda; and also Neil Angus, the Member for Forest Hill; and we have Christine Couzens, the Member for Geelong.

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I now invite you to proceed with a brief statement to the committee, which will be then followed by questions from the committee members. Thank you for being here, and again I do apologise for the delay.

Ms BRUCE: Thank you very much. I would like to start by acknowledging also the traditional owners of the lands on which we are meeting today and pay my respects to their elders past and present and the Aboriginal elders of other communities who may be here today.

I apologise for not having the MAV background screen on; I was unable to do that this morning. I would like to give a general introduction and just note that we really value the opportunity to participate in this parliamentary inquiry on behalf of the local government sector and also acknowledge that I believe there have been submissions made by the City of Whitehorse and the City of Moreland to the inquiry. Our submission centres on how local government can be supported to meet the needs of older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in the local communities right across Victoria.

Just as a bit of background, the Municipal Association of Victoria is the legislated peak body for local government and represents the state's 79 councils. The MAV is a membership association accountable to its constituent members through the state council and an elected board. We are a driving and influential force behind a strong and strategically positioned local government sector. The key roles of the MAV are to build the capacity of councils, facilitate effective networks and provide policy and strategic advice as well as represent and advocate local government interests and promote the role of local government. As a level of government, local government best understands how to support community needs and aspirations. We work extensively with state and federal government in supporting the work of councils and advocating on behalf of the sector across the diversity of areas that councils manage, and I just note that the MAV is represented on the state's Senior Victorians Advisory Group.

In terms of our support for ageing issues, the support we provide to local government is advocacy on sector-wide issues to federal and state government. We support the sector around significant issues, in particular with the changes recently to federal government funding of aged care. We engage with local elected representatives, with mayors, CEOs and directors. We work closely with aged services managers and positive-ageing staff through regular meetings where we seek input and direction and also lead the sector around current and emerging issues.

We work in partnership with a range of community agencies and, just to note, we work closely with COTA Victoria, U3A and ECCV. And we recently ran a session in conjunction with ECCV which was around

supporting CALD seniors groups in COVID normal times—that was run in October 2020. We also as an organisation support the Victorian Local Government Multicultural Information Network.

I would just like to say that councils are guided by strategic planning processes and documents developed with older people in the work that they undertake. Many metropolitan and rural councils are providers of home care and social support services which support older residents to remain living at home for as long as possible. Local government is trusted and respected by the community, particularly by older residents, and we are often the first port of call for them when seeking support and information to connect them to the services groups and activities that may be available within their local community. We also, through the sector, provide a range of information in community languages.

We are well connected to a network of community organisations and provide links to them and the opportunities they provide. The support we provide to older residents has a long and important history with local government, and we include people from migrant and culturally diverse and refugee backgrounds through age-specific facilities, particularly seniors centres, and through programs, events, information, libraries neighbourhood houses, community centres, parks and open spaces, walking trails and sport and leisure facilities. So it is a really diverse range of opportunities that are provided in any local community.

Councils also often employ dedicated policy and program staff to work with their communities and also provide support in many instances to people accessing aged-care services. We encourage information sharing and connections across seniors groups, and councils have also been heavily involved in digital training and education for older people, particularly in recent times through COVID lockdowns—being able in many cases to lend digital devices to older people.

I would like to note that the resources that councils have available to work with their older community and people from migrant backgrounds is only provided within their resource capacity, and not all needs and issues facing older people can be met with the current resources and funding that councils have.

There is a great diversity in the number and proportion of older people born overseas across municipalities, which you all know. But councils may have extremely high proportions of the 65-plus age group that are born overseas. For example, six councils have 70% or more of their over 65s who were born overseas—Brimbank's figure is 82.4%. So many councils are really aware of and are supporting older people from those backgrounds, because they represent a very high proportion of their community. Often there are dedicated staff to support people from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are really focused on the particular issues and needs of that group.

The MAV developed a statement of diversity which has guided local government. That has been in place for some time now, since 2012. It really indicates the sector's dedication to having an effective way of being able to support the diversity within their communities. There are broader multicultural policies within councils that have been developed that are at a high level and that really help in their work with their older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds as well. So they often have got those broader statements for all of their multicultural communities, but in the work they do with their older residents, that can guide that as well.

As I said earlier, employing a dedicated multicultural policy and program officer is often taken as a way in which councils can support this group. I note that Monash has a multicultural community development officer. Hume has a senior service navigation and advocacy officer to do that. The translation of information into community language is done as best councils can do, but we will get to how that could be improved later on. Councils also provide facilities, and these are often used by multicultural seniors groups. They are a really important part of the availability of opportunities and the support that councils provide. There is support, as I said earlier, for people trying to access the aged-care service area, and there is often navigation support provided to older residents. Councils are encouraging information sharing across seniors groups as well, and that is often a really important part of the connection that can be made within communities for older people within those clubs. Also there is active encouragement for people from migrant and diverse backgrounds to participate in council events and activities.

We recently undertook a survey of council activities and the support they provided to older people during the COVID lockdowns. This was undertaken in late 2020. What we found was 30% of councils provided translated materials to their older residents during those lockdowns; 32% of councils ensured translated materials were

available to older people; 23% of councils established programs targeted at older people from CALD backgrounds; 42% of councils, which was 77% of metro and 11% of rural councils, targeted information and support particularly to CALD seniors groups; and 30 councils indicated that they provided specific programs targeted at their older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

What we are seeking in putting in our submission to the inquiry is recognition of local government's universal role in supporting all people and those from diverse backgrounds—that is a recognition we are seeking: recognition of the strong investment by local government in their multicultural communities; recognition that councils are an accessible and trusted source of information and support to community; and for financial assistance to be available to councils to enable them to build their response and support people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

The local government sector recognises the need for greater state government support not only to councils but also to community groups and organisations. What we are seeking from this inquiry specifically is increased and more accessible government funding to be made available to establish new local groups that support and connect older migrants and refugees and for this funding, if it is available, to be through an easy and accessible application process that is not just digital but also non-digital hard copy, because that is really important. We also need to see that there is support available to clubs and organisations and groups wanting to make applications for any funding, and also some funding for group establishment and ongoing operation, which is really important for the longevity of those clubs and organisations. I think it is really important to have funding available for more than a 12-month period. We would also like to see financial assistance for the local government sector to assist with better connecting older people into their new local communities when they are recent arrivals to that community as either migrants or refugees so that we can connect them in and find the supports that those people need to help them settle and live happily.

We are also hoping that we can see more resources available to councils to further develop their local support and increase the availability of state government funding to councils to expand services and supports to this group within the community. I think there is a need to consider more funds for digital training and support to build on the work that councils do now but also which was activated even more so during COVID lockdown. But there is a long way to go in terms of being able to develop the digital skills of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, and it would be great if there was more government financial support to achieve that.

I think the provision of translation services to councils is something that needs to be better thought through and to have more support available. We need to think about information for older people who do not have English as their second language or are not even literate in their own community languages. We need to think about ways in which we can support a simplified information provision so that is not just the written word. The provision of information may be through recorded messages or information on community radio. I think there is a local role for local government to play in this space as well, and it would be a great benefit to be able to get access to more funds and more opportunities to be able to do that well.

I think older people having access to a comprehensible care navigation system is also critically important. It is very confusing and very difficult for people who speak English, and it does make it very difficult for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds should they need to access the services, so we need to think about how that accessibility into the care system could be done better. Through COVID the government implemented the community connector program, which was seen by councils to be very successful and very helpful, and I think there is a need to consider whether that could continue on with funding beyond this or be reactivated so that it could continue to happen in local communities.

Elder abuse is also a big issue, and having access to educational materials in community languages for older people is something that is really important. That has been highlighted through a national elder abuse conference which was held this week in Tasmania which I attended. It really focused on the need to have access to good information for all the community and all older people, whether they speak English or not.

The other thing that is really important to us and has been is: how can we support all older people but particularly older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to re-enter community life after COVID? I think we would like to work with the government on how we can help in building that confidence and look at what resources might be required to do that as well as we possibly can, including issues about proof of

vaccination and proof of identity as well, which can get very, very difficult for many older people to be able to feel confident with.

So that is basically what I wanted to say this morning to give a very brief overview of our submission to the inquiry, and I would be happy to receive any questions that any of you may have for either Kim or myself.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much, Jan, for that in-depth submission. I will move to questions from members. The first question is from Chris, and then I will move on to Neil.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you for your contribution today. We really appreciate it, and obviously it is really valuable for us to hear from the MAV. I understand very much what a critical role local government plays. One of the questions that comes to mind—well, I have got a few questions. Do you see a difference between rural and regional Victoria and Melbourne metro, what is your experience of those differences and how can we start to address some of those?

Ms BRUCE: Certainly in terms of older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds, I mean, the figures indicate in many municipalities in metro Melbourne how many people there actually are in terms of percentage and numbers, so there is a strong and quite an intense need to be able to address the needs within metro areas. And in rural areas there are some councils that have reasonably high proportions of older people in that category as well, but much less so. I think what we need to do is not have a situation where just because there are low numbers in a rural area the needs of those people are ignored. So I think those needs should be recognised right across the board, and that is important. For small rurals I think it is really important, and because they are particularly financially stressed as well and have far fewer resources available to them, often they are the ones that really need to be considered for any support that the government might provide.

Ms COUZENS: Were you going to add something, Kim?

Ms HOWLAND: Oh, yes, sorry, just to jump in for a second to add to what Jan said. I think of the value of what local government does in those small communities. I look at the situation we had when, you know, three-quarters of Shepparton ended up in lockdown last year and there was not appropriate cultural food for the Afghani residents there. Local government got involved there, worked with Foodbank, worked with the state government emergency management system, and got culturally appropriate food in. That is a really small example, but I think it is vital.

Quite often in rural populations, as Jan said, because there is less money—less of a rate base, less money that the councils have—it has to go much thinner, but the engagement that they have is quite often much stronger. So the social support they provide is quite often stronger. Then you have that tip side, don't you, that if you have a very small—a minority—cultural group, then sometimes they can be disadvantaged or targeted if the community has not been brought on a journey and they have not blended. I think it is recognising that there are differences between, as Jan said, the numbers and differences between metro and rural and even the regional centres. You know, we have to recognise there are differences, but I think we need to ensure that all families or all older people are supported within those communities whether they are in Mitchell shire or whether they are in Brimbank. So it is a really important point, I think.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you. You talked a lot about the need for local government to be funded to offer these support services for older multicultural community groups and individuals. Do you see that there is almost a disconnect between local government and the local multicultural or ethnic communities councils in how that actually works?

Ms BRUCE: I do not believe there is a disconnect. I think a lot of that work happens locally with really strong partnerships. There is variation across the state, obviously, but I think those groups work really well and I think councils are really keen to work in a partnership with whatever community groups they can to achieve the best results for their communities. So I think that we absolutely recognise the value and importance of those groups to any community at the statewide level and the local level, and I think that continuing to work in a partnership and in recognition and involvement with those groups into the future is the best way that councils can work, and they would absolutely agree with that as being the way forward.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, I agree, but I do know of situations where that does not happen and the local multicultural groups or ethnic communities councils feel very left out of what is happening.

Ms BRUCE: I acknowledge that it works extremely well in many places, and on occasion there are situations where there is a disconnect or an issue that is impacting on that partnership and that way forward. With 79 councils something is sure to happen, so we just hope that is something that can be changed and improved over time.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, so a focus on that partnership is obviously really important, particularly in rural and regional areas obviously.

Just on another question, how can the state—well, the Victorian government and local government—improve the capacity of the workplace to some provide culturally inclusive and trauma-informed care? What is your view on that one?

Ms BRUCE: I am not well placed to talk about trauma-informed care, but I think it is about a recognition of the importance of local and living locally, and feeling part of and integrated into a local community is really a very positive way of being able to embrace new arrivals and people who might have felt not quite engaged. So I think the state needs to work with councils very much on how we can do that most effectively. Often that is having a person—it is having a resource there, somebody who is focused on that issue that can step in and provide the referrals and the connections and take people carefully through the process of integrating into community groups, organisations and just understanding that there are generally accessible community opportunities through libraries and through open space and through using the local pool. All those sorts of things need to be considered, and as I said, often it can be done really effectively through there being a person dedicated within a council to do that, and they are the ones that are really well informed and are in a very good place to be able to do that. That often does not happen just because of the resource constraints that councils face, but in many councils there are people that actually are dedicated to that task. Kim, you might have something else you wish to add to that.

Ms HOWLAND: Thanks. I think as far as the direct service provision areas in councils, most of them have undertaken trauma-informed practice, so they understand, I suppose, the trauma part of it and work really closely and make sure the referrals and that are there, but not all of our senior migrant families are obviously accessing care. For councils, quite often, even though they might not be accessing care, they will be using the knowledge of those care workers or the age and disability manager to try and navigate that system. But it is certainly something that we have done a fair bit of work around in the background, some policy work, and certainly looked at in the past having forums and that to really make sure that people understand, I suppose, why people react in certain ways and the trauma that a lot of our, particularly refugee, families have faced before they have entered Australia and how that impacts the way that they will integrate or access services or are comfortable to walk into a council building even. So there is certainly work.

I think there is more that can be done in that area, absolutely, and I think it is certainly an area of knowledge that is being built throughout the whole of community, and I think it is a really important place. I think there is some work being done in the health and wellbeing plans, which are the statute plans that local government do. A lot of the councils with large migrant families certainly look at that trauma-informed practice and trauma-informed policy work and are looking at it at that high level in those plans to make sure that it is on the council agenda, whereas I suppose other councils do not have the higher numbers to do that. But it is certainly something that MAV is, I suppose, really aware of when we are thinking about our forums that we hold or any capacity building we are trying to do in council.

Ms COUZENS: Great, thank you both.

The CHAIR: Thank you, I will move on to Neil.

Mr ANGUS: Thank you very much, Chair. And thank you, Jan and Kim, for your evidence today and also for your written submission. It has come up numbers of times in relation to funding requirements, and certainly most of your recommendations referred to that. Has the MAV quantified what the funding requirements are?

Ms BRUCE: No. At this point we have not pulled together what a budget might look like, but we would be more than happy to work with the state government on what might be required across the state. I think whatever happens in terms of funding, if something was available, it needs to be available to all councils to access based on their assessment of the need in their communities as well. It is not possible to say that every council needs

this much money, because they all operate in a different response, so no, but we would be happy to work with the government on working out what that amount might be.

Mr ANGUS: Sure, because I mean, numbers of the councils have submitted to us already and they have identified funding gaps. So I suppose my second question would be: would you consider from what you have said and from the other written evidence that most councils would perceive that the state government has underfunded this area in terms of supporting them in their programs?

Ms BRUCE: I am not sure whether they would put it that way—maybe they would express it as underfunded, but local government has many financial pressures that they are facing at the moment, as is every level of government post COVID, but there are limitations in terms of the financial capacity of councils to finance these things. They may see them as a priority, but whether they have actually got the funds to do that—

I am sorry, I have now just lost a little bit of my train of thought, but I think councils would really like to see some funds made available to them to support what they are doing now. But I also would like to say that sometimes it is really valuable to have funds for innovation and for new programs so things can be stimulated to work in a different way and different support, so I think that is something that should be considered as well.

Mr ANGUS: Okay. Thank you very much.

The CHAIR: Any further questions, members? I can see Heang.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. In your submission you talk about a stronger partnership, and we heard about the translation material, we heard about the radio, we heard that within that it can be strengthened or can be improved. Can you elaborate more on that?

Ms BRUCE: I cannot elaborate necessarily on a particular place where that is, but I think local government really knows that they can gain great strength and better outcomes when they are working in partnership with community—individuals, but particularly community organisations—and I think they are very well connected into their community. They know their community, but sometimes you need some extra resources to be able to do better in that space. I think, again, maybe some thinking about some funds for innovation—I mean, there are ways in which some new ideas could be explored around that information provision for older people in this group. I think there is an opportunity that we are all faced with with local government and the state in which we could really explore some exciting new ways forward. Kim, I am not sure if you have anything to add.

Ms HOWLAND: No, not really, except to emphasise it is that partnership. I mean, local government does not expect that they can do this by themselves. It is not their sole role. The role is so diverse, but it is certainly part of their role if you are thinking about the universal planning and coordinating that local government needs to do under the *Local Government Act* to ensure that the right services are in their municipalities for their community, and this sits beautifully in that area. When we talk about resourcing sometimes it is resourcing government to resource the ethnic community rather than resourcing local government itself. So I think those partnerships, however they work, the partnerships that local governments have done during COVID with faith leaders to ensure that those communities are getting the right messages around COVID—I mean, they have been really vital connections that have been made that potentially were not there prior to COVID. And it would be really sad, I think—I mean, COVID has been dreadful, but there have been some really great things that we have learned and there have been some really good things that have happened as well, so it would be horrible to lose some of the learnings of that. Whether it is radio, as Jan said earlier, whether it is videos, whether it is linking in online like this, it is really about how local government can act as that navigator and connector to make sure that everyone has access to what they need.

Mr TAK: And, Chair, perhaps just one last comment—it is not really a question. I mean, COVID tested us in many ways, including the cohesiveness and the inclusiveness of the multicultural senior migrant committees that can participate. If I can go back to Neil Angus MP's questions about funding, would you see there is a need? Local governments know their community very well, but sometimes local ethnic communities have difficulty with funding applications, be they online or paper application forms, and miss out on funding when competing with the mainstream organisations that seek the same funding.

Ms BRUCE: Yes. I think that it can be a problem, and thinking very carefully about the nature of the funding and who can apply is really important. I do not think a Wyndham Chinese elders group should

necessarily be going for funding out of the same pot of funds that a statewide organisation might be applying for, because I think it can be quite different. The state in the past has had some targeted funding to support CALD seniors groups, and I think that has been really valued. It has changed in recent years. I think councils would be really keen to see some funding back in a way in which you can apply for it easily—for that to be done and thought through as well.

Mr TAK: Thank you, Chair. Thank you for your presentation, all.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Heang. Thank you. I think this concludes the questions. I do, on behalf of the committee, thank you very much, Kim and Jan, for your valuable contribution today, for taking the time to present and also for your thorough submission. The committee appreciates very much the effort that you have taken in presenting and preparing your evidence today.

Our next steps will be we have a number of further public hearings, and once they have concluded the committee members will deliberate all the submissions and of course the contributions through the public hearings to be able to then prepare some strong recommendations to government and table the report. You can stay up to date by following our website and of course be in contact with our secretariat. Thank you again for being here today and for your submission and all the time that you have taken. As I said, we truly appreciate it. Thank you.

Witnesses withdrew.