

# **TRANSCRIPT**

## **LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE**

### **Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities**

Shepparton —Thursday, 24 October 2019

#### **MEMBERS**

Ms Natalie Suleyman—Chair

Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

Ms Christine Couzens

Ms Emma Kealy

Ms Michaela Settle

Mr Meng Heang Tak

Mr Bill Tilley

#### **WITNESS**

Ms Sally Rose, Manager, Children's and Youth Services, Greater Shepparton City Council.

**The CHAIR:** Good morning. Thank you for being here. I declare open this public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. At this stage telephones should be turned to silent. I do welcome Sally Rose, the Manager for Children and Youth Services at Greater Shepparton City Council. All evidence taken today by the Committee is protected by parliamentary privilege, therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. But if you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, those comments may not be protected. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard, to the right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to proceed to a brief opening statement to the Committee of up to 10 minutes, which will be followed by questions from the Committee.

**Ms ROSE:** Thank you. As I said, my name is Sally Rose. I am the Manager of Children and Youth Services at Greater Shepparton City Council, which means I work within the sector from birth to school entry, and then we have a little slice within the youth sector beyond that. Greater Shepparton City Council obviously provides all maternal and child health services in the municipality, and we provide approximately half the long day care, family day care, kindergarten and pre-kindergarten services. So we do have a fairly large slice, and I like to think that what we do is aim for being the benchmark standard so that services around the municipality and other places look to us as being the leader. We are not perfect but we are always working towards that, and that is what we want to do.

What we do is more than just chat to mums, weigh and measure babies and play with children. If that is what it looks like, we are doing it well, so that is where we concentrate our efforts. We do not deliver specifically culturally or linguistically diverse programs. We more deliver services that are generic but developed to support families in what they need. So a family who has a linguistic requirement would get a slightly different service to a family that has family violence in their background or a socio-economic disadvantage. So while I believe we are inclusive to services, we do not necessarily run a program for Middle Eastern families or for Albanian families or for particular groups.

We receive approximately 900 birth notices a year and we deliver about 8000 maternal and child health consultations. About 10 per cent of those would include our culturally and linguistically diverse families and would include an interpreter in the visit. We work very hard to ensure that we do include interpreters, mostly supplied by LanguageLoop, but partly supplied by the ethnic council here in Shepparton. We want to do that because we find that family or friend interpreters are not necessarily the best people to support a family. In something like maternal and child health some of the issues are quite personal and are things that a woman or a family might share with a nurse through a stranger but do not want to share through a person in their community, and it is very inappropriate for it to be through a child. We do have a lot of people say, 'My eight-year-old son will come', and I respect that family's capacity, but we want it to be about what this service is providing, not putting an eight-year-old in that position.

We deliver a number of things across the board which are adapted in ways to meet the needs of our culturally and linguistically diverse community. For example, we have baby book bags which are given out to families at various points through the maternal and child health service, and they include bilingual books. In the resources that we have available—some are State or Federal Government provided—we include appropriate languages. We try to be very mindful about cultural issues for families and respectful of those things. At the same time we are very conscious of delivering the service to a standard that is appropriate for our whole community. A good example of that is that in some of our local cultural groups co-sleeping or sleeping with a baby between the parents is very much the standard. While it sounds lovely, we know from the evidence around SIDS that that is not an appropriate behaviour, so our nurses, for example, will talk to families about that. I am not a nurse, but if I was, I would not be in your home at night, so I could not influence that. But I could talk to you about why we suggest a cot or a bassinet is a better sleeping practice. But in saying that, we use the right amount of tact to

ensure that we maintain that relationship so that families continue to be engaged. It becomes quite a close working relationship, maternal and child health.

We also provide a lot of information to GPs and practice managers, because many of our refugee families, for example, come from communities that do not have like services. Sometimes when the language barrier exists, families worry that they are going to see somebody that might take their child away or hurt their child or that they are going to charge them a lot of money for it. We have a fabulous system. Maternal and child health is great. It is free, it is for every single child and family, and 99 per cent of families actually take that up.

We also run playgroups, which again are not specifically for our refugee or CALD communities, but they tend to be location based. At Arthur Mawson kindergarten we run a playgroup once a week of which probably 90 per cent would be families for whom English is not a first language, and that is basically because it is located in an area where those families live. We provide bilingual support—clearly not in a room that has got eight languages; we do not have eight different bilingual support workers. But we do find that many of our new families actually speak two or three languages anyway. I speak English, and that is it, but often our families speak two or three, so an interpreter or a bilingual worker that speaks Arabic probably speaks Farsi and Dari and a couple of others in at least a passing fashion. So it is a really good way to support those families. Other organisations locally do provide culturally specific playgroups, and we support those in varying ways. We have a playgroup facilitation support worker at council who might organise funding for a bilingual worker or toys or whatever it is that those groups need.

We have a Best Start project in Shepparton. Best Start handles a lot of the work we do around the AEDC data. Unfortunately our profile for last year was not good—that is how it is. We have actually commissioned a report specifically relating to our CALD families, and one of the main reasons for that is because we are very aware of additional needs. That data actually said quite clearly that in the general population one in three of our children has a vulnerability in one or more domains. In our CALD community it is one in two, so it is not good enough. And some of the advocacy we take for that, for example, is even just this writing a report to our local member about how we would like three-year-old kindergarten to be funded for 15 hours for all of our refugee families—so a trauma base to come into the criteria for early start kindergarten. They are the kind of things that unfortunately we cannot do without outside funding, but it is an advocacy role that we take very seriously.

We have a combined Best Start municipal early years plan, which is on the tail end so I cannot even tell you what the new focus areas will be for that one. But we are looking forward to that. Again, the AEDC data will drive a lot of that, so we are looking at working around the whole concept of the first 1000 days, which is a preschool measure, and we need to get it right. As far as early years services go—your more broad long day care, family day care, kindergarten, pre-kindergarten, those kinds of programs—as I said, we operate about half of those services and aim for our services to be the benchmark. Our services vary quite a lot. For example, we have one kindergarten in the south end that of their 36 children, 33 of them come from a home where English is not their first language, so it is a huge challenge. We are lucky enough to have a fabulous teacher that works with those families and supports them really well, but it is something that we consider quite concerning, and that goes back to the trauma-based criteria potentially for early start kindergarten.

What else could we do? Lots of things. I think we do quite a good job with what we have got. I did bring one thing to share because it is fairly new, but it is just a copy of a poster that we have got locally which specifically has the languages that our community has. Anybody who would like one is welcome to one of those. There are a couple of other things that we do. For example, as I said, we put a book into our baby book bags four times during the key age and stage visits, and this is the current one that is at the printers as we speak—I am very excited about it—which is just pictures of what goes on in a child's life in English and then in multiple languages. I guess it is perhaps not quite relevant to this room, but we are very excited that we have a local Indigenous language as well.

**The CHAIR:** Fantastic.

**Ms ROSE:** We have a central enrolment system. The forms are not translated anywhere, and that is partly because the person entering the data speaks English, but we do provide quite a bit of support for families to fill those forms in. The same goes for some of our directories we have. This one is only new, and it will be on the

website in multiple languages. This one actually has the information about where to find that information in multiple languages. I think that is all I have got to say, but I could talk for hours if you would like me to.

**The CHAIR:** Lovely. Thank you, Sally, very much for your presentation.

**Ms ROSE:** You are welcome.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thanks, Sally, for coming along today and giving us your presentation. We really appreciate it.

**Ms ROSE:** You are welcome.

**Ms COUZENS:** And thanks for all the work that you and your team do at council. It sounds pretty impressive. I am interested to know how non-English speaking people access your services.

**Ms ROSE:** We work with a variety of the agencies around town—so Uniting, the Ethnic Council, Africa House, FamilyCare, Berry Street, all of those—to ensure that the information is available in those agencies. We do not have it all translated because we just cannot do it, but we meet with those groups at least annually to make sure they are up to date with what is going on. There were significant changes to the child care subsidy over the last year or so, so we have met with those groups to do the same sort of thing. We try and create a good partnership in the playgroup so that there is a fairly soft entry from a new parent group, for example, with maternal and child health, into a facilitated playgroup, which then moves into kindergarten or child care, depending on what the families' needs are.

**Ms COUZENS:** Do you think it would be beneficial, if you had the resources, to have more information translated?

**Ms ROSE:** Absolutely. It would be fabulous if we could do that.

**Ms COUZENS:** So if somebody wants to enrol their child in kinder, for example, how do they, firstly, get that information? I think you have sort of answered that—through other services.

**Ms ROSE:** That would be through some of the agencies that we know families are accessing. That is probably the basic reason. There is a lot of advertising around town, and we find with a lot of our families the neighbour might say to Maram next door, 'Have you been to kindergarten?'. So we do rely on community. Then we would invite them in to help them fill in a form or bring an interpreter in to do that. We have actually decided that as of next year we will find a way of doing that on an enrolment day at the centre. There is quite a bit of paperwork involved from a regulatory point of view.

**Ms COUZENS:** It would be interesting to hear about that because we have heard during the Inquiry about the difficulty in filling out forms, particularly kinder enrolment forms.

**Ms ROSE:** That is our kindergarten enrolment form, and we make it very clear in our advertising and promotions that we are happy to work through it with people, and we do that one on one. There is another form—this is to get you onto the list to get a place in a kindergarten. Once you get a place in a kindergarten there is more paperwork to be filled in. It is tedious for people for whom English is their first language. We have pared our form back so it only has the regulatory requirements on it so that we know the families at whatever—we have families with poor literacy in English. We have tried to make it as simple as we can for everybody, and the plan is—it is a plan at the moment, not set in concrete—that we will spend half a day in each service offering one of my admin team to be there and actually go through the form and fill it in for them.

**Ms COUZENS:** Fantastic. So you have not done that before, have you?

**Ms ROSE:** We have not done that, no. This is a new plan.

**Ms COUZENS:** A new trial.

**Ms ROSE:** My concern with it is that a lot of our culturally and linguistically diverse families will enrol in first term next year, and that makes it a little bit more complicated because we can resource probably towards

the end of a year and less easily at the start of a year. But that is something that we can work out. We are currently working with council to try and get a little bit more admin support in general, for many things, not just this. We need to understand how the families are operating and thinking and then meet that need—not me saying, ‘I’m coming to see you on 12 November and you have to fit in’. We do not do it like that with anybody else so why would we do it any differently?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes. That sounds like a great idea. It would be interesting to see how it goes.

**Ms ROSE:** It is, yes. I am looking forward to working out the practicalities.

**Ms COUZENS:** In terms of other children’s services, how do communities get linked into other children’s services that are happening at council?

**Ms ROSE:** I will go back. We probably do not do a lot else that is specific for any one particular group. We had a Children’s Day event in the park yesterday, so that advertising goes out to all of the community groups and group leaders et cetera. Then I guess we know they will pass that sort of thing on. At yesterday’s event, for example, we had a stand—stall, whatever you like to call it—that had a lot of information in the languages that we have got it in so that people could talk to people on a one-on-one basis. At the St Georges Road Food Festival, which you have probably heard of, we do the same sort of thing—have information available at every opportunity where we know we are likely to meet families who have got an additional need in terms of trying to enrol and become engaged. I do not speak any other languages, so I am not much help, but I can listen and I am getting much better at that communication.

It is sort of a little aside, but I have got a maternal and child health admin who is just amazing. It does not matter what language somebody is speaking, she gets it, and I’m thinking, ‘How does she do that?’. She has just got that really beautiful, patient manner. Most of our families for whom English is not their first language certainly have a reasonable amount of English, so they are not completely blocked by that language barrier, and they are very keen to learn a bit more English and to give their children the best possible thing. I think every parent wants that, but these families know what the difference is.

**Ms COUZENS:** All the challenges. Do you have any indication of the uptake—say for your children’s event yesterday or for the food festival—from multicultural communities? Is that measured at all, or do you just—

**Ms ROSE:** No, we do not really—

**Ms COUZENS:** sort of have a visual—you know, it looks like there are X number of—

**Ms ROSE:** What we do with the schools is collect data around how many children did not attend kindergarten in the year before. So Wilmot Road, for example, which is one of the schools that we are a fairly direct feeder to—and I could have my years wrong here—if we go back to 2008 I think they had 17 of 20 children fit into this category, who did not go to kindergarten, whereas the figures last year were that 40 of 41 did.

**Ms COUZENS:** Wow, that is a huge difference.

**Ms ROSE:** I guess that is the word of mouth. And one of the things we found even with kindergarten is that 10 years or so ago it was almost like a family from a particular community would come in to a centre almost like to check it out: ‘Is this a safe place for our families? Are we welcome here?’. And I would go away to my friends and say, ‘Your child will love this’, or ‘Your child will be happy here’, or ‘They are safe here’. Almost like a pilot program—I am going to check it out for my friends.

And we tried to support that as much as possible, which we would with any family I guess: ‘If you would like to stay a little longer, that’s fine’. We have one centre that operates a 9.30 start instead of 8.30 or 9 o’clock, because we found those families just get there later. There is not a lot of point in saying, ‘Well, we operate from nine till two and if you can’t get there, bad luck’. So we are 9.30 till 2.30. Now, we cannot, in kindergarten, for example, say, ‘Oh well, just come whenever you feel like and stay until whatever’. And part of that is because we want the best of these children. Your average four-year-old is not at their best at two or three in the

afternoon. So it is about meeting what the families' needs are, and that is about finding out what the needs are and not making an assumption.

**Ms COUZENS:** And you talked about the data. I think it was one in two?

**Ms ROSE:** Yes.

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes, which is pretty high.

**Ms ROSE:** It is.

**Ms COUZENS:** You may not have had the opportunity yet, but are you looking at solutions in dealing with the outcome of that data?

**Ms ROSE:** Yes, and one of those is trying to encourage trauma background into the ESK, or the early start kindergarten program, which would mean that a lot of the children who are coming to us with no English and no Australian social skills are actually being involved in a program of benefit.

Most of the families that do not send children to three-year-old kindergarten in our area do not because it is expensive. We do have families that we have waived fees for in certain circumstances and I know a couple of people who donate to pay a child's fees, but unfortunately we cannot make that a blanket proposition.

Also, as I said, I believe the criteria should be a trauma background but I do not think it should be a fine detail about, 'What is your trauma? Tell me'. We say to people: if your child has any involvement with child protection, then your child is entitled to free kindergarten as a three-year-old. People do not tend to claim an involvement with child protection or a trauma background if it is not true, so I think we need to say families know their children the best, and if they think it is the right thing for their child, then that is what we should be providing. But we do need financial support to do that.

**Ms COUZENS:** Just a last question around what you see as the gaps or the barriers for providing services: obviously you have touched a number of things, but is there anything else that you think we should hear today around the barriers or gaps in your community?

**Ms ROSE:** Probably plenty of things, but I think I would like to see some of our families have more English classes. I am absolutely all for maintaining the first language; I really want children to learn their first language, and I know that children learn a second language better if they have got a good grasp of what is spoken at home. But I do feel that there is a barrier to some people because they do not understand the language. One of the things that we do in our centres is if you are having a Mother's Day something or other, if I am the teacher, I might say to you, 'Would you please invite Chris to come along? She doesn't necessarily feel comfortable. You're a really nice parent, Natalie, would you?'. And you are, 'Yes, that's all right. I'll pick her up', or whatever. We do not necessarily have the families with that language to make the invitation. If our families had a bit more exposure to English, and I know that can be problematic too—we have issues around a lot of our mums go to TAFE and then they have got to do X number of hours, and it really makes it difficult with childcare arrangements. So I know there is lots to it, but it would be great if we could do that.

I think most of our mums—and I do talk mums mainly—do want to be part of their child's community, want to be a part of that, and language would be quite a big part of that. Some of the things that the three school hubs—St Georges Road, Wilmot Road and Gowrie Street—are working on actually involve mums in cooking groups or really encourage people to go to playgroups. Those kinds of things are really valuable because it is a mixture of cultural nuances, and for me that is really exciting. I love that, 'Oh, so what am I eating now?'. And food brings people together—that is the bottom line. Provide food and they will come. I guess they are some of the things. It would be good to have spaces where our parents could meet. Even in a large long day care centre, there is not really a space for parents.

**Ms COUZENS:** Do you have a community hub here?

**Ms ROSE:** Yes and no—not that would meet this purpose, not really. There will be a new service built in Mooroopna starting next year, which will hopefully have that capacity, so a sort of community room and open

plan foyer area and meeting rooms for various purposes. The kitchen that will operate at the childcare centre will be available for weekends or evenings for families, and that is about talking nutrition with anybody who we can possibly talk to.

**Ms COUZENS:** In terms of employment and opportunities in children's services, do you think it is worth promoting people from different multicultural communities—they gaining those skills and being employed in those roles?

**Ms ROSE:** Yes, absolutely, but I would go back to that the English language is a barrier. If I am going to provide education and care to a child, I need to be able to communicate effectively in the language of that child. We are not going to put all the children who speak Arabic in one room and employ an Arabic-speaking worker. We do have quite a number of people employed from various backgrounds. We have a number that are permanently employed, and we have a number on our relief staff as well. I would say probably on similar percentages to everybody else, there are good ones and there are bad ones, but, yes, I think that language—

**Ms COUZENS:** But you would see that as being beneficial?

**Ms ROSE:** It is very beneficial, absolutely.

**Ms COUZENS:** So encourage that?

**Ms ROSE:** I am really conscious of what is being recorded because what I am about to say is going to come across as really racist, but seeing a black face in a centre is very encouraging to the next parent. If I walked into a room where nobody had anything like me—I am pretty confident and articulate, but I would feel nervous. Once we have a worker or a few families—as I said, that sort of pilot program where a parent will try before they buy—it is really important from a purely visual point of view. It does give people comfort. I think it is great for children to see the differences—Phoebe, for example, in her hijab. There are children who come into our services who have never seen it before, and they will go, 'What's that?'. It is beautiful, honest curiosity, and that is what I think we should all be maintaining. At 56 I do not necessarily say, 'Tell me about that'. I am pretty inquisitive too, but—

**Ms COUZENS:** Great. Thank you.

**The CHAIR:** Just to follow up from that question, I am passionate about the question that I am about to ask you, and it is again in relation to diversity in workplaces. As you know, the Andrews Government has been really passionate about encouraging more women on corporate boards and on government boards. We have really gone beyond quotas, and we are very proud of that. Do you agree that there should be cultural quotas for local government when it comes to encouraging diversity in our workplaces and filling them with diversity?

**Ms ROSE:** What I am about to say is a personal view. I am not a believer in quotas for anything, the reason being that I believe our children deserve the best people, not a token man or a token Aboriginal. We have good diversity, and we do have a couple of positions that are specifically for Aboriginal people. But I want our children to be educated and cared for by the best people. So I guess my answer is: no, I do not see a quota as being part of that. But I see what we should be doing as educating all of our people so that they have got the best skills. I guess it is like with women: we need to ensure that our children are being exposed to science and maths and higher education and university degrees to ensure that they are capable of filling the position. So rather than a quota, I guess, I believe in a system that gives people the skills to meet the needs of everything.

**Ms COUZENS:** But that has not worked at all up till now. We do not reflect our community.

**Ms ROSE:** It has not necessarily, yes. In children's services, with gender equity it is kind of the complete opposite. I have 161 people on my team; one of those is male. So I would really like to see that one shift the other way. We work with TAFE to ensure that the students for whom English is not their first language do get additional support so that their language skills are bumped up. We do work with TAFE to provide placements within our services to ensure those people get the right skills and the right experience so they can do the job properly.

We are regulatory based, which means that we have to have a certain number of people with a certain qualification. That means that every single person in that room has to be absolutely up to the job on every single level. If we had to say, 'I'm going to have 3 per cent Aboriginal, and I'm going to have 9 per cent from overseas and 4 per cent men' or '50 per cent men', I do not believe that we would get the quality of people to look after our children, and that is the first priority in what we do in early childhood.

**The CHAIR:** It is not just about having a quota; it is about having a quota where clearly you have the qualified people.

**Ms ROSE:** Yes, qualified quality, because qualification is not the only—

**The CHAIR:** But it is about trying to boost the workforce so it is reflective of our communities, and quite frankly at the moment—

**Ms ROSE:** It is not.

**The CHAIR:** No, it is not. I could talk about many cases where you have someone that is skilled and educated and has got the qualification and may wear a hijab, and may not, for whatever reason—without getting into what the obvious reason would be—be able to get that role. So that is why I am a strong believer in having quotas so we can, for a short period of time, encourage our workforce to be reflective of our community, giving our multicultural communities and people like me, a first-generation Australian, a chance to get in there. You cannot be what you cannot see, so until government—all levels of government—actually start to recognise that we need to be reflective, I think we are going to continue to have some very strong challenges.

**Ms ROSE:** I agree with you on that basis, a quota for a short period of time, until we correct the imbalance—having said that, that period of time could well be 100 years. I would like to think it is not. Part of the reason I think it is not is because of what we do in early childhood. For us it is about saying every single child has the same opportunity. The blocks are not for boys and dolls corner is not for girls, and we all play with magnets, or we celebrate Ramadan as much as we celebrate Christmas.

I guess I agree with you. I see that we need to give every child and every adult every opportunity. My concern with a quota is ensuring that we have given everybody the opportunity to be the right quality, so the quota fits in before we actually get to employing somebody on the floor.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you so much for your submission today.

**Ms ROSE:** I could go on forever if you like.

**The CHAIR:** Your submission will take part in the deliberations of the Committee, and we will be then handing our report with recommendations in the new year. If you would like to remain updated with the progress, you can stay on our webpage, the Committee's webpage, to be informed of our progress. But thank you so much again for presenting on behalf of your council. We really appreciate it.

**Ms ROSE:** I can talk for hours. I feel very strongly about what I do.

**The CHAIR:** I am sure you can. I can see that. Thank you.

**Ms ROSE:** If we get it right with our little people, then we get it right with everyone. That is the whole point: if equality is something that happens in early childhood, then it is something that happens all the way through.

**The CHAIR:** That is right.

**Witness withdrew.**