

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Geelong—Wednesday, 20 November 2019

MEMBERS

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Mr James Newbury—Deputy Chair

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WITNESSES

Ms Deanne Verity, Manager, Children's and Youth Services, and

Ms Subha Simpson, Area Manager North, Geelong Regional Library Corporation.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon; welcome. I declare open the public hearing for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities. All mobile telephones should be turned to silent at this point. I welcome Deanne Verity, Manager Children's and Youth Services of Geelong Regional Library Corporation; and Subha Simpson, the Area Manager North of the Geelong Regional Library. All evidence taken by this 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 by this privilege. All evidence given today is also recorded by Hansard to my 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 provide an opening statement of between 5 and 10 minutes to the Committee, which will then be followed by questions. Thank you.

Ms VERITY: I would just like to begin by acknowledging that we are meeting today on the traditional lands of the Wadawurrung and just pay my respects to elders' past, present and emerging. My name is Deanne Verity, and I am the Manager of Children's and Youth Services for the Geelong Regional Library Corporation. I would like to take this opportunity to thank you for the opportunity to speak at today's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities. To provide you with some context, the Geelong Regional Library Corporation comprises of one central library, 16 community libraries, a home library service and two mobile libraries that provide library services across 5500 square kilometres for the municipalities of the City of Greater Geelong, Surf Coast shire, Golden Plains shire and the Borough of Queenscliffe. The demographics of the region vary in age and profile, including urban, rural and coastal regions. It also includes some of Victoria's most disadvantaged communities due to high unemployment, low income and low levels of literacy, education and qualifications, particularly in Norlane, North Shore, Whittington and Corio. These are part of our disadvantaged communities.

Corio is also home for the region's largest population of immigrants and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in our area. The Geelong Regional Library Corporation has employed 14 specialist children's and youth services librarians who are dispersed across our network. Two of these positions are based here in this Corio branch, in recognition of the diverse and complex needs of the young people living in this community. Our specialist librarians provide a range of early literacy-focused programs, both within our libraries and connecting directly with children and families through outreach programs, which are delivered through local schools, kindergartens and community centres. In Corio we also focus on developing strong connections with our local Aboriginal people, and one of the services we provide is a fortnightly outreach to the Wathaurong cooperative's Milla Milla playgroup. We also partner with Diversitat to support their homework clubs for refugee students and engage with community groups through this organisation.

Our programs are designed to be welcoming, inclusive and model play-based literacy and numeracy strategies that caregivers can implement, adapt and practise in their home environment. Through our services, programs and resources we promote and support reading and talking in one's first language, and our libraries provide access to a range of print and digital collections, including bilingual picture books in 44 languages; access to the International Children's Digital Library, which aims to build a collection of books that represent every culture and language; magazines in languages other than English; and free online language courses. We provide access to bilingual story sessions and ensure that the resources and program content do reflect the diversity of our community.

Modern public libraries are spaces where children can learn and discover the world of information through a variety of formats. The library provides access to free children's play and learn computers, which provide restricted access to digital literacy and numeracy programs that have been specifically selected for their educational value. This resource helps support our goal to develop literacy and digital literacy skills, and primarily caters for those children that do not have access to technology in their home.

We collaborate with local services to better connect with CALD communities and encourage everyone to visit and access our libraries. Our experience shows that CALD communities find our libraries to be welcoming and inclusive spaces where they can access resources, technology and assistance from our knowledgeable and friendly staff. They are valued community spaces that support social interaction with each other and the broader community, and I think we can just see an example of that out the door there with the story time that is going on.

Ms SIMPSON: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for the opportunity to give evidence at the Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities. My name is Subha Simpson and I am the area manager of the north, and the branch librarian at Corio, for the Geelong Regional Library Corporation. Through Corio, the Geelong Regional Library Corporation provides services to the residents in the Corio-Norlane area. Together they represent a community of 24 951 people, according to the 2018 population figures. Both suburbs have a high migrant and refugee population. If you look at the data for the year of arrival in Australia, Corio has gone from 5.8 per cent of persons born overseas in 2001–05 to 15.3 per cent in 2006–10 and to 28 per cent in 2011–16.

While the percentage of the CALD population rises with every census, the regions of the world that they come from changes quickly. In 2011 our top four countries, after the United Kingdom, from which people migrated to Corio were the Netherlands, the Philippines, Serbia-Montenegro and with Myanmar and Croatia sharing fourth place. In 2016 the top four after the United Kingdom were Afghanistan, Myanmar, Thailand and the Philippines. Library staff have noticed a significant increase in visits to the library now from people who have emigrated from Iran and Iraq. This transient nature of the CALD communities leaves us in a position of sometimes playing catch-up. With all the effort and the resources that the GRLC puts into the community outreach and library resources, we sometimes still miss out on connecting with some groups. This also sees us sometimes on the back foot with planning and purchasing resources for CALD communities.

On-time information from agencies working with newly arrived migrants would help us tailor our services to them in a more holistic way. It would help us engage with them from the start, the moment they arrive into our community. It would help us affect better outcomes for them and their young children. It would help us model a suitable early learning environment for parents to emulate and provide parents and children access to authoritative information, for us to be a great source of connection and information on other community resources and agencies and for us to provide access to traditional and digital literacy for young children and most importantly a safe and comfortable space for their learning and leisure—and a space that is free.

The Corio-Norlane area is an area of very high disadvantage as well. According to the 2016 SEIFA index, which measures relative socio-economic disadvantage, Norlane, at 731 points, is the most disadvantaged community in the state. Corio, at 832, is the third most disadvantaged community in Victoria. Number two is Whittington, which is also in our service area that we provide services for. This extremely high level of disadvantage adds another level of complexity for CALD communities. The results of this disadvantage echo throughout their lives and is reflected in the almost 50 per cent lower take-up of TAFE or university by the youth in Corio and Norlane compared to the City of Greater Geelong, and there is double the disengagement levels in the 15 to 25-year age group, with Corio at 15.9 per cent compared to the City of Greater Geelong at 8.2. Norlane fares even worse, with 23.6 per cent of disengaged youth.

This is why early childhood engagement is not just ideal but essential for CALD communities. As a library we play a community-building role, one which aims to honour the culture and heritage of those from CALD backgrounds through the provision of appropriate resources. An example of that is the sewing maker space at the Corio Library, which is used by many members of our community. We have a patron who migrated from Tibet who uses the sewing machines to make his prayer flags. We have women who sew every day and make traditional clothing for their young children and wider family.

Along with that our aim is to help our CALD population integrate into the wider community by providing the essential building blocks of early literacy for young children and their parents, who are often the child's first teacher. My colleague Deanne has spoken in great detail about our early years programs, and there are significant resources that we pour also into educating the parents. We do this through the provision of our learning English resources and our ESL chat room program, which provides English conversation practice.

Digital literacy is also catered for through the provision of borrowable hardware, such as iPads and Chromebooks. We simultaneously build the digital literacy of the parents by offering a suite of e-know-how programs so they can help educate and guide their children.

However, with everything that we do, we could do more if we got help, which comes in the form of funding, connection and communication. Victorian public libraries receive more than 30 million visits a year. They are operated and mainly funded by local government, with State Government funding accounting for 13 per cent of their total income in 2019 and 2020. Councils currently provide 80 per cent of the operational funding required to cover the daily running cost of libraries, from paying staff to opening the doors, purchasing new books and other resources and providing internet access and computers for community use. Historically library funding was shared 50-50 between the State and local government. However, funding by successive Victorian governments has failed to keep pace with the growth and expansion of services. The GRLC strongly supports the Libraries Change Lives campaign and in particular the Public Libraries Victoria submission as part of that campaign to the Victorian state budget for 2020–21. The submission includes a request for a \$10 million investment for universal and targeted program delivery for children in literacy development and STEM. We are a huge asset to our local and state governments, but we could and should aim higher so we can achieve better results for our CALD and wider communities. Thank you for allowing me to help.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you so much for your presentation today. I am very much aware as the Member for Geelong of the critical and vital work that the library corporation do here in Geelong, so thank you very much for your presentation today. You talked about, I think it was, two workers in the north, and there are 14 across the region. So my question is: why are there only two in the north when it has got the highest population of CALD and Aboriginal communities? Or is it too political to ask you that?

Ms VERITY: I do not know that it is too political. Ten years ago we did not have children's and youth services specialist staff in our service, and to add specialist staff requires additional funding. What we have been able to do as we have opened new libraries is lobby for the funding for specialist staff. We have been able to grow that number to 14 in that period of time, which is significant.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, it is, actually.

Ms VERITY: So I guess when you sort of think of the historical context, that is quite an achievement. We were able to review the locations of those staff recently because obviously when a new library is built and opened there is an expectation that that staff member in that position stays at that library. But we have actually been able to justify the reallocation of those staff and increase the staffing from one children's and youth services librarian to two children's and youth services librarians here at Corio. It is also relative to the opening hours and the operational requirements of the branch.

Ms SIMPSON: And to further add to Deanne's answer, the two specialist staff are children's and youth services staff. We also have another specialist staff member, which is Tim, who is an information resources librarian. He specialises in digital technology. The three specialist staff work together to provide a lot of programming across schools and early years, and they help and train each other across that. Along with that they also have a fully qualified branch librarian, which is me, so whatever they cannot cover, I do. And we sort of manage to do outreach. There are quite a few in terms of what we can reach, plus there are also customer service staff. So there are not just two people in the library.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, I understand that.

Ms VERITY: In the staffing ratio of five staff in this location, four of those are specialist librarians. It does not sound like a lot, but it is a high proportion.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, okay. I am very much aware of the great services that the libraries across Geelong provide, including here, and you mentioned some of those in your submission. Are any of those CALD specific in the early learning years?

Ms VERITY: Yes, the homework club is CALD specific. We have provided outreach to specific CALD communities through connections with Diversitat. So, for example, there is an Afghani women's group that

meet there, and we have run programs for that group. There is a Kareni group that meet at the Northern Bay Family Centre, and we connect with them quite strongly as well. It is where there are opportunities, and it is finding, I guess, that middle person who will allow us to connect and build trust with those communities.

Ms COUZENS: How do you encourage CALD communities to come in and use the early learning services? Have you got a particular program or target?

Ms SIMPSON: Yes, we do. We actually do a fair bit of targeted work. The Wyndham CEC is one of the providers that is allowed to provide the first 500 hours of English tutoring to new migrants. They come here every Monday, and we provide them with this hall for free so they can come in and do their tutoring sessions. When the parents come, that is when we connect with them and we ask them, 'Do you have children? How old are they? This is what we do. Come along for that'. We form connections through that.

We also work through Diversitat. We also took part in the multicultural jobs fair, not just as an organisation but as a little library that provided play area services for the kids while the parents were engaged. So we are fully part of the community as such. We are also engaging directly with children through the children's and youth services librarian. We engage via the adults and find out what their children need. We are also doing things like sewing classes. It is that first step into digital literacy. Our sewing machine is actually a touch sewing machine and it is programmed, so it is a really good soft skill, a soft step into digital literacy. So from that they say, 'I want to learn more about iPads', and then we can take them onto more computer skills. Educating the mother will educate the whole village, so that is what we are trying to do. We are trying to get the adults while the children's and youth services librarians are trying to get the children. So it is a bit more of a complete approach to connect with pretty much everyone that we can.

Ms COUZENS: Fantastic.

Ms VERITY: And I would just add to that that we also make sure that we have a presence at Pako Festa, which is the region's largest cultural diversity festival. I think they had 100 000 people attend that last year, so it is quite a—

Ms COUZENS: It is huge.

Ms SIMPSON: Yes, it is huge.

Ms VERITY: Huge is the word. We do make sure that we are there, and any opportunity that we have that is like that we do try to be there. We also work with our maternal and child health nurses and the new parent sessions that they deliver to families. On one of those weeks they come to the library and we have the opportunity then to talk to the families about the library services but also about promoting early literacy in the home. We are able to introduce our bilingual picture book collections and other relevant resources to families that are there.

Ms COUZENS: That is really impressive stuff.

Ms SIMPSON: For Corio, the maternal and child health meets here all the time. They do not just come here for a library talk; they are here always. And they have just signed the paperwork—they are coming next year again, so it is all done.

Ms VERITY: We have also got the immunisation sessions happening at Newcomb Library, and the librarian pops upstairs when they are on as well and connects with families who are accessing that service too.

Ms COUZENS: And obviously resources are always an issue. So I get that—I am very aware of it. If you had the resources, what other programs would you put in place to target CALD early learning?

Ms VERITY: In terms of children's services, I think the barrier for us is having access to people who can speak the home languages of the communities who are here.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. So interpreters.

Ms SIMPSON: Yes, if we had funding, interpreters.

Ms VERITY: Yes, that type of thing. But also people from the community who could be paid to actually co-facilitate some of those programs with us—that would be an ideal world scenario. Do you have anything to add?

Ms SIMPSON: I will definitely be looking at facilitating more access to digital literacy as well as hardware. At the moment, some of our hardware they are able to take home and some of it they are not. And it is always under pressure—there is always someone waiting to take some things. It would be nice not to be under pressure and to be able to turn around and say, ‘Yes, here you go. Take it. You need it’. Kids will take the Chromebooks home because they need to do homework. Schools have moved on—they are expecting to do everything via the internet, but they do not necessarily have the money to buy it. It is a triage system, and I do not want a triage. I am not a hospital. I want to be able to tell the kids that each one of them deserves to take what they need and do what they need.

I would love to expand homework club. We are looking at doing programs next year which would help more children access a suitable environment for school study and things like that, but we would love to be able to extend homework club for a lot longer. It is limited for the first five years of being a migrant, and sometimes five years is not quite enough.

Ms SETTLE: You have talked a lot about going out into the communities and outreach. I am almost interested in flipping it on its head: in terms of people coming in here, we have heard from other people about losing visibility—families will come through the settlement program but then do not continue on. Within the library context, is there a role for you to be able to refer people back into those groups? Do you have information available to you about: ‘Why don’t you go to this playgroup? Why don’t you engage with this community?’ Do you have the facility to outreach?

Ms VERITY: I would say that we do not have that information, and it would be fantastic to have that. I think that is a little bit of what Subha was touching on in her presentation—about playing catch-up. Things are changing in other areas, and we all do it—we all work within our own little four walls. You get caught up in your day-to-day, but it is that playing catch-up and not knowing what is actually happening in another organisation.

Ms SETTLE: We have heard a lot about the barriers to seeking help, and it is whether people are comfortable in an environment, and obviously a library is a comfortable environment. They talk about it being very warm and welcoming. So in fact people might be coming in here that you could be referring on.

Ms VERITY: Absolutely.

Ms SETTLE: But you would need that support.

Ms VERITY: It is knowing what is available. And we do have people—somebody new will come into their community and they will bring them into the library as a way of introducing them, so we do get that referral from their side. It would be lovely for us to be able to then help them with that next step too.

Ms SIMPSON: Yes. We have started some of those processes, but it is not as well-rounded and well-formed as we would like. We work very closely with our neighbourhood houses, so we are looking at formalising it and doing a bit more with them next year and sort of building on the relationship that we have. But there is a lot of work to do in this area.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your presentation today. The next steps will be that the Committee has three more public hearings, and then we will deliberate on all of the submissions and we will put forward a report next year to Government with some strong recommendations, and your submission will be considered by the Committee as part of that. If you would like to keep up-to-date with the Committee’s progress, you can stay updated on the Committee’s web page. That will keep you up-to-date with our progress. But we will keep you informed at the conclusion of our Inquiry. Thank you very much for all of the work that you do, and again for taking the time out to present to us.

Ms COUZENS: And for having us here today.

Committee adjourned.