

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Ballarat East—Thursday, 21 November 2019

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WITNESS

Ms Jenny Fink, Executive Manager, Learning and Community Hubs, City of Ballarat.

The CHAIR: Good morning. Thank you for being here. Just for the process, all evidence taken here today is protected by parliamentary privilege. Therefore you are protected against any action for what you say here today. If you go outside and repeat the same things, including on social media, these comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is being recorded by Hansard. 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 welcome Jenny Fink, Executive Manager of Learning and Community Hubs, City of Ballarat. You have 5 to 10 minutes to make an opening statement, followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome, Jenny.

Ms FINK: Thank you. I have some notes here, but my opening statement basically is that I am here to represent my unit at council, which represents libraries, intercultural services and youth services. I will talk mainly about intercultural services and libraries, but I probably can answer some questions on other areas of council, because I work in the community development area and quite closely with people in family and children's services as well. Mainly I will talk about libraries and how City of Ballarat libraries in particular approach the CALD community. As with any other community, we believe that we offer universal services, so we do not tend to distinguish between any families, although we certainly welcome every single family into our libraries.

Ballarat libraries are quite unique in that we offer quite a specific service to the CALD community through our intercultural information place. That is for any family arriving in Ballarat that is actually looking for a friendly face, a welcoming place or any information on other services that they can find in Ballarat. That multicultural information place is often a first stop. Often a family will come to a place like Ballarat, and they will go to the public library first. We have got a very, very large public library in the centre of Ballarat, so they will come there. We have volunteers that run that service. The intercultural services unit has a program called our Intercultural Ambassador Program.

So there will either be an intercultural ambassador or a volunteer that will meet an individual or families at that desk and talk about what Ballarat has to offer to them and why Ballarat is a great place to stay in. Often at that point they will talk to families about joining in with library programs. We run a host of early-years programs in our libraries. Everyone is welcome to join those programs. You do not have to book in. They are run right across the city of Ballarat. We also run early STEAM programs and school holiday programs—so a host of terrific learning programs for people. Often at that point, the person on that desk—and quite often there will be a program running in Ballarat at the same time—will walk them down to that program and introduce them, and hopefully that gets them off to a great start in joining in with other people.

We do run a specific program called Little Languages, and that program is really to invite people in to understand more about our intercultural community. So that is for everyone again, not just for intercultural families, and that program focuses on looking at a language every week. Included in those languages are Auslan—so any kind of language. Those programs basically introduce children in a very soft way to other languages. So they might focus on Japan one week and they will find out information about Japan, they will read stories about Japan and they will learn some language as well. That is quite a specific program, and it is a very, very popular program, but mainly the programs that we run are focused on being universal and not to one specific group.

Ballarat became Australia's first Intercultural City in 2016, and we got that label—we got that honour—because we are very inclusive in the programs that we offer and we tend not to offer specific programs for specific multicultural groups—generally because we really cannot afford to offer programs for each specific group. So our intercultural programs are strong because everyone is in there together; there is a mix of people in there together and they are actually learning from each other in those programs.

I will go a little bit beyond this—and I know you have received a submission from Public Libraries Victoria as well, so I will try not to repeat a lot of what they are talking about—but in our public libraries, of course, if you

come in and you speak another language, and that is whole families, we have access to resources in other Victorian public libraries. We have a very small languages-other-than-English collection in Ballarat, but we can get in collection materials for people literally within a week and probably within two days because we are part of a library consortium. The City of Ballarat and Central Highlands are part of a wider library consortium called the Swift consortium, so anyone that uses our libraries has access to over 3 million library items, and included in those are languages other than English.

I have talked about our early-years programs, and the heavy focus, I should have mentioned, on literacy. Our programs that we run in Ballarat are accredited through the State Library, so we have gone through a huge accreditation phase. So when our staff run those programs there is lots and lots of follow-up and information and resources for parents and child carers to take home with them after the program.

Our spaces, we hope, are seen as places that are safe, inviting and welcoming—places that people can come and actually either take the opportunity to be included in what is happening around them or even to sit on the periphery and still feel like part of a community. That is a very important thing for us to know—that we are there and people can come in at any time and use us and can stay all day if they want to.

Part of my portfolio at council is intercultural services. We run a number of those programs within our library spaces because the City of Ballarat libraries basically get about 1600 people through our libraries every single day. We have just opened a new huge space at Sebastopol. I think we quadrupled that in size, Michaela. It is huge.

Ms SETTLE: And beautiful.

Ms FINK: It is a fantastic space. So we run a lot of programs in our library spaces. We run programs like Language Café. That invites people in to come and speak their own language or to actually build up their English language skills as well. Those programs morph into amazing community get-togethers. I think the last one morphed into a group tai chi session in the library. We hope that all of those sorts of activities and actions turn our libraries into places where any person from the intercultural community can come in and actually feel welcome. I will not keep going. I will let you ask questions. I could probably keep talking for ages.

The CHAIR: Thank you, Jenny.

Ms SETTLE: I obviously know a lot about the ambassadors, but I think probably for the benefit of the Committee could you talk to us a bit about how we get the ambassadors, what we do with the ambassadors?

Ms FINK: The ambassador program is actually one of the reasons, I think, that got us so high on the intercultural index with the Council of Europe. In the ambassador program we advertise for people in the intercultural communities that are looking for leadership opportunities. These are entirely voluntary programs. We have nine to 10 ambassadors every two years. I think we are into our 50s now with the ambassadors that have gone through this program. When you become an ambassador you actually become a representative for the City of Ballarat and you become a representative for your own cultural community as well. You actually extend that information out to other ambassadors and other cultural communities. Our ambassadors have been amazing. They will attend events; they will hold events; they will sit on committees for Ballarat. They basically become these incredible people that just give back both to their cultural communities and to the wider community, and by doing so we know so much more about all of these communities. So we run these amazing events. With something like the Hola festival, I think that if you look in the past year's attendances the mix of interculturalism that is attending that community rather than just the Indian community attending—and that is what would have happened previously—has just been amazing.

A lot of the work the ambassadors do is a thousand, myriad, things that actually bring the community together. What is happening with our ambassador program is you can be an ambassador now for two years, and then what we are finding is all of our ambassadors are now becoming advisers to the next ambassador group and then participating in their training and development. We invest as much as we can into that program through leadership training and other training opportunities. Now we have seen this program repeated. Bendigo now have an Intercultural Ambassador Program and a number of other places too. So it has been a very successful and wonderful program.

Ms SETTLE: And in the terms of this Inquiry you talked about ambassadors being at the library in the intercultural space. You talked about them referring on to events that you do within the library. Do they also have the information to refer on— ‘You should be going to kinder’ or ‘This is where CMY is’?

Ms FINK: They absolutely do. I should have said this: we have a very strong partnership with CMY, the Centre for Multicultural Youth, the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council, which is just up the stairs, and also Ballarat Community Health. We all got together as a group to really start looking at the intercultural community because we could do better together, basically, and we could pool resources and actually have a better outcome for the community. The group of four work together constantly. You might know about this program, the EVOLVE program, that is running in the Wimmera. A few years ago we all banded together and put in a joint application for that program. Now, that is not even run in Ballarat—that is a program that is run with the Wimmera Development Association—but it was worth us all going for that money together to show how strong partnerships can be and how important it is to really look beyond the boundaries of any local government area if there is an opportunity to help an intercultural community anywhere within Victoria. We had basically the oomph behind us to do something. That is how we got that program off the ground, and that has been really successful.

Ms SETTLE: Could you talk to us a little bit about Parent Place, because that is obviously something we have talked about, having that centralised service, and particularly how Parent Place would deal with CALD communities coming in.

Ms FINK: I will talk a little bit about the 13 per cent, as I call them. The 13 per cent are the people in the community that will not come into an institution like a library. They will not walk into the art gallery. They will probably barely go beyond their boundaries within their neighbourhood. The 13 per cent are often the most disadvantaged people in the community. That will be single parents, it will be men over 65 or it will be people in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community. There is a whole group of people it will be—certainly families that are either migrants or refugees or have experienced difficulties in their lives because of their intercultural background, whether those are barriers to employment, education or anything like that. They are our 13 per cent, and we really try to focus on the 13 per cent. Even though we run universal services, the 13 per cent are really always there and always included. They are the people predominantly from the intercultural community that will walk into a place like Parent Place because it is small, it is welcoming and it is a very intimate kind of space, and in that space they know that they can easily watch their children play while talking to someone that can help. It can be sitting in an easy chair talking to a maternal and child health nurse: ‘I don’t know how to enrol my child in kinder because I can’t speak that language’. So someone will be there helping them, or, ‘I’m having problems with breastfeeding’. There will always be professionals within that space. It is a space that is really, really important to keep in any community, because of the background especially of the intercultural community and especially if you are a migrant refugee asylum seeker and you have come out of a very serious situation in the country that you had been in previously and that situation has been exacerbated by a government or people in authority—an authority figure. So Parent Place is that wonderful place that exists for everyone and actually can provide very quick personalised service to families.

It has been highly successful. I think it started six or seven years ago as just a little pop-in centre within the Bridge Mall shopping centre area, and it was going to last for six months. It was just, ‘Let’s try this out and see’. I think that council put a breastfeeding nurse there at that stage to really increase breastfeeding rates in Ballarat—I think there was a clear outcome there—but now it has just grown into this amazing service for families that has really, really taken off.

So that is what that service does. That is quite separate to anything else that council does—an incredible service. The library runs story times at Parent Place, and we get overwhelmed by the amount of people that come to those kinds of programs. It is a brilliant service.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you very much for coming along today. We appreciate your presentation, and some great information there as well. I just wanted to clarify: you talked about the volunteers at the library that meet new families. Is that the ambassadors or other volunteers—

Ms FINK: Sometimes it is an ambassador, but it is volunteers as well. I should have talked about another program that we run. We run an intercultural employment pathways program, and that is specifically with the

intercultural community. I was talking before about barriers to education and employment. This program actually helps people get jobs and stay in jobs. It is very easy—relatively easy—to get someone a job if you have got an intercultural background, but to keep that job beyond even a week is sometimes really difficult, so we run this program that is based on entrepreneurship skills. It has got a mentoring umbrella to it and soft skills. We work with lots of industry within Ballarat, so there are industry leaders in Ballarat that will come in and work with people that are on the program. We have people in the program that are highly qualified—they may have come from Syria and are an accountant or a nurse but still cannot get a job within this community, because of their background and because of their language.

So it is basically getting people over that hurdle to enter into meaningful work for them. Some of these people have been out of work for years and years and years. They just have not had that opportunity to have someone working with them and guiding them through and then, once they have got employment, following up all the time: ‘How are you going? What are the things that you are not sure about? How can we help?’.

So we have run this kind of program for probably 10 years now, and we have learned from previous programs that it is easy to get someone a job; it is hard to keep them in a job. Now this program really focuses on keeping them in a job. So some of those students or people that are going through that program will also volunteer, but we have other people that just volunteer from the intercultural community. I have to say the intercultural community is probably our most generous, amazing community. They will give back readily, always, and will dive into anything that we offer, feet first.

Ms COUZENS: And do you have a specific training program for those volunteers?

Ms FINK: Yes. We have an adult educator running the program, and there are a number of training sessions that people go through. I can provide more information about that.

Ms COUZENS: Yes, that will be really useful.

Ms FINK: And that is a Government-funded program through RDV.

Ms COUZENS: Okay. Great. I mean, with limited resources—and I understand everybody has got limited resources—what are some of the things that you would like to see expand, particularly in the early learning area within your services, that you think would be beneficial?

Ms FINK: One of the best things about the early learning space is that you do not need a language to play. Playgroups are, I think, essential for children that speak a language other than English. Often those children will speak six languages and might speak a little bit of English as well. I love play. I love that a child can pick up a toy and will instantly know how to play with that toy, because you do not need a language to play. I think that one of the best things you can do with children is to promote play, because with play will come language. It comes in a non-threatening, easy environment and it actually just builds. I have seen children—I used to work at Deer Park, and I have seen a child learn English through library story times, but when you put in an element of play that actually becomes easier. Socially that child is actually joining in in a different way with other children and doing exactly the same thing as they are. So I do think that play-based learning is essential for the early years.

Ms COUZENS: And are there language groups that you are not able to meet the needs of—that are coming into the community?

Ms FINK: A few years ago I would have said that we really struggled connecting with the African community, and that was because of that community being very, very protective of their children and worried about bullying. We have a street in Delacombe, Leawarra Crescent, and we became aware of—and we used to run programs at a neighbourhood house in Leawarra Crescent, and we knew that there were—lots of African families on that street, but they would rarely come to the neighbourhood house, and parents were really worried about their children getting home. Some of these were after-school groups as well, so we worked out different ways of getting those children home safely where they would not be exposed to any kind of bullying that might have happened on the way home from other children. That has changed though. There has been a real shift in that. We have an amazing African community in Ballarat and young leaders in that community that have really worked hard. I think that, with everything, sometimes it is time, but sometimes it is literally trying to get to the

root of the problem and saying ‘Okay’, working it out with everyone, ‘do we just need a walking bus to get those kids home and for those parents to feel that it is okay for them to go out to a homework club?’.

Ms SETTLE: I guess I am thinking about forward planning. There was talk a while ago that Ballarat was going to be a new refugee—we were going to get a big quota. I do not know what ever happened to that. Does council look to the future in terms of, are we expecting a large group, and how do we get ourselves ready for that?

Ms FINK: Just by chance, yesterday we had a forum on SRSS funding and looking at groups. We think we have got about 40 families in Ballarat that are quite reliant on government funding that are struggling seriously. We have Rural Australians for Refugees in Ballarat, we have BRMC, we have a number of groups. The Asylum Seeker Resource Centre works pretty closely in Ballarat as well, but a lot of families are supported by community in Ballarat. It is amazing. I think one lady from Rural Australians for Refugees talked about her ‘network of angels’ in Ballarat. So there is a very strong community that does support people that actually have not got access to anything. What we are finding, Michaela, is a lot of people are actually moving out to where there are more jobs, into regional Victoria as well. So there are jobs certainly in Ballarat, but there are probably more jobs and better opportunities for families further out—we hope there are, anyway.

We struggle; we find it really hard to get figures on secondary migration. So we know when people turn up and then we really do not know where they go, which is really worrying because you do not know what is happening to them. Just the sheer fact of the SHEV requirements that people have to work in regional Victoria, we know that there are people out there, but we also know that there are people that are getting—and they talked about this yesterday—misinformation about what they are meant to do to have a SHEV. Some people are still living in cities and thinking that if I do this, this and this, I will meet the requirements, but probably will not get there in the end. So there is a little bit of misinformation out there.

Communication programs with these communities would need to be better, and so this is what the forum yesterday was talking about. How do we actually get that information out there that if you hold a Safe Haven Enterprise Visa, this is what you have to do. You cannot just say, ‘I’m going to go and study’; you actually have to be studying. And then you cannot say, ‘I’m looking for a job’; you have to have a job. I think that we will find that there will be issues with that visa, sadly.

Mr TAK: Jenny, I just have one question which you touched on just then in terms of worrying about not knowing of a family that falls through the gaps. Why is that so?

Ms FINK: I am going to talk about the Federal Government now. It is a little bit indiscriminate on how people get through. Some people will meet visa requirements and the next person that comes from the same sort of background will not, so it is really hard. Lots of families are living on—there are so many different visas—TPVs, I think it is—

Mr TAK: Yes, temporary visas.

Ms FINK: Yes, temporary visas and thinking that they are on a pathway to some kind of either permanent residency or know that at the end of that three years they could look at a safe haven visa—I do not think you can do that anymore. So it is the unknown, I think, for these families. It would be terrifying—

Mr TAK: So it could be anything from transportation to job security, because many of these families will not have work rights.

Ms FINK: They have not got work rights. They are not eligible for positions and are literally having to rely on the goodwill of community. So a place like Ballarat is great because there are lots and lots of people, but that is not going to last forever as well. A lot of these groups talked about themselves just getting too old to help. It is predominantly older Australians that are helping out people. I wish I had a very nice suggestion to say why don’t we do this, but this is what yesterday was all about, just literally talking and talking and trying to come up with ideas to help.

Mr TAK: All right. Thank you, and thank you for your work.

The CHAIR: I just have one final question in relation to your current programs, and I am really keen to hear more about Parent Place. I think that is a really great concept, having a number of services in one area in a comfortable space for parents to come in, and they might have another issue while they are there, instead of running around in the navigation of enrolments and assistance through IT, because we are now in the IT world where most of our communities are still having challenges in relation to having email and IT access. I know you have already said it, but just for the record, having that sort of model—as I call it, a one-stop shop—clearly has some significant benefits, would you say?

Ms FINK: Absolutely, and if you look at the research years and years ago from the Murdoch institute, which looked at a child and looked at what should—you know, to give that child a best start, and this is any child, the best start is you surround that child with access, basically, to anything. You would have a public library in the mix, you would have any kind of allied health, but you would also have that great maternal and child health support. I think it is an amazing model that could be duplicated in many places across Victoria. It really, really works.

The CHAIR: And just in addition to that, with the interpreting services, have you had challenges in accessing interpreting services?

Ms FINK: Not that I know of, but that would be because I am not directly working in that area. Not that I have heard of, but Frances Salenga, who I work with and who is in my team, might be able to give more answers on that.

In terms of digital literacy, if you added digital literacy into the mix of a Parent Place, that would be the perfect world, I think. That really, really helps. Even if it is basic access to e-gov services, which our libraries spend a lot of time helping people through—we could run digital literacy services until they come out of our ears and we would still have a waiting list. So they are really important.

The CHAIR: It is. Okay, lovely. Thank you, Jenny. There being no further questions, thank you for your presentation.

Ms FINK: Thank you. Great to meet you all.

The CHAIR: The next step will be that the Committee has two more public hearings. All evidence and submissions will be deliberated on by the Committee and a report will be presented to Parliament next year with some strong recommendations to Government.

Ms FINK: Brilliant. It sounds like a great thing that you are doing; fantastic.

The CHAIR: Thank you again.

Witness withdrew.