

# **TRANSCRIPT**

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

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

Bendigo—Wednesday, 23 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 Kate McInnes, Executive Officer, Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services.

**The CHAIR:** I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities. All mobile phones should be turned to silent. I welcome Kate McInnes, the Executive Officer of Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services. 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 those things, including on social media, you 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 now invite Kate McInnes, the Executive Officer, to present a brief of 5 to 10 minutes, an opening statement, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Thank you, Kate.

**Ms McINNES:** Thank you for having me. My name is Kate. I am the Executive Officer at Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services. We are a not-for-profit based in Bendigo, covering the Loddon-Campaspe region, which is two of our rivers here. It is eight shires but most of our work is within the City of Greater Bendigo, and that is because that has got the highest level of cultural diversity in that region. It is still relatively low levels compared to metro—but growing cultural diversity as well.

We are a not-for-profit. We are an ethnic communities council and the peak body for multicultural groups in this region. We are membership based. Our members are individuals, but also community groups. Our work sits across our community programs, so that is our work focusing on migrant and refugee communities, particularly newly arrived communities—education, settlement support, employment et cetera—and then there is our whole-of-community work, which focuses on social cohesion and anti-racism work.

In terms of who we work with in Bendigo, our three major refugee communities are the Karen community from Burma, the Hazara community from Afghanistan and the South Sudanese community. Bendigo demographics show there is also an increasing number of skilled migrants, but they have lower needs—still needs, but lower needs. Our work tends to be with those three refugee communities.

I think importantly for this Inquiry, those communities all come from very low education backgrounds. They predominantly come from rural areas of their countries, with very low access to education, particularly for women. Most of the women from those communities we work with have never been to school before, even primary school, and are illiterate—or preliterate, as we say—in their first language.

What I see is really important for early childhood for those refugee communities is a whole-of-community and a whole-of-family approach. We see serious barriers when services take a more individual approach. For example, the AMEP English—women cannot bring their children, which I understand in a classroom setting, but if you cannot use child care, because your child comes from a trauma background and is not settling well, because you do not want to use child care or because you are using public transport and you cannot get to child care and then back to TAFE, you are excluded from that. I think that has serious outcomes for children and their understanding of education and their comfort going into education for the first time themselves.

Our models: we run an ACFE-funded—so a State Government education funded—English class. Children are welcomed into that class as well. We run a supported playgroup, again to provide an education model that includes parents as well. At the moment we are advocating for a multicultural hub in Bendigo. There is no one space where communities come together, and I see that as a real barrier for early childhood education, because there just are not those opportunities for children to be in safe, comfortable, early—very early—gentle education opportunities. Our supported playgroup runs out of here, which is wonderful, and we are really happy to use this space. It is a community space. It looks like a church, but it is not being used as a church anymore, so it is a non-religious space. But it is only accessible to some of our communities via public transport, and for others it is too far to go. In Bendigo the public transport really does affect people's access to education, including young children.

I do want to also touch on the innovative solutions funding. I am not sure if that is something you have been aware of or talked about in other consultations. That is a federally funded program for childcare centres and kindergartens that provides up to \$3000 of funding for a child if they have particular needs, particularly around disability or a cultural inclusion. It is quite a complex kind of tender process each time. We have provided that service once to a childcare centre and it was enormously beneficial, but the hoops that a childcare centre needs to go through can make that—you know, you need a childcare centre that is really on board with wanting to be more culturally inclusive, I think, for it to be worth their while to apply, but I would love to see that happening more. With that, we were able to provide a bilingual support worker who spoke the family's language, who was able to attend, I think, six times over a period of six weeks with the child so that the parents could communicate with the staff, so the child could have someone who spoke their language—they were the only child of their language group in the centre—so that that could be a positive experience for that child that was culturally safe.

That is the end of my presentation and I would love to answer any questions you have got.

**Ms COUZENS:** Thank you, firstly, for coming today and for your presentation. We really appreciate it. How many preschool children are there? Do you have actual numbers?

**Ms McINNES:** No, we do not. We know that there are probably around 2500 to 3000 Karen individuals in Bendigo now. It is a younger population, so there are more children. I would say that it is probably bigger than that; that is our census data. So no, we do not have any figures on how many preschool children there would be in our region.

**Ms COUZENS:** You talked about some of the challenges, which we really appreciate. How do you see us resolving some of the gaps that are there, particularly when it comes to accessing services, whether they are council services or health services or even your own services, and relying on, say, community leaders to assist with that? What are some of the challenges and solutions you see?

**Ms McINNES:** I think bilingual and bicultural support is critical. I would love to see services taking up interpreter use more and budgeting for that, because that is a gap as well. I think interpreting is great, but bilingual and bicultural support is better. Obviously the role of an interpreter is to translate word for word, and if you have someone who does not have much knowledge of that culture, things can go awry and people just do not necessarily feel comfortable. Whereas a bilingual, bicultural worker can explain a system and can explain the ins and outs and answer questions, answer fears, and we see that as being much more effective when we are able to provide that. I think also the accessibility by public transport of services is huge, particularly for us in a regional setting. Our refugee communities, particularly women, are coming, never having driven before. It is a long process to get a drivers licence. There is no funding or support for that, so something else that we are advocating for is funded driver education programs for over-21s—so we have it for under-21s but not over-21s. But I think that physical accessibility of services is really critical as well.

**Ms COUZENS:** You mentioned regional Victoria. Do you think employment opportunities within those communities would be beneficial in terms of getting them into those positions, providing services that can be more engaging for the communities?

**Ms McINNES:** Absolutely. Yesterday I was at the public hearing for the inquiry into disadvantaged jobseekers, so I was talking about these issues there as well. I think there is great opportunity in regional areas for employment. We need more bilingual, bicultural staff and we know that it benefits all workplaces. Whether that is because they are customer facing with their own community or whether it is just increasing the diversity of that workplace, we know there are benefits there. We are working with more and more workplaces that see that, that are seeing those benefits and are really coming on board in terms of how they change their policies and procedures to be better able to recruit people from diverse backgrounds. But I see that a real opportunity is for more of our migrant and refugee communities to be moving to regional areas where there are work opportunities, and it is a win-win because we need it for our economy and it is also a great settlement outcome.

**Ms COUZENS:** Do you find that key employers are taking up cultural training, for example?

**Ms McINNES:** Not as much as we would like. We offer it as fee-for-service, because obviously there is no funding there for that kind of service. We offer it as fee-for-service. We do not find we get good take-up. Really

the take-up is for community services, where I think there is probably just that ethos of doing those things because it is the right thing to do—because you are not making money out of it necessarily. It is hard for businesses.

We have just started a pilot program funded by the Department of Premier and Cabinet looking at filling skills shortages. With our refugee communities we are very successful in terms of labour shortages, but people are not coming with recognisable qualifications—so looking at that. With that we have put in part of the budget for cultural competency training. We will be able to offer free or low-cost cultural competency training, and we would love more workplaces to take that up. Obviously workplaces working with us are self-selecting, so people in a senior role are supportive of cultural diversity, but we are still seeing discrimination at a workplace or colleague level in some workplaces. The Committee yesterday was asking about unconscious bias. Yes, that is important, but we are also still seeing discrimination, very conscious discrimination as well, that we need to be working on. That includes in early childhood settings, where childcare staff do not necessarily have positive attitudes.

**Ms COUZENS:** Is that skills and training being done through the local TAFE?

**Ms McINNES:** In terms of cross-cultural competency training?

**Ms COUZENS:** Yes.

**Ms McINNES:** We offer it ourselves with accredited trainers. But no, it is not something that TAFE offer.

**Ms COUZENS:** Are there any particular issues that you think the Inquiry should be focused on?

**Ms McINNES:** I think how we can make childcare centres and kindergartens more culturally inclusive through initiatives such as bilingual support as children start, particularly if they are not speaking English yet. I think that is really important. Then I would say those whole-of-family models, such as supported playgroups, can provide that bridge pre-kinder, pre-child care, or if children are not going into child care, so that they and the whole family are getting a positive education experience. I think that is really critical.

**Ms COUZENS:** We heard from Bendigo City Council that three-year-old kinder would be a real benefit to the community.

**Ms McINNES:** Yes, definitely, and I think it is those gentle stepping stones. The more we can have that graduated model of gentle stepping stones into education, I think, the better the outcomes.

**Ms COUZENS:** Great, thank you.

**The CHAIR:** I just have a couple of questions. Do you think that culturally diverse communities are aware of the benefits of early childhood education and care?

**Ms McINNES:** No, I do not think people do in general. I think there is a high value placed on higher education for refugee and migrant communities, and we hear that a lot in our consultations. Families want their children to go on to university; it is seen as very valuable. They want them to do well in high school. I do not think there is much of an understanding of the link between early education and later educational outcomes. I think that primarily comes down to it not being a universal model across the world, so people are not familiar with the idea of kindergarten or playgroups.

**The CHAIR:** How can we, I suppose, promote the value of early education and care, in your opinion?

**Ms McINNES:** I think the bilingual and bicultural workers are really important to get that information to their community. I would love to see more simple in-language resources about that as well. I think government is, on the whole, trusted by migrant and refugee communities. So with those documents that say ‘State Government’ or say whatever government, that is trusted information if it is in language but simple. And with in-language as well, we do see a number of translated documents where they are so complex that even with the translation—

**The CHAIR:** So you just need simple language?

**Ms McINNES:** Simple. And also realising that some of our communities, as I said in Bendigo, for example, are preliterate in their first language, so those documents are not going to reach the whole community anywhere, and you do need to have verbal information from trusted sources as well. I think we have an over-reliance on community leaders. We see burnout with community leaders. I think you need to pay people. It is work. It should be paid work.

**The CHAIR:** For my final question, we have heard that the system is very complex to navigate—for the average person it is complex, let alone someone from a non-English-speaking background. In your opinion is that correct? If it is correct, what are some of the things that we can do, that the Inquiry should take on board, to improve the system?

**Ms McINNES:** Yes, I think it is correct. It goes back to what we want to do here in Bendigo, which is to have a multicultural hub. What we find is we miss people. There is not one spot where people know they can go for the range of information for them. We really want to be able to develop that as a space that is very recognisable in Bendigo: when someone moves here, they know they can come with their questions and get support to navigate systems. I do not necessarily have any feedback about how those systems could be simplified. I think that is quite a complex process. But I think the more that people know where to go to get the information—you know, zoning and kindergarten zoning are very complex; filling out the forms is often in English and notes coming home are often in English, which can make people feel very anxious about the system and about whether they are doing the right thing by their children. So I think the more we can provide information and have that in language, the better that is as well.

**The CHAIR:** Thank you very much, Kate, for presenting today. Thank you for all the work that your multicultural service does here. The Committee will keep you updated in relation to the progress of this Inquiry. Again, I thank you for taking the time out.

**Ms McINNES:** Thank you. You are very welcome.

**Witness withdrew.**