

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

WITNESSES

Ms Lisa McKenzie, Executive Officer, and

Ms Lisa Morey, Support Coordinator, Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project.

The CHAIR: 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. At this stage all mobile phones should be turned to silent. I welcome Lisa McKenzie, the Executive Officer, and Lisa Morey, the Support Coordinator, of the Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project. 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, 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 this transcript for you to check as soon as possible. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations and any handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to proceed with a brief, up to 10 minutes, opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee.

Ms McKENZIE: Thanks for the opportunity. Greater Shepparton Lighthouse Project is a place-based collective impact initiative, so what we have set out to do as a community is to deeply understand what is impacting on our young children, conception to career, and what are the elements that are causing vulnerability and disadvantage and how we can address them. We are really looking at educational wellbeing across the board. We have used data extensively to understand that, and extensive community consultation. We talked to 1000 people in 2015 and again in 2018, and our goal has been to understand really everything we can—not second-hand but really firsthand—about what is impacting on children in greater Shepparton, what is working and not working, and what we could do to support better outcomes.

So it came out of an understanding, really, from the business community that they were really struggling to find people to employ. We had jobs, but we had high youth unemployment at the same time, going back about five or six years ago. We were trying to understand how that could be. Why don't the people who are unemployed do the jobs? We started to unpack that and work our way through it and decided to set up an ongoing community-led initiative to address what we perceived to be the shortcomings. With what we unpacked we put together a database with 1400 datasets that relate to children, and what we found was high levels of disadvantage, as you would expect, in particularly marginalised parts of the community, and that did include our multicultural community and our Aboriginal community in particular.

Overarching themes really came forward. One of them was around connection—so a lack of connection, a feeling of being marginalised and a lack of sense of belonging really came out as being identified by the community and families as not supporting early childhood wellbeing. So we set out to unpack that further. We have put 50 community leaders on leadership tables, and they are from all walks of life—so they might be from the business community, they might be an engineer or a lawyer, a social worker or a schoolteacher—and together they unpack and sort of interrogate the data. They use the data, they use the community consultation and they use local knowledge and wisdom, and they try to unpack and interrogate it. So we have used that as our mechanism to try and create solutions.

Some of the data relates to our early childhood figures, the AEDC figures. You have probably heard about them elsewhere. In Shepparton the figures are fairly poor, and they are pretty poor as they relate particularly to the CALD community. Lisa has prepared some figures for me. We are due to have 320 new arrivals in this financial year. They are sort of designated arrivals for Shepparton, but what we find is we have many more. It is a site of second settlement. People might come in to Frankston or Dandenong or western Sydney, but they hear about the work here in abattoirs or in the fruit industry or just that we are an accepting community where there are perhaps some relations or perhaps people from their own community, from their original locality. So we often get a second wave, and it is often not linked to services directly. They have had their services attached to them at their first location, but when they arrive here they are often actually quite vulnerable and high need.

At the same time, they are coming into a community that is often well-established, whether it is Afghani, Iraqi, Sudanese or Congolese—or Syrian now. So we are expecting 320 designated arrivals. Fifteen per cent of our community in Shepparton was born overseas, but again a large percentage of those are refugees as opposed to skilled migrants. So I guess the vulnerability in our cohort is particularly high. Sorry if this is not new. Is it okay?

Ms COUZENS: That is all right.

The CHAIR: Yes, absolutely.

Ms McKENZIE: So we found from the AEDC figures, that is, school readiness—the Australian Early Development Census—that in Shepparton 49.2 per cent, so half of the CALD children, are developmentally vulnerable in one or more domains. The domains are physical wellbeing; health and wellbeing on arrival—this is arrival at school; social competence; emotional maturity; language and cognitive skills; communication skills; and general knowledge. Now that figure—the 49.2 per cent or half the children—relates specifically to kids who were born overseas. There were 135 children in the last census in 2018 who had English as a second language going into prep, and of those roughly half were born overseas. So it really relates to about 30 children who are developmentally delayed. Forty-nine per cent of our children are developmentally delayed in one or more of those domains, but of those 135 it is only the children who were born overseas. The average for Shepparton is 20 per cent vulnerable in one or more domain, but the average for the state is 10 per cent. The average for Shepparton is 20 per cent, roughly. The average for the state is 10 per cent, but the average for these children born overseas is 49.2 per cent. So it is pointing to a real pocket of vulnerability. We know that a poor start often equates to poor outcomes later on. There is a correlation with poor NAPLAN results, poor school participation and poor outcomes. We are seeing from early on and all the way through that there is a part of our community that requires intensive focus. Hence our desire to have the hubs here in Shepparton.

I saw years ago that the Scanlon Foundation were working in this space, and I approached school hubs Australia probably five years ago about it. So it was really fantastic to see when we had three hubs designated here for Shepparton, and they are in the right localities because they are in the localities where most of this vulnerability occurs. I know that there is a kinder in north Shepparton and a kinder in south Shepparton where this year 100 per cent of the young people have been identified as vulnerable, and in one of those kinders many of them are new arrivals children. So what we are seeing is that the hubs are really well located to address some really targeted issues. When we think about the disadvantage it is across the board to an extent, and that comes with being rural and regional, it comes with some issues that might relate to low aspirational or generational disadvantage and so on. But there are particularly these pockets that relate to, I think, being a refugee, and you can imagine why that creates all sorts of vulnerability.

We have a suite of initiatives at Lighthouse. We have volunteers going into kinders, and they are often very skilled and they are supporting those kinder teachers who are obviously really challenged. They have their work cut out when they are dealing with kids who are so vulnerable. We have programs in prep—for example, at Wilmot Road Primary School, where we have a group of highly skilled volunteers working with kids who are arriving and who have been identified as having poor literacy and poor communication skills. So we are putting in place a raft of things. In Mooroopna there is less of a CALD community but there is high vulnerability, and we are putting in place a family haven over there ourselves to address that. But the primary thing we have got happening in the space is the hubs. What they have done I think is already attract a really significant number of vulnerable families. Lisa can talk specifically about what is happening in the hubs.

Ms MOREY: Thank you for the opportunity to speak about Community Hubs Australia. We have got three community hubs here in Shepparton. They are located within the primary schools, which I think is really one of the strengths of the model. They only opened in September last year, so we are very new. There are 74 community hubs around Australia and 34 more new ones are going to open. So that is fantastic. There will be about 106 around Australia. We opened, as I said, in September last year, but already we have seen that children have accessed our playgroups and early years education sessions, as of mid-2019, about 668 times. Also parents have been engaged about 729 times through various programs that we have actually got running in the hubs. I think the important message is that the community hubs that we have got here in Shepparton—in relation to the vulnerability that Lisa has already talked about—it just goes to show that by having these hubs located within the schools, they are in the community and they are there for the community.

I think the difference with our programs is that we make the programs up based on what the hub members need. So they are very much place based but they are actually asset based as well. We look at what the hub members bring, what the skills are that they perhaps have or things that they would like to get involved with, and we develop programs based around that. So where we have got these pockets of vulnerability within the community we can link mothers and their children in straightaway to our community hubs and therefore our schools. So the links between our playgroups, our kinders and our schools are being forged straightaway. Then from there they are going on to do programs. We are decreasing isolation and increasing—the research shows that if we can engage the parents, we can improve the outcomes of the children dramatically. If we can improve school readiness—and also the readiness of schools to accept children from CALD communities is another really important factor—then our outcomes are going to be dramatically increased. That is really what we are aiming to do.

At the hubs we offer programs in the early years areas. English is obviously one of our main programs, and we have childminding which is actually attached to that. You may have heard that where AMES offers 510 hours for new refugees and migrants within the community, Community Hubs Australia have actually lobbied to get money from the Government to run English within the community hubs and attach childminding to it. That has been a really pivotal thing that has occurred and has been really successful. We are actually capturing the mums and the children that might actually fall through the gaps, because often the hours that are given to AMES to provide English for new arrivals over that five years goes to the main visa holder or it goes to the mums, but then they have children and they drop out and they become isolated and stay home. So this way they can enter the hubs, they can learn English, they can take their children and they are there side by side.

We have got hub members who are attending the hub within two days of arriving within the country, and we have got hub members that have been within Shepparton and isolated for 10 years. So we have got a variety; we have got up to 14 different cultures that attend our hubs. The beauty of it is that we can develop programs based on what they like and what they need. So we are very flexible and very asset based in that approach. I think that is really important. Our programs are free and there is no eligibility. Where activities that are offered, for example, by the council are inclusive of the CALD community, they are not developed for the CALD community, so we develop programs for and with the community, and I think that is the difference. Also, transport is a huge problem within Shepparton. Because our programs are within the school and within the neighbourhood that they live in, most of the hub members actually walk to the hub and attend the programs. Weather can be a bit of an issue, and also religious celebrations are things that stop them from attending, but they are right there—they are able to access it. So that breaks down the barriers to actually accessing them, and I think that is a really pertinent point.

Other figures that are probably relevant are that playgroups are the number one reason why parents actually attend the hubs. Our stats from 2018 show that two-thirds of hub parents with a child under five have not attended any other early years activities outside of the hub, so it is really powerful that they are actually coming—they are in the door and they are getting access to quality services straightaway. As I said, I have mentioned the statistics already.

The other really important thing, I think, to mention in Shepparton is that we are not going to get funded three-year-old kinder until 2022. You can see that with our vulnerability and the stats that we have talked about it is going to be really pivotal that we try and fill that three-year-old space with really quality early years programs. That is what we are really trying to do at the hubs at the moment: turn things around and offer, say, within the playgroups programs like, Mother Goose or bilingual storytelling—these types of things that can influence children and that they get access for free, because they are just not accessing those early years opportunities otherwise. So it is really, really critical.

Just to give you an idea, you are going to visit Wilmot Road playgroup. However, very close—next to that—is also St Georges Road community hub, and they are located on the same site as SELC, which is the Shepparton English Language Centre. SELC currently have about 60 primary school children and 40 secondary school children. As soon as they arrive in Shepparton they go and they are enrolled in SELC and the parents are automatically led to the hub. That is why we are getting hub members coming within two days of arriving. Then they are going straight to the playgroups. The hub leaders are linking them in to the kindergartens, making sure they are enrolled. We have got the connection straightaway to the school, so they are heavily involved in

the enrolment process and the transition process. Also, we have got maternal and child health services visiting once a term, and that is shown to have increased the attendances of our CALD community. They have certainly got a focus on the CALD community at the moment in Shepparton and increased attendances and therefore hopefully health outcomes as well. Really it is a soft referral process. Once they are comfortable and they feel like it is a safe environment, we are able to softly refer them on to settlement services—maternal and child health, Primary Care Connect. We can get parenting sessions going and that type of thing, so that is really powerful as well. I think there were 1746 referrals made to services, preschools, kinders and maternal child health, so we are linking them in straightaway.

The other thing we do with our playgroups is modelling as well, so where other cultures might have a different approach to the early years, the child care educators within the playgroups are modelling behaviours and teaching the parents how to teach their kids through play—all of those types of things. So that hopefully gives you a bit of a feel for and an overview of how we are set up.

Ms McKENZIE: With cooking and gardening and all of the things that entice and attract the mothers, the children are often involved as well, so it is a relaxed sort of setting that suits the interests and the needs of the parents and the kids. They do things together—they plant vegie gardens and go on outings.

Ms MOREY: Last week we had a trip to the library. We had 34 hub members and their children and took them on a bus to the library, and we did storytelling and then a tour of the library and signed them all up so they could borrow. We showed them all of the different languages that are available—that type of thing. But yes, gardening is one of the pivotal programs, I think, and just learning English through actually doing, and doing things that they are passionate about—like cooking, for example, and craft and that type of thing. Yes, so it is really good.

The CHAIR: Thank you very much for your presentation. Thank you for all the work that you do. My first question is, and I think you have spoken about—and we heard this yesterday as well—the difficulty and the barriers when it comes to navigating the system and connecting the system, so would you be able just to probably elaborate a little bit more about what are some of the things that Government can do in reducing some of those barriers to make it much more accessible to CALD communities—and much easier?

Ms McKENZIE: I am sure Lisa has got specific examples but broadly we see it across the board in Lighthouse. It is really about focusing on the family, the individual and their needs rather than creating a system that they need to fit into. Because this is place-based, the services essentially are either coming to them or are linked from there to them. So there is a foundation; there is somewhere where they feel safe, connected and engaged. It is their own place. It is culturally appropriate. And from there the services can either come in or they can be directed to them.

Typically what has happened over the years in the past is that services set up along our main road here in Shepparton, and then the community has to identify—self-identify often—their need and then go to those individual services, and understand what those services are and how those services can be utilised and then access those services themselves. So this is sort of a fundamental shift in that it provides a safe, culturally appropriate place where they feel welcomed and they are attending regularly. From there it is a launching pad to whatever it is they need. And so they have got people, trusted people, there with them that can direct them. That information can be provided and then they can either have people come in and provide access and opportunity or they can be directed out to it in a soft referral way. It seems simple, but it is sort of a fundamental shift to how things traditionally have been provided. And we are finding that across the board at Lighthouse, and particularly with vulnerable people. And as a vulnerable group this is very much the case.

Ms MOREY: That is right.

The CHAIR: And I suppose we have also heard about the lack of interpreters and the difficulty of accessing interpreters, the time that it takes for interpreters, or the interpreter services on the phone—the 25 seconds is in English. What is your view on that?

Ms MOREY: Certainly, even within our hubs interpreting is an issue also. However, normally there is someone there when you are running a program who can interpret, or we have employed someone to actually

do that. But yes, we could certainly still use a lot more support in that space because we want the hub members to be able to speak English and to practise their English rather than be speaking their own languages, so the more—

Ms McKENZIE: As well as speaking their own languages.

Ms MOREY: As well, yes, absolutely. So to be able to support that adequately is really important.

The CHAIR: So you are finding it, I suppose, encouraging from those CALD communities and mentoring some members to actually work in your organisation?

Ms MOREY: Yes, definitely.

The CHAIR: In these programs—

Ms MOREY: I think one of the really positive outcomes of it is that you are looking at what their assets are and utilising them within the program. Often we have hub members who are employed to do our childminding, for example, who may have had those qualifications back in their country of origin, or might have a passion for that type of thing. So we are able to employ them in that capacity or as an interpreter, for example—that type of thing. And if it is not doing that, then it is looking at what else is available within the community and exposing it. Certainly Lighthouse does that. Partnering with the Lighthouse Project allows us to leverage off other things within the community to offer them experiences that they would not otherwise get, so it is really powerful.

The CHAIR: What is a suggestion that you can give to government, all levels of government, when it comes to encouraging much more diverse workplaces that are reflective of the communities? What are some of the suggestions that you may give?

Ms McKENZIE: One of the things is that people are coming from—we are not all arriving at a point of readiness at the same time. So it is an acceptance of, I guess, the many pathways that people arrive at. We have a view that what is seen as a vulnerability sometimes in this community can actually be our greatest asset. When we think about the resilience and the resourcefulness of the refugee community, for example, and we think about their capacity over often decades to navigate their way to our community and survive unimaginable, sort of, experiences, we identify that community as having enormous capacity and resilience and resource. So while we do talk about vulnerability and we do talk about disadvantage, we also need to be careful not to categorise people, and to understand their intrinsic value but also their value in their incredible resourcefulness and resilience. You know, when you take an asset-based community development approach, you see the strength, but typically we look at what is wrong: ‘Oh, you don’t speak English. You have a mental health problem. You have experienced trauma’—whatever those things are. But when you take an asset-based community development approach, you are thinking about what is remarkable or strong, or what value they can bring or add and what resources are contained within those people in their communities.

Again, it seems simple, but it is a really fundamental shift to think about being careful, while offering opportunity, not to categorise and just think of people as overly vulnerable and a burden on our community. I think our whole community has to embrace this approach. We are, I think, largely a remarkably tolerant community and a remarkably open community that has absorbed generations of migrants, largely refugees, over the years, fleeing from one war or another or one experience or another. So specifically, I guess, it is in relation to having a culturally safe work environment—and we have some fantastic training in our community; our office is doing it in the next month, actually—and then identifying opportunities. But it is also in decision-making and leadership. So on our tables, for example, we have some culturally diverse representation to ensure that we are thinking through that lens. It is really the lens around decision-making and, I guess, seeing people when they arrive at a point—day one of arriving at work—and not assuming that everyone is arriving from the same place. It is accepting that people maybe have different needs but also may bring additional value. Do you know what I mean? Yes, it might be hard work initially, but over the long-term there is inherent value in that.

I also think we need to be thinking about our migrant and refugee population in terms of their capacity to be entrepreneurs, and entrepreneurship, because again they have shown that often in arriving in Australia—not just thinking of them as employees but thinking of them creating opportunities around entrepreneurship as well, because small business is often that entry point and can be such a road to success. That is something I am very

much thinking about at the moment: those opportunities for access around social enterprise and entrepreneurship.

Ms MOREY: Hopefully our community hubs—I just think the model that it has within the schools and those links that we have got to playgroups and kinders and that is just such a strong model that has been so positive. We are Victorian State Government funded—the majority of the hubs are federally funded—and we have got ongoing funding for the next four years. However, our funding ends next June, so hopefully we can gain that funding to continue on, otherwise we will certainly close down. That would be really disappointing.

Ms McKENZIE: With this model that we are talking about as well, we have over 100 partnerships and many of them are business, so there is capacity, for example, to do industry tours, to explore the community and the breadth of the community and understand the operating environment. So it is not just about being in a room learning English or participating in a playgroup, but it is—

Ms MOREY: Connection to the community.

Ms McKENZIE: It is connection, it is engagement, exposure to lots of different people, to workplaces. It is really around access and opportunity to really minimise that marginalisation.

Ms COUZENS: I know we are limited for time. We are looking forward to going to the Wilmot primary school. So just quickly, we have heard a lot about playgroups and the value of playgroups for multicultural communities, particularly refugees, and there has been a strong focus around trauma for young children. Do you have a focus in your playgroup or within any of your services around that—children experiencing trauma as refugees?

Ms MOREY: So what do you mean, like do we have a focus on it or do we have members attending who have a background in trauma? Is that what you—

Ms COUZENS: Well, both.

Ms MOREY: Both, yes.

Ms COUZENS: So you have got the children; what services are you putting in place to deal with those trauma situations?

Ms MOREY: I suppose it is really having educators who are trauma-informed in the way that they actually teach and offering the children opportunities to learn in a place that acknowledges that or deals with that. That is probably the main thing.

Ms COUZENS: So you are offering that?

Ms MOREY: Yes. That would be the main thing, I think.

Ms McKENZIE: At the schools where the hubs are, once they do enter primary school there is a program that a paediatrician, Peter Eastaugh, has put in place in those schools. That is a trauma-informed approach identifying and targeting the children who have experienced trauma and putting in place a sand play therapy response. I do not know whether you have heard about that. Many of them are refugees and have experienced trauma, but also from the broader community and all the different types of trauma that have been experienced in childhood. It is an evidence-based and quite an extensive program across those schools to specifically address the issues.

Previously, anecdotally the principals have told us that significant numbers of children from the CALD community were arriving with no exposure to three-year-old or four-year-old kinder, so they were turning up with significant evidence of trauma and not prepared for school. This is the stepping stone to that, I guess, and they can be identified. Because they are engaged with the schools and there is a pathway to the schools, they can be identified before they commence school. Also they are getting exposure to playgroup and encouragement to participate in kinder, and then when they arrive at school they may have already been

identified and be able to participate and be identified for further intervention via the sand play therapy. So there are pathways which did not exist, I guess I will say, five years or more ago.

Ms COUZENS: The only other thing—sorry, I have just got one more question—you talked about engaging new arrivals into the hub and the playgroups and activities. Do you also look at cultural events to engage community—their different festivals?

Ms MOREY: Yes, very much so. We are not only trying to help them to live in Shepparton and to adapt, we are also acknowledging their culture. I think things have changed so much over the years where previously integration was all about speaking English. Now it is all about their culture and what they bring and their language as well, but definitely acknowledging their celebrations. With a lot of our programs, probably the attendance drops off when Ramadan is on, for example, and you have got other celebrations that take place, and that does tend to affect numbers. That is where the community hub's approach is so good in terms of they are coming to English and they have got childminding. They do not lose their place if they stop coming because of a religious purpose or reason.

Children's Week, for example, is on at the moment, so going to the Queens Gardens and taking a busload to that and celebrating that, but it could be any cultural event. I mean, Shepparton is very multicultural in its activities. We have got St Georges Road Food Festival which is on this Sunday, so that is celebrating all cultures. The school have a stand at that, and they are working with the community hub and they are doing that together.

So that is where you can see the integration and the connection within the community, but we certainly highlight all of the celebrations across all of the different cultures and try and connect in. It might be a Samoan afternoon tea or something like that to connect with the specific community that are based around Gowrie Street, for example, that type of thing. So they are things that we think about and programs that we would run, and we acknowledge those events as we go.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you.

The CHAIR: Okay, we will conclude at this point so we can travel to Wilmot Road Primary School community hub. Thank you again for your presentation. That was just really good.

Witnesses withdrew.