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**Municipal Association of Victoria**

**Submission to Victorian Parliamentary Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities**

**October 2019**

*The MAV can provide this document in an alternative format upon request, including large print, Braille and audio.*

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*While this paper aims to broadly reflect the views of local government in Victoria, it does not purport to reflect the exact views of individual councils.*

**1. Introduction**

The Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) is the legislated peak body for local government in Victoria. Victorian councils remain critically interested and involved in the provision of early childhood education and care services to all children in their municipalities including children from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities

Councils are the leading provider of children’s services and early years infrastructure in Victoria. All Victorian councils are committed to the aim of providing children in the municipality with the best possible start in life through effective planning, development and provision of services that improve health, connectedness, education and care of children and their families. Local government has responsibilities for local planning around all these services as well as providing a strong local early years platform that includes Maternal and Child Health (MCH), Municipal Early Years Plans and provision and support of early years services. Under legislation, Victorian councils follow-up every birth notification through the MCH service.

The work local government has undertaken and continues to undertake with their children and families is a core part of the economic and social fabric of communities and municipalities.

**2. Background**

For decades, Victorian councils have played an important role in celebrating and supporting communities and fostering social cohesion. MAV supports councils to build their capacity and understanding to respond to cultural diversity across all councils functions, including in areas such as aged care, policy development, advocacy to State and Commonwealth governments, developing partnerships with multicultural community sectors and relevant peak bodies, regional settlement, and citizenship ceremonies.

MAV has a close partnership with the Victorian Local Government Multicultural Issues Network (VLGMIN); a network for Victorian council staff interested in multicultural services and policy development. For almost 20 years, the VLGMIN has met regularly to:

* share information, advice and contacts between councils
* advocate on issues affecting multicultural communities and councils’ ability to address them
* promote best practice
* coordinate its annual forums.

Arguably local government in Victoria underpins the early years sector. Local government delivers the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Service in co-funded partnership with the Department of Health and Human Services. The MCH service has a long and proud history of serving all Victorian families since the first Baby Health Centre was established in Richmond in 1917. In addition, currently councils represent approximately 20 per cent of the early childhood education and care system across both centre-based and home-based care. Victorian councils invest in early years planning, community capacity building and infrastructure provision, and many councils deliver a range of early childhood education and care services and programs.

MAV has and continues to work with the State Government and the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria and engages with them on common issues regarding our multicultural communities.

**3. Overview of local government engagement with children and their families**

Victorian councils engage with and respond to their communities through a variety of programs, services, projects and policies. MAV has developed a Social Cohesion Practice Portal for councils to share policies, plans, practices, programs and projects they have developed to:

* build social cohesion and community resilience
* support and celebrate diverse residents
* prevent violent extremism of all types.

Councils have an enormous amount of engagement with children aged 0-8 yrs old in their municipalities. There are a range of strategies councils utilise to engage with their youngest residents (and often their families) including keeping them safe:

* Municipal Early Years Plans
* Libraries and library services
* MCH
* Enhanced MCH
* Supported Playgroups
* Community Playgroups
* Best Start
* Central Registration and Enrolment schemes for kindergarten (including 3 yr. old)
* Family Support
* ChildFirst
* Child Safe Standards and Reportable Conduct Scheme
* Mandatory Reporting
* Preschool Field Officers
* Early Years Development workers and coordinators
* Family Day Care
* Kindergarten provision to 3 and 4yr old children
* Out of Home Care nominated contact officer for the OoHC Agreement
* Early Years Compact
* Multicultural workers
* Ensuring information regarding early years services in a municipality is available in the relevant languages for that municipality
* Developing plans and documents that capture the voice of children
* Local early childhood hubs and a range of physical meeting spaces for families and children

MAV presumes that Victorian Government Departments in responding to this Inquiry will provide details of policies, programs and funding, many of which councils implement. MAV would like to offer a perspective of how engagement with CALD children (and their families) happens on the ground, at the local level, often without any formal support or funding.

All rural councils are passionate about their communities and in particular their children and families. Focussing on a culture of being welcoming, inclusive and supportive is vital rural councils to support their social cohesion and economic development and this is particularly apparent in rural municipalities. All say it is that first engagement with council, often with the universal services of MCH or Kindergarten that provides the building blocks for CALD families and children.

Local government offers a well-established and respected place-based MCH service for their children and families experiencing a new phase in their lives. It offers:

* Seamless referral
* Home visits on discharge from hospital
* Care for both the primary caregiver and the person receiving care
* A record keeping system so clients can keep important documents in one place such a birth details, immunisation details and a record of the development of their children
* Health screening
* Risk screening e.g. mental health, family violence
* Access to social support and peer support
* Predictable care pathways
* Life stage appropriate assessment and referral
* Access to a range of services that support early childhood development, social inclusion and participation in community.

**4. What is happening at the local level?**

MAV called for information from councils about what is happening in their local communities to support the engagement of CALD children in early childhood. The response from councils has been comprehensive with many examples of successful work with diverse communities provided, including from our rural councils - that although may have smaller populations (many say these populations have increased over time) are nevertheless ensuring their CALD children and families are welcomed, feel safe and are socially engaged.

The key themes from the information councils have provided are:

* That engagement with children means engagement with families and vice versa
* That diverse communities have much to offer, particularly when it comes to children
* That reciprocity and respect are critical to social cohesion and engagement
* That it is important to build on the strengths of diverse communities
* That responses and supports are ‘human centred’ and can take many forms

Councils use many strategies to engage with their communities and often use specifically designed or targeted strategies for their CALD children and families.

MAV has selected seven case studies to be included in this submission to showcase the innovative and variety of ways councils engage with and support their CALD children and their families with regard to health, learning, wellbeing and social inclusion.

**Case Study 1 – Health and Wellbeing**

City of Yarra

City of Yarra is a geographically small inner-city municipality with a population of approximately 103,000. City of Yarra offers programs for African children recognising that knowing how to swim is an essential skill. This program supports newly arrived and refugee children aged 4-12 years. In addition, they also offer a ‘Women Making Waves’ program conducted on a Saturday night as a women’s only swimming session aimed at supporting women from diverse backgrounds can participate in the joy of swimming. Boys under 5 years can attend with their mothers thus making it an inclusive activity for children. The session operates outside normal operating times and windows and doors are screened during the session.

**Case Study 2 – Joining up services and community for children and families**

Hindmarsh Shire Council

Hindmarsh Shire Council is 350 kilometres from Melbourne in the Wimmera-Mallee region with a very small population of 5,100. Hindmarsh has an ever growing culturally diverse community. The town of Nhill has a large Karen refugee community from Burma, Myanmar and Thailand. Supporting these families is a priority and ensuring children get the best start in life is critical to their future success. Hindmarsh has looked to joining up their services through connecting health and well-being services with early years services and the local broader community. The Refugee nurse works with the Supported Playgroup facilitator (who has created a multicultural playgroup), the playgroup operates out of the Early Years Centre where families can also meet under the supervision of an early childhood teacher. By operating out of the Early Years centre children and families are exposed to early childhood education of 3 and 4 yr. old kindergarten, long day care and MCH. The local community have been engaged by supporting new arrived families with donations (which are left in a space outside the Playgroup room) so families can have access to clothes, shoes, baby equipment etc anonymously and without stigma. There is limited access to translators and no bi-cultural support workers or services in the municipality, so the community has come together to welcome and support the children and families.

**Case Study 3 – Early Years Professionals CALD Network**

Yarra Ranges Shire Council

Yarra Ranges shire Council is an interface council on the fringe of metropolitan Melbourne. It has a population of 157,000.

For several years Yarra Ranges Shire Council has been facilitating a quarterly network meeting with a specific focus on working with families and children from culturally diverse backgrounds. The meeting is attended by a range of different professionals from early years service providers, preschools and schools. The aim of this network is to support those educators working in the municipality. The network focuses on such things as: the importance of cultural competency to ensure cultural safety, the need for responsive and inclusive services, and strategies and information sharing to implement this. As professionals working with children and their families, it is important to tailor programs and practices that focus on the specific needs of children and families from CALD backgrounds.

**Case Study 4 – An Early Years Partnership in Action**

Wyndham City Council

Wyndham City Council is an interface council experiencing significant growth. Its current population is 256,000. In Victoria, Wyndham had the third largest percentage increase in population adding 65,000 people in 5 years between 2013 and 2018.

A young woman arrived in Australia from a refugee camp in Thailand to join family members who had been in Australia for five years. On arrival she found out that she was in the early stages of pregnancy and was referred from the community health service to the Healthy Happy Beginnings program. This program is a partnership between Western Health, Wyndham City Councils and VICSEG new Futures. It is the first program of its kind in Australia. Her partner, the father of the child, remained in the refugee camp.

As she established relationships with the Health Happy Beginnings staff, the woman disclosed significant trauma that she had experienced prior to coming to Australia, abuse she had experienced from her family that she lived with since arriving in Australia and ongoing mental health challenges as a result of these experiences. A case team was formed to support her including Wyndham City’s MCH and Bi-Cultural Support worker, Werribee Mercy midwife, settlement service social worker, VICSEG and youth mental health service. Following the birth of her child, Child Protection became involved.

When her child was born, she was given support for the birth registration process, which required the signature of the child’s father for the birth to be registered. She was supported to engage with West Justice who were able to support the process of liaising with the refugee camp in order to get the required signatures – a lengthy and complicated process. She was also linked with the Multicultural Liaison Officer at Centrelink to support access to access to parent support payments.

Support was provided by the case team to continue her connection with services, to navigate through the Child Protection system and to understand the Australian system (including why she needed to appear in court to maintain custody of her child and why she needed to be observed caring for her child by Child Protection workers). She now has full custody of her child and has been supported to re-locate to another suburb where she lives with relatives. Referrals have been made by the members of the case team to equivalent services in the area where she now lives.

**Case Study 5 - Maternal and Child Health - a responsive service**

This case study is prefaced with a comment that although it is from Boroondara City Council, most if not all councils who provided input to this submission have excellent examples regarding MCH. MCH is the connecting and universal service that supports children and families from CALD backgrounds in a myriad of ways. This is just one example.

Boroondara City Council

Boroondara City Council is a metropolitan council with a population of 184,000 people. Like all other councils it has an obligation and responsibility to ensure Maternal and Child Health Service operates in its municipality. The following examples are provided to demonstrate the range of innovation, responsiveness and support the MCH Service provides. This is embedded practice in Boroondara for their CALD children and families of which a very large proportion are Chinese.

Newly arrived families and children are offered an opportunity on a monthly basis to meet socially. The MCH nurse facilitates this group and is available to make any referrals or answer questions from attendees. It is an intergenerational group with parents, children, carers and grandparents attending.

Saturday morning MCH appointments – these are offered to families who for cultural reasons prefer to attend MCH with both parents.

Cultural Confinements – Cultural confinement home visits are offered up to eight weeks before the expected birth for all CALD families adhering to home stay for cultural reasons and beliefs.

MCH – linking families and children (with consent) from similar cultural background and language. This is facilitated by the nurse generally by booking appointments for children and families on the same day and by block booking an interpreter for these appointments. The families then get to meet at the service whilst and interpreter is available thus making a more efficient and effective experience for all.

**Case Study 6 - The possibilities of co-location**

Towong Shire Council

Towong Shire Council is in the North East of Victoria and is relatively unpopulated. It has a population of 5,600 people. Tallangatta Neighbourhood House developed a monthly cooking program to represent cultural diversity in the community. The outcomes of these cooking classes was a cook book demonstrating culturally diverse recipes and cuisines was developed. This program also resulted in a number of people in the CALD community going on to pursue training facilitated by the neighbourhood house and a partnership with the local TAFE of which a number were parents.

The Tallangatta Early Years Learning Centre is also located in the same building and the flow on for families has been beneficial. CALD families have subsequently enrolled their children in the service, the service has developed a more culturally diverse learning program and there is a focus on respectful relationships. The co-location of these activities has made the outcomes even greater than any single CALD focussed program operating alone, especially in a rural setting. The capacity building for community through a culturally diverse lens is a great service model for a small rurally isolated community.

**Case Study 7 – Human Centred Design Project for CALD Families**

Whittlesea City Council

Whittlesea City Council sits on the northern fringe of Melbourne. Demographically, over half of the residents are from non-English speaking backgrounds. It has a population of 240,000.

Over the past 2 years Whittlesea City Council designed and undertook a project called *‘Human Centred Design Project*’. It involved speaking with people from culturally diverse backgrounds who had recently moved into the municipality. From these consultations a set of profiles were developed.

Four profiles are of parents with children with an age range of the children from 9 months to 16 years old. These profiles highlight what children and families need at different developmental and life stages including how these families access and want to access services and information. The aim of developing these profiles is to inform and guide service planning.

For example, parents with twin 9-month-old children and a 3yr old want to – connect with other families, rely on word of mouth to get their information, have no family support, do not drive and early childhood and school education is a priority. They do not read the newspaper, they use MCH and are thinking about Playgroup, they use Social Media but do not use the internet for parenting information and heard about immunisation from a neighbour when the family first arrived in Australia. These profiles provide valuable insight for service and information design for CALD children and families.

**Conclusion**

Local government in Victoria works with their diverse communities to support and enhance their experiences of the early years service system from 0 -8 yrs. old and beyond. Councils have been developing Municipal Early Years Plans (MEYP) on a consistent basis for the past 10 years and MAV has just recently refreshed its [Municipal Early Years Framework](http://www.mav.asn.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/21694/MAV-Resource-Guide-to-Municipal-Early-Years-Planning-Nov-2018.pdf)  for councils to use when completing their MEYP. These plans focus on children and their families.

There is a significant body of evidence that collective investment by all governments in the early lives of our youngest citizens improves their outcomes and their life trajectory.

**Recommendations**

* That best practice programs and initiatives developed by Victorian councils be promoted and supported with State Government investment to ensure CALD engagement processes and strategies are embedded and a strong evidence base built
* That the Victorian Government invests in a systems approach to ensuring all children are enrolled and able to access kindergarten through linking the MCH Child Development Information System with a state-wide Victorian Government funded kindergarten central enrolment system.
* That the Victorian Government extends its current Early Start Kindergarten Policy to include asylum seeker and refugee children.
* That the Early Childhood Improvement Branches being established by the Department of Education in the 17 regions have their roles and responsibilities extended to focus on CALD children.
* That cultural inclusion strategies are seen as best practice in early childhood education and care services and are included as part of the overall Assessment and Ratings processes and funding requirements.
* That the Victorian Government continue to advocate to the Commonwealth Government for enduring and stable funding for kindergarten in the year before school which benefits all children.