



Australian Government
Department of Social Services

Submission to the Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism

11 May 2017



Introduction

The Department of Social Services welcomes the opportunity to provide a submission to the Select Committee on Strengthening Multiculturalism. This submission pertains only to matters over which the Department has a degree of influence or responsibility, namely items (a), (b), (g), (h) and (i) from the Select Committee's terms of reference.

Our commitment

Our mission is to improve the lifetime wellbeing of people and families in Australia. This guides all the work we do in shaping policies on everything from housing support, to disability services, to settlement and multicultural affairs. We are proud of the work we do in support of multiculturalism in Australia.

On 20 March 2017, the Government launched the new multicultural statement, *Multicultural Australia: united, strong, successful*. The statement identifies the Government's priorities and strategic directions which will guide programs and policies for the coming years, and is available online at www.dss.gov.au/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/australian-governments-multicultural-statement.

Australia is a successful multicultural society. Our levels of cohesion are the envy of the world. Since 2007, the Scanlon Foundation's Mapping Social Cohesion research has provided a series of detailed surveys on social cohesion, immigration and population issues. The Scanlon Monash surveys, together with a number of international indicators, find that Australia remains a broadly stable and highly cohesive society, with high levels of belonging and broad public support for a multicultural Australia. In 2016, the survey showed that 83 per cent of people agree that multiculturalism has been good for Australia, and 91 per cent of people have a sense of belonging in Australia.

However, we know that we have more work to do. The Mapping Social Cohesion Report 2016 noted an increase in incidents of racism since 2010. While social cohesion remains strong at the national and local level, there are issues which warrant ongoing attention, including the experience of racism and discrimination by segments of the community, as well as issues relating to violent extremism.

We also know from the settlement services sector that there are ongoing barriers to accessing mainstream services for some clients, and we are working to address these.

While the Attorney-General's Department has portfolio responsibility for driving the implementation of the Government's human rights policy agenda, we will continue to promote multiculturalism, and develop resilience in our communities, in support of our mission to improve the lifetime wellbeing of people and families in Australia.

Our actions

The Department is very interested in the views and experiences of all Australians, particularly relating to strengthening and enhancing our communities. This is why we listen to Australians through a range of channels:

- we fund the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Councils of Australia (FECCA) to advocate the views and needs of ethnic communities, and to enhance their reach and engagement to support representation of new and emerging communities;
- we provide secretariat support to the Australian Multicultural Council (AMC), which is a ministerially-appointed body that provides advice to the Government on multicultural affairs policy and programs;
- we listen to community leaders around the country in a very direct way, through our Multicultural Community Liaison Officers. These are departmental officers who productively and collaboratively engage with multicultural communities and key stakeholders to strengthen linkages to the Australian Government;
- we provide secretariat support to the Settlement Services Advisory Council (SSAC), which is comprised of experts and representatives from across settlement services and refugee and migrant communities. SSAC provides advice to the Government on how to strengthen social cohesion and maximise the social and economic participation of migrants and refugees through specific settlement services, English language, educational and vocational programs, and employment pathway programs; and
- we consult with peak bodies to hear first-hand experiences and become better informed about new and emerging issues. These include the Migration Council Australia, the Multicultural Youth Advocacy Network and the Settlement Council of Australia.

All these mechanisms enable the Department to be well placed to identify and respond to emerging social issues.

The Department strives to improve the lifetime wellbeing of people and families in Australia by building on their strengths and addressing barriers to independence and participation in the community. Through our suite of settlement programs and services, the Department is working toward improving the lifetime wellbeing of people and families from refugee and migrant backgrounds. These programs and services encourage the economic and social participation of new arrivals.

Australia has a rich history of migrants contributing to our social and economic fabric. This continues today with our inclusive multicultural society providing opportunities for new migrants to contribute to the success of our nation.

Together, the efforts of communities, schools, non-profit organisations, faith-based organisations, employers, and governments are providing opportunities for people to positively contribute to Australian society.

At the same time, economic and social integration by new migrants and their families is vital to their future. Feeling connected to their new home and being a part of Australian society creates a sense of worth and belonging.

The Government has budgeted more than \$810 million for settlement services over the four years from 2016-17 to 2019-20 to support humanitarian entrants and other eligible migrants, especially during their first five years after arriving in Australia. The aim of these settlement services is to enable the participation of new arrivals as quickly and as fully as possible in the Australian economy and society. An overview of the Australian Government's settlement services is available at **Attachment A**.

The Australian Government has a particular focus on improving English language, education and employment outcomes of humanitarian entrants, as these are crucial to fostering participation, supporting productive diversity, and maintaining Australia's high levels of social cohesion and community harmony in the future.

While the existing services are working well, improvements can still be made to deliver better settlement outcomes for new arrivals. With the current Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) and Complex Case Support (CCS) contracts ending in 2017, the Australian Government is taking the opportunity to re-design the settlement services it provides, taking into account recommendations from the evaluation of these programs and the Government's commitment to improve English, employment and education outcomes for humanitarian entrants. The new Humanitarian Settlement Program will build on the success of the current HSS and CCS programs.

The Department is currently undertaking a review of Settlement Grants to ensure grant funding continues to assist eligible clients. The review will include an independent evaluation which will assess appropriateness (how well the program is focussing on client needs), effectiveness (for example whether the program is effectively engaging the target population) and efficiency (the extent the program is achieving value for money). The review will inform the development of program settings for the next open selection round for Settlement Grants, scheduled for 2018.

In addition to specific settlement services, newly arrived migrants are able to access mainstream services for which they are eligible, such as Medicare, employment services and social security payments (if they satisfy prescribed criteria).

The accessibility of Government services is a key issue, and the Department implements the Multicultural Access and Equity Policy to ensure that Australian Government programs and services are accessible to all Australians, whatever their cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The policy centres on six commitments essential to the effective delivery of government programs and services in a multicultural society: leadership; engagement; performance; capability; responsiveness; and openness. Australian Government departments and agencies are required to apply the commitments to all relevant activities, including those conducted on behalf of Government by contractors and service delivery partners.

The Department works in partnership with the Scanlon Foundation and Community Hubs Australia to implement the National Community Hubs Program (the Hubs). Hubs provide a place for local residents, businesses and community services to help newly-arrived migrants and refugees forge connections and access support services.

In 2015 the National Community Hubs program was independently evaluated by Charles Sturt University who found that the Hubs are effective and have reached and engaged positively with newly arrived migrant families, with a combined 256,000 adult and child visits during the first half of 2015.

There are currently 39 Community Hubs in operation in primary schools and community centres across NSW, Victoria and Queensland, with many located in areas of high cultural diversity and low socioeconomic status. Approximately \$5.7 million was announced as part of the 2016-17 Federal Budget to expand the National Community Hubs Program. This investment will see the creation of up to 30 new hubs, in addition to the 39 that already exist.

The Department is building strong and resilient communities through targeted grant funding under the Strengthening Communities Activity, and will continue to do so through the new Strong and Resilient Communities grants program, which will replace the Strengthening Communities Activity from 1 January 2018. The \$18 million Strong and Resilient Communities grants support local community organisations in their efforts to overcome disadvantage and solve complex social problems.

This program will help foster community cohesion by increasing people's sense of belonging and engagement. The grants will help to strengthen the capacity of communities to become more self-reliant and empowered to address local issues. The grants program will place a greater emphasis on collaboration among organisations to develop whole-of-community approaches to emerging community challenges. They will enable community organisations to innovate service delivery and work together to better respond to changing community need.

The Department promotes the benefits of diversity by administering Harmony Day, which is celebrated each year on 21 March, to coincide with the United Nations International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination. Harmony Day celebrates Australia's cultural diversity by fostering inclusiveness, cultural respect and a sense of belonging for everyone, with the message: 'everyone belongs'. Harmony Day celebrations are strongly supported among school-aged children with sport and cultural activities, as well as sporting and community groups, local government, churches, businesses and other government agencies.

The Department is a member of the National Anti-Racism Partnership and Strategy (NARPS) which is led by the Australian Human Rights Commission. NARPS provides educational information to foster a clear understanding of what racism is, and how it can be prevented and reduced. The Strategy incorporates a central initiative – the *Racism. It Stops With Me* campaign, which is designed to empower communities and individuals to take action and help to reduce racism in the community.

In relation to the Committee's reference *h. the potential benefits and disadvantages of enshrining principles of multiculturalism in legislation*, ultimately this is a matter for the Government. However, it is worth noting that both the 2013 Joint Standing Committee on Migration's *Inquiry into Migration and Multiculturalism* as well as the Access and Equity Inquiry of 2012 considered this matter, but did not advocate for national legislation.

Similarly, it is a matter for the Government to consider whether a legislative basis for the AMC or an ongoing Multicultural Commission would be of benefit to the Australian population. If this were to be considered, it would be important to be cognisant of the structures already in place, to ensure no duplication or unnecessary bureaucracy is created. For example, the role of the Australian Human Rights Commission, and the Race Discrimination Commissioner in particular, may have some overlap with the potential role of any national Multicultural Commission. Similarly, there may be overlap with the multicultural commissions in place in several states and territories.

Conclusion

The Department is pleased to have this opportunity to demonstrate our commitment to improving the lifetime wellbeing of people and families in Australia. We look forward to examining the findings of the Committee, and to hearing many more views of Australians through the Committee process.

Attachment A

Overview of Settlement Services

The Department provides targeted settlement services to the newly arrived migrants with the highest needs — humanitarian entrants as well as eligible vulnerable migrants — in recognition of the particular barriers to integration faced by these new arrivals. These services are designed to complement, not replace, the services available to all Australians. There is recent evidence that Australia’s settlement services are generally working well and achieving their objectives in supporting vulnerable migrants to settle in Australia¹.

Humanitarian entrants over the age of five are eligible to attend an Australian Cultural Orientation (AUSCO) course before their departure for Australia. The program gives practical advice about the journey to Australia, including quarantine laws and information about what to expect post-arrival, and assists in ensuring a successful start to the client’s settlement journey.

The Humanitarian Settlement Services (HSS) Program provides early practical support to humanitarian entrants on arrival, and throughout their initial settlement period, generally for the first six to 12 months.

HSS providers work with clients to assess and identify their particular settlement needs, and deliver a tailored package of services to meet those needs. Services may include: meeting clients when they arrive, helping find suitable accommodation, initial orientation and a package of basic household goods. HSS providers also assist clients to register with Centrelink, Medicare, health services, banks and schools.

The HSS Program has an Onshore Orientation Program to assist clients to understand Australian society, laws, values, and rights and responsibilities. All HSS recipients aged 15 years and over are eligible for orientation support, and the Program is based on their individual needs and capabilities.

The Complex Case Support (CCS) Program provides specialised and intensive care management services to eligible humanitarian entrants with exceptional needs which are beyond the scope of other settlement services.

CCS is generally available for up to five years after arriving in Australia (although extensions may be given in exceptional circumstances) and includes access to a variety of services including mental and physical health, disability services, family violence intervention and support to manage accommodation, financial and legal issues.

The Free Interpreting Service assists approved service providers, such as medical practitioners and pharmacies, to communicate with eligible non-English speakers.

¹ End mission Statement by the UN Special Rapporteur on the human rights of migrants on his official visit to Australia (1-18 November 2016) and <https://www.dss.gov.au/settlement-and-multicultural-affairs/publications/evaluation-of-humanitarian-settlement-services-and-complex-case-support-programmes>

Eligible clients include Australian citizens and permanent residents who do not speak English well or at all. Select temporary residents are also eligible in certain circumstances.

The Australian Government also provides the Free Translating Service to new permanent arrivals, select temporary residents and returning Australian citizens. Through the service eligible clients can access free English translations of up to 10 personal documents, including identity records and education and employment certificates. The service is available within the first two years of visa grant or arriving to settle permanently in Australia (whichever is later).

The Settlement Grants program delivers services which assist humanitarian entrants and other vulnerable migrants in the first five years in Australia to become self-reliant and participate equitably in Australian society. The program has a focus on fostering social participation, economic well-being, independence, personal well-being and community connectedness. Settlement Grants are delivered via a three year competitive grants funding cycle.

Funded activities include casework/coordination, community coordination and development, youth settlement services and support for ethno-specific communities.

Support is also provided for migrants other than humanitarian migrants; for instance the Beginning a Life in Australia booklet (currently available in English and 39 community languages), Community Hubs and Free Translating and Interpreting Services. However, such migrants are generally expected to have other sources of settlement support (such as their employers, family members and educational institutions) and to be able to independently access mainstream support services where they are eligible to do so.