Responding to the Changing Needs of Victoria’s Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities

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Acknowledgments
I would like to respectfully acknowledge the traditional custodians of this land we are meeting on today, and pay my respects to the Elders, both past and present.

I’d also like to acknowledge:

- The Hon. James Merlino MP, Minister Assisting the Premier on Multicultural Affairs;
- Cr Anthony Griffiths, Mayor, Rural City of Wangaratta;
- George Lekakis AO, Chairperson, Victorian Multicultural Commission;
- Mr Pino Migliorino, Chairperson, Federation of Ethnic Communities’ Councils of Australia;
- Other Mayors and Councillors present; and
- I would also like to thank the Standing Committee on Local Government and Cultural Diversity who, in partnership with the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the Rural City of Wangaratta and the MAV, have organized and promoted today’s conference.

Cultural Diversity and Local Government

- Cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity is an everyday reality for all of us in local government.
- It is a significant asset for local councils and it contributes to the economic, social, political and cultural life of the local communities within all municipalities.
• Across Victoria, councils represent and serve diverse populations that are a reflection of the global community with cultural, linguistic, ethnic and religious diversity central to all aspects of every-day life.
• Local government is often viewed as the level of government most accessible and closest to the people.
• It is located within the local community and communicates and engages directly with citizens and residents on issues that are important to the local community.
• Local government provides many basic services to the community and it plays a significant role in determining how a community will develop and respond to ever changing needs and circumstances.
• Councils also play a significant role in influencing local issues, economies and communities. We are well placed to lead the development of inclusive and equitable policies and strategies.
• Multiculturalism - as a public policy - recognises, respects and celebrates cultural, linguistic and religious diversity.
• It promotes social justice and equity and fosters economic development, participation and inclusion.
• Multicultural public policy also underpins community harmony and cohesion by creating better understanding and raising awareness of the benefits of cultural diversity.

**Legislative role**

• Local government has a responsibility to meet certain legislative requirements as outlined in the Local Government Act.
• Among other things, the Act specifically states that a council must have regard to improving the overall quality of life of people in the local community; and
• ensuring that services and facilities provided by the Council are accessible and equitable.
• Some of the roles specified for councils in the Act include acting as a representative government by taking into account the diverse needs of the local community in decision making; and fostering community cohesion and encouraging active participation in civic life.
• The work that local councils undertake at the grassroots level builds the foundations for strong and healthy communities.
• For example, later today the MAV’s Positive Ageing Program Manager will detail work being done by councils within our increasingly culturally diverse ageing communities.

• This is why it’s important that the right policies, strategies and programs are in place to ensure access, equity and participation for all residents and communities.
• This includes established, new and emerging communities from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

**Embracing Difference in the Community**

• Our role is to help build strong and healthy communities free of inequality, discrimination and racism.
• If we don’t get this right everything else we try to do at the local level will fall apart, as you will have individuals and communities feeling isolated, marginalized, unsettled and unconnected.
• Collaboration and engagement with our local communities, service organizations and other agencies and governments is crucial.
• Councils should be embracing, harnessing and nurturing the ‘sleeping giant’ that is Cultural Diversity
• Realizing the potential benefits can in turn enhance the social, economic and cultural life of local communities.
• Councils should not be afraid of embracing difference, simply because they do not understand it or are not comfortable with managing difference and diversity.
• The nature of our local communities, which are becoming increasingly diverse due to the movement of populations and settlement of new migrants and refugees, speak loud and clear that diversity cannot be ignored or managed in an ad-hoc way.
• Cultural Diversity is a reality and it is good for our communities.
• “Cultural competency” needs to be recognised as a core skill and performance criteria for all of us working in local government.
• Cultural Diversity should be core business because it is our core business.

Whole of council approach

• We cannot plan, develop policies and strategies at one level and then add the ‘bits’ that relate to diversity issues as an afterthought.
• Addressing cultural diversity ought to happen as a ‘whole of council approach’ and not in isolation.
• An integrated approach will ensure all areas of council have responsibilities for incorporating cultural diversity issues into their planning processes and addressing those directly.
• My point is that cultural diversity is not something that sits on the margins, it is mainstream.
• In my view the notion of ‘mainstream’ versus ‘ethnic/multicultural is artificial’, as in reality, it does not exist
• Just take a look at the demographics of most local government areas.
• Our communities are multicultural – that is the only way to describe them
• And councils are working with this diverse “mainstream” on a daily basis.

Current practice in local government

• It’s important to acknowledge that as a whole, councils across Victoria are committed to cultural diversity and multiculturalism
• A significant number of the 79 councils have in place Cultural Diversity, Multicultural or Access and Equity policies and strategies to address the needs and aspirations of all residents including those from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
• These policies and strategies also promote equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities for all regardless of people’s ethnic, religious, or cultural backgrounds.
They also promote good community relations and foster an open, inclusive, harmonious and cohesive society.

Many examples of good practice in addressing cultural diversity can be found across the local government sector, both in metropolitan and regional Victoria.

For example:

- Projects such as those undertaken across regional Victoria under the *Global Skills for Provincial Victoria* - which aims to attract and retain new migrants and refugee families to Regional Victoria.

- This is a great example of how local councils can demonstrate leadership in developing local policies that strengthen local communities and provide increased opportunities for economic and social participation.

Other examples include:

- The development of Interfaith Networks across a number of council areas – the MAV is currently working particularly closely with Melton, Ballarat, Brimbank and Whittlesea councils to enhance their capacity to facilitate interfaith engagement in their local communities.

- The aim of these initiatives is to foster interfaith and intercultural understanding between different faiths and cultural communities.

- They also aim to maintain good community relations, community harmony and combat racism and intolerance.
Other ways that councils are embracing their commitment to cultural diversity and showing this through leadership include:

- The development of *Locally Embracing and Accepting Diversity*, or “LEAD” pilot projects by Whittlesea and Shepparton councils which we’ll hear more about from VicHealth later today.
- And signing of the VMC’s *Community Accord* by many councils over the past few years.

**Effective Responses to Cultural Diversity**

The Municipal Association of Victoria, as the peak representative body for local government, is committed through its ‘Statement of Commitment to Cultural Diversity’, to a strong local government sector in which cultural diversity is recognized, nurtured, respected and valued; where access, equity, equality, participation and inclusiveness are central elements to local government business.

We are actively playing a leadership role with respect to cultural diversity; working closely with councils to address the gaps and challenges; and to advocate to other levels of government on these important issues. For example:

- The MAV has established a *Multicultural Policy Adviser* position to support Victorian councils in this area of work.
- The MAV is active in representing local government in intergovernmental forums at State and Federal level on multicultural
policy development, settlement of migrants and refugees and more specific issues such as intergovernmental coordination on international students issues.

- We work closely with ethnic and multicultural community sector organisations to enhance our collective effectiveness, particularly in the area of ageing; including aged care services and healthy ageing.
- And we collaborate with academic research such as the Melbourne University’s Australian Research Council Linkage Project which you’ll hear more about this afternoon.

Population Policy

- The resettlement of newly arrived migrants and refugees in regional Victoria is an issue that many of our regional councils would like more engagement from the Federal and State Governments on.
- Many of our regional councils look to more effective engagement between our three levels of government to achieve their growth objectives and to address gaps in local labour markets.

- The Federal (Caretaker) Minister for Sustainable Population, Tony Burke has recently guaranteed the direct involvement of local government in the membership of three panels to advise to the Australian Government on sustainable population issues. This of course, is entirely dependent on the Caretaker Government securing the support of the independents to form a new Government.
- However, regardless of who forms our next Federal Government, the MAV will advocate that it is critical to include local government at the table in any national discussions about population strategies.
- Our interactions with our communities means that we are best placed to offer insights into regional differences which is a strongly emerging theme in the current population debate. Councils can also provide advice on diverse community opinion, as well as opportunities and challenges associated with population growth.
Summary

- The good work that is already happening in local councils should be acknowledged and commended, however there are still many gaps and challenges that need to be met.
- I encourage all councils to consider the benefits of effectively addressing cultural diversity and the importance of ensuring all members of our community have opportunities to participate in decision making processes and access our services and programs.
- The value and the implications of cultural diversity policies, which promote access and equity, should not be underestimated by our sector.
- Specifically it is important that we address the lack of consistency in approach to cultural diversity between councils.
- To achieve this, the local government sector must be supported and resourced to fully realize the development and implementation of sustainable policies and strategies addressing Cultural Diversity.
- The Federal and State Governments need to support local government, and strengthen and further develop the role that can be played by peak bodies such as the MAV in facilitating a consistent state-wide approach to cultural diversity.
- The 2003 report *Local Governments’ Response to Cultural Diversity in Victoria – Access, Services, Support, Respect* highlighted that both a state-wide approach and a response by the individual councils is required to ensure good outcomes are achieved.
• Equally the Interface Council’s Workshop held in August 2006 reinforced the findings of the 2003 report and made a number of recommendations to strengthen and further develop local government’s response to cultural diversity.

• These themes were further progressed at our last conference of this type hosed by the City of Whittlesea in South Morang in November 2007.

• No matter how large or small the culturally diverse population is at any one municipality, councils need to have mechanisms in place, or approach the way they respond to the needs of all members of their communities in an inclusive and meaningful way.

• In the future, our sector is going to be faced with more, rather than less cultural diversity challenges and it is paramount that we build on current good practice and develop a sustainable framework for local government to effectively coordinate the development and implementation of responsive policies and initiatives.

I look forward to engaging with you through today’s program which will help to inform the MAV’s sectoral leadership on multicultural policy development.

Thank you.

ENDS