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The Committee Manager
Legislative Assembly Legal and Social Issues Committee
Parliament House, Spring Street
EAST MELBOURNE VIC 3002

30 November 2021

Dear Committee Manager,

RE: INQUIRY INTO SUPPORT FOR OLDER VICTORIANS FROM MIGRANT AND REFUGEE BACKGROUNDS

Moreland City Council welcomes the opportunity to provide input into the *Legal and Social Issues Standing Committee's Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrants and refugee backgrounds*. With two thirds of our older residents born overseas and speaking a total of 67 languages, Council is committed to developing inclusive services, advocating for adequate supports and working in partnership with our community to meet their diverse needs.

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the needs of older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds and exposed a system of under-servicing for migrant and refugee communities when it came to health, employment, housing, and family support (ECCV, 2021). While we do not yet know the long-term impacts of COVID-19, we have evidence indicating that Moreland's residents will continue to feel the effects of the pandemic for many years. Providing culturally appropriate, well-resourced and equitable support systems and opportunities for social connection will be critical as we plan for recovery from the pandemic.

Moreland has a long-standing commitment to social justice and inclusion, supported by our Council Plan 2021-2025, Moreland Social Cohesion Plan 2020-2025, Living and Ageing Well in Moreland: An Age-friendly Framework and Moreland Human Rights Policy 2016-2026 (see attachment).

- Our recently adopted [Council Plan \(2021-2025\)](#) acknowledges the importance of strategically planning for the health and wellbeing of our community, including a commitment to 'Continue to invest in services for older people to ensure access to services that meet their needs' (24).
- Council's [Moreland Social Cohesion Plan 2020- 2025](#) provides a framework for enhancing social cohesion by strengthening relationships and developing opportunities for cultural and social connection.
- More specifically, Council's [Living and Ageing Well in Moreland: An Age-Friendly Framework](#) aims to increase the age-friendliness of Moreland for all older people, with a focus on equitable access and inclusion – understanding and responding to the diverse needs of Moreland's older people.

- Our [Moreland Human Rights Policy](#) commits Council to respecting and celebrating the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity of the community and provides a framework for ensuring services and programs are accessible, equitable and inclusive.
- Moreland City Council also provides important direct support services for older people including personal care, household tasks and general home care, assisted shopping, home maintenance and modification, respite, delivered meals, community transport, social support and access and support.
- We work collaboratively with local aged and community services and in partnership with settlement services across the municipality. Council convene an active Multicultural Settlement Network which aims to identify and respond to local needs and coordinate services and supports across Moreland.
- Council has developed a Community Connector model and that has been funded as part of Victorian Government Cultural and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) Communities Taskforce by the Department of Families Fairness and Housing (DFFH) to deliver the Local Partnership Model Supporting Moreland’s multicultural communities through coronavirus (COVID-19) project. Engagement and support of older residents and groups from non-English speaking backgrounds has been a core part of this response, including working with over 70 of our senior citizen groups as well as the Asylum Seeker Welcome centre to distribute COVID-19 information and support.

Our Moreland Community

Moreland City Council is located on the lands and waterways of the Wurundjeri people, in the inner north of Melbourne and consists of a richly diverse community, including a large population of older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

Older people in Moreland from migrant and refugee backgrounds at a glance
61% Older people born overseas
26% Italy
10.9% Greece
3% Malta
2.5% Lebanon
1.3% Egypt
23% Spoken English barriers
100 Languages spoken
65% Older people from migrant backgrounds no formal education
48% aged care clients in Moreland speak a language other than English ¹

¹ Summary of demographic information on older persons and Moreland City Council clients, Moreland Strategy and Research Unit, April 2021

5428 People living alone with no internet access

29% People living with severe disability

1000-1500 People in need, but not accessing care services

49% of falls in older people at home require hospitalisation

41% older couples without children in housing stress

Responding to the Terms of Reference

(a) adequacy of services for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds;

Moreland Council has identified that the support needs of many older people in Moreland are not being met. There is a Government policy drive and a community desire to 'age-in-place' however cultural and language-appropriate services are not meeting current demand, and this will continue to grow. The major trends and factors influencing service adequacy for this cohort are:

Cultural expectations and language influence service take up

Many older migrants have cultural expectations that family will play the caring role as they age. They can often have limited understanding and acceptance of formal support services available to them. In some cases, contemporary western care systems contradict traditional cultural practices, which can create conflict.

*'I haven't thought much about services, but now that you mention it, I'd like to stay at home. **The Chinese culture is to stay home, with family supporting.** This is a much better environment than going to a nursing home. **I don't get any services.** I moved here because my son lives here. I go where he goes. When I arrived, I didn't even know I could get services. **As a resident I try not to be a burden for the system'** Mandarin speaker, 70 years*

CALD services are not meeting local demand

CALD-specific services are best placed to meet this cohort's support needs. Our diverse community requires services and staff with deep local knowledge, relationships, and cultural understanding to meet needs and maintain health and wellbeing. However, Moreland requires more service providers, catering to a wider range of cultural groups, and more capacity to meet demand. The majority of local CALD support services are full. They are not offering new client places and have closed their waiting lists. These services require more support and funding to meet the needs of our community.

Meeting the needs of new and emerging groups

With Moreland's wide diversity, it's a challenge for service providers to meet everyone's language and cultural needs. This has particular consequences for new and emerging groups with only a small number of people in the local area and older refugees with unique psychosocial needs. Providers are unable to develop services for these people, increasing the likelihood they will be isolated and unsupported.

Older refugees arriving in Australia for example, face greater settlement needs due to recent trauma, higher degree of chronic illness and in some cases complex psychosocial adjustment requirements. Caring practices need to be considerate of mental health needs and it is important that efforts are

taken to minimise re-traumatisation. Cultural concerns can impact acceptance of care services, particularly from government providers due to previous negative experiences.

An undersupply of appropriate and qualified aged care workers

The aged care sector is not attracting a sufficient number of qualified bicultural workers to meet demand. Staff numbers are low, and providers are unable to fill staff vacancies.

(b) unique challenges faced by this cohort, including, but not limited to, social isolation, civic participation, digital literacy, elder abuse and access to culturally appropriate aged care and home care services; and

Social isolation and civic/community participation

Social isolation continues to be major issue facing older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Moreland is unique in its large cultural and social diversity; however, this can make it difficult to connect and network with people who share the same cultural, language and lived experiences. Our research has found that many older people only connect with their family and that language barriers and a lack of understanding of the local culture, means people don't know what is available or how to find details about it.

'Even though people have relatives around, they don't have any other relationships. They need somebody to talk to, to communicate with. The kids don't have the time to sit down and talk to their parents. We sit for 2 or 3 hours and just talk about the past. Their time in Greece, in their youth. They want a sympathetic ear'. Greek Organisation Volunteer Visitor

This isolation has been significantly compounded by the pandemic. Research conducted by Council with local service providers throughout the pandemic uncovered a range of issues facing older people from Migrant and Refugee backgrounds¹. The most persistent issue reported was significant social and wellbeing stress due to the pandemic. Research indicated that community members reported high rates of social isolation. Local service providers reported older community members feeling "isolated, anxious and scared" (Fawkner Service provider). With services providers indicating a dramatic need to increase social wellbeing programs to fill this void. This was complicated by lack of digital literacy and infrastructure, making it difficult to connect to friends and family via mainstream digital technology.

This pandemic has done the worst thing - the daily things we used to do in life, no longer can we go and share these things' Spiro, 85, Greek speaker

'There are lots of older people living alone without connection to their family or community. The government has a policy of 'ageing-in-home'. So, any initiatives in this regard we support, particularly to combat loneliness. I talk to people every day and hear them crying on the phone. It is very very bad for people at the moment. Particularly for those without English. They don't know how to get services and even can't go to church.' Older Italian community leader

The Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) research highlighted that disturbingly, the social isolation for seniors continued even after the easing of restrictions, as many stopped going out to socialise due to introduction of the QR codes check-in process.

As COVID-19 restrictions ease, there is a need to build confidence among older people from non-English speaking communities to return to social activities and provide opportunities for connection.

Accessible information and service access

23% of older people in Moreland report spoken-English language barriers, many of whom are illiterate in both English and their first language.

A lack of accessible information and unapproachable systems make it difficult for older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to connect with service providers.

Information is not CALD appropriate and there are limited non-digital options available.

Centralised static information from governments fails to tap into the way the older CALD community gathers information. Rather information is shared through informal social networks – in-person or in messaging groups.

'I get my information mainly from friends exchanging Arabic news. I have a language barrier speaking English. So mainly we exchange news on mobile phone. Language barrier is the hardest thing. My family take me to appointments' male, 73, Arabic migrant

COVID-19 has reduced the ability to visit to physical buildings or spaces to seek out information. Local, community-based information points are key in sharing information. For example, staff at a local post office with language skills are viewed as a trusted source as opposed to using a telephone to call a government agency. Additionally, translation services add additional barriers and are impractical.

'I speak Arabic, so local residents are always coming in with a letter from the Government asking me to translate it. I'm happy to have a chat with people' Australia Post staff member

'Council is a visible building that people can walk into. You know that there will be someone there who can help you. This is the problem with My Aged Care. They're only a website' Aged Care sector advocate

'No one will ring a service just to ask a short question. You wait half an hour just to be connected. So people just go without knowing' Older Italian bicultural worker

The digital divide in Moreland has been magnified during the pandemic. Households without internet access, those who struggle to afford access to the internet and others who don't have the skills to be digitally literate were all extremely vulnerable during COVID-19. A significant number of these households were older residents from non-English speaking communities. Issues included lack of ownership/access to devices, lack of digital literacy and affordability to access the internet.

"I got a letter from the hospital, and it said I needed to have blood tests – I had to get my neighbour to read it. I didn't know what sort of blood tests they were, so I could use the iPad to look up what the tests were and get some more information about them before I had them." Digital mentoring Initiative project participant

Elder Abuse

Moreland Council is active participants in the Northern Region Elder Abuse Prevention Network, as well as sitting on the Integrated Model of Care for Responding to Elder Abuse, the Council is also the convenor of [the Moreland Family Violence network](#) attended by around 20 local and regional support services.

COVID-19 has limited the reporting of elder abuse due to the lack of contact and isolation and lack of in home services has meant that opportunity for informal interactions and observations has further isolated our older people. These types of opportunities for visual observations in their home

environment restricts the ability to raise any concerns and provide options to be supported through their challenging times.

Our older CALD community members are even more restricted in their ability to seek support, we have had an increased number of referrals via Victoria Police raising issues caused by family members moving home, increased stress levels, carer stressors creating challenging family relationships. The reluctance for people to accept services in the home has also created increase stress level on carers leading to concerns of elder abuse.

Council Assessment and Program Staff also raised the concern that GP's should play a bigger role in supporting older people to seek support in Elder Abuse Prevention, but appear to either be under equipped with resources or lack knowledge on how to manage the situations or even assessment of issues raised by their patients which can often lead to acceptance of unacceptable ongoing situations.

The lack of appropriately trained culturally specific workers to provide supports further isolates individual's ability to seek support and advise. The opportunity to challenge and educate our CALD Community on Elder Abuse of what is acceptable and unacceptable behaviour from their family member and how they can be supported to get assistance.

Lack of access to appropriate information in their community languages, lack of access to technology and the ability to connect using the technology to get support. Literacy even in their own language often is a contributing factor in continuing to stay in Elder Abuse situations.

Frontline case workers have reported an increase in the severity and complexity of family violence experienced during COVID lockdowns while the overall number of clients decreased. This indicates that clients experienced barriers to accessing support in a timely manner during COVID lockdowns.

Case workers expect an increase in demand in coming months as COVID-related service restrictions ease and clients may find it easier to access support, as was the case after Melbourne's previous months-long lockdown that ended 12 months ago.

Frontline workers' experience is consistent with media reports regarding the significant increase in the number of family violence online searches by Ask Izzy [here](#) and in relation to Google searches [here](#). Additional information about the impact on older people regarding family violence during COVID lockdowns has been provided by Seniors Rights Victoria (SRV) [here](#).

This report highlights an increase in requests for information and support regarding family violence while there was a decline in the total number of calls received. It is believed that social isolation, with fewer family, friends and professionals able to witness potentially abusive behaviours and calling SRV was a factor. Of particular concern was a 30% decrease in calls from clients born overseas, and a 38% decrease in clients requiring an interpreter.

(c) ideas to advance the physical and mental health and wellbeing of Victoria's multicultural seniors including global best practices

A range of programs and services provided within Moreland show promise in increasing the health, wellbeing and access of older migrants and refugees to services and supports.

- **The Moreland Community connector program** worked in partnership with bicultural workers and older people to engage directly with the community. Connectors were directly involved in designing and delivery appropriate messages to their communities, through target non-traditional and emerging channels.
- The **Local Partnership Model** in the Moreland supplying targeted engagement and support for priority CALD communities in response to COVID-19 currently being delivered by Council

shows promise by partnering with cultural community groups and settlement services to provide culturally appropriate, tailored information and support to older people from migrant backgrounds. Moreland's Senior Citizens Groups are reporting high vaccination take-up as a result.

- Council is developing a **pilot aged care navigation service** to explore how we can better support our diverse older population to understand the aged care system and increase access services.
- Moreland's Aged + Community Care and Moreland Library Service collaborated on a 12-week **pilot program to increase digital literacy amongst older community members** in the home. Participants received a loan of an iPad or tablet and 2GB data/month and were visited in-the-home, by home support workers to teach and support clients in learning digital literacy skills.

Recommendations

1. To effectively address the needs of older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds all levels of government, the corporate, private and community sectors need to work in partnership. This will ensure that policy, funding, programs, services and governance have the capacity to deliver the services needed.
2. Resource and support community navigation (bicultural) capacity so residents from non-English speaking backgrounds can effectively navigate the service system and access appropriate services, particularly the My Aged Care system.
3. Expand culturally specific aged care settlement program for older people, to assist them to understand the aged care service system and integrate into their local community in a meaningful way.
4. Support an employment pathway for bilingual and bicultural workers in the aged care sector.
5. Champion community representatives from migrant and refugee communities to inform development of programs, services, and policies. Appoint local facilitators who represent the communities they serve and continue to support age-friendly reference groups.
6. There is a need to ensure culturally appropriate services are available, accessible and inclusive for older community members. Resource bi-cultural supports within local government and community services and build the capacity of settlement services to better support older people.
7. Funding of interpreters for community and aged care services, including food and material relief providers, family violence/elder abuse services and other community-based services.
8. Ensure the 'ageing in home' services are culturally appropriate.
9. Partner with Local Government, Libraries, Neighbourhood Houses and Settlement Services to build on existing digital inclusion programs to provide affordable access to devices and increased digital literacy among older non-English speaking communities. This should be provided in a range of languages.
10. Prioritise the needs of older refugee and migrant communities in COVID-19 recovery. Specifically, provide accessible information about opportunities to re-engage in social and community activities and partner with local organisations and senior groups to provide community connection opportunities.

11. Ensure culturally appropriate communication and engagement methods are used and promoted. For example, Plain English, accessible resources appropriately translated in consultation with, and distributed through, community organisations, culturally specific media and other communication avenues.
12. Increase volunteer and community-contribution opportunities to provide social support to older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
13. Develop better responses to elder abuse among older migrant and refugee communities including capacity building of GPs and other health professionals, provision of community education in language and partnering with service providers to identify and respond to abuse early on.

For further information please contact Leanne Giardina, Acting Manager of Aged and Community Support on 9240 1206.

Yours sincerely



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