

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Melbourne—Monday, 28 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

WITNESS

Ms Kris Pavlidis, Chair, Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria.

The CHAIR: Good afternoon. 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. All mobile phones should be turned to silent at this point. I welcome Kris Pavlidis, the Chair of the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria. 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, those comments may not be protected by this privilege. All evidence given today is protected and recorded by Hansard to my right. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. Verified transcripts, PowerPoint presentations or any handouts will be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to proceed with a brief 5 to 10-minute opening statement to the Committee, which will be followed by questions from the Committee. Welcome, Kris.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Good. Thank you, Natalie. It is a pleasure to be here. Yes, I am Kris Pavlidis, the Chairperson with the ECCV. I am also a local government councillor in the City of Whittlesea, which is in the northern suburbs and has one of the highest CALD communities there. So thank you very much for this opportunity. I think it is really important given the topic that we are discussing. You would have had opportunity to receive and maybe look through our policy paper. This paper was done—and we have got Masha sitting there, the policy officer, who produced the paper—in close consultation with a number of specialist organisations, like VICSEG, who have that as their remit.

So there are three main points that I wanted to bring to the table today. The overarching theme is equity in access. In talking about that, it has been branded for a long time and it is a bit of a motherhood statement. So breaking that down, there are three things that we are suggesting we look at. Firstly, there is the model that has been operating for ever and ever. Given that the demographic profile in Melbourne, Victoria, is changing so rapidly, the issues that are surfacing and not necessarily that different, but I am calling it that the symptoms certainly are. So we have got new issues that are presenting from smaller cohorts, new and emerging communities. Even though the numbers of these communities are small, their issues are certainly a lot more intense because of what they are bringing with them, where they have come from, their understanding or lack of understanding of systemic models that we take for granted. So one suggestion is that we need to look at maybe the current model that is in operation of direct service provision and whether it is doing what we want it to do, in particular for this vulnerable cohort. So when I say 'the cohort', I am putting everyone into one basket, but effectively new and emerging communities are not a homogenous people, we know that—the intersectionality of all the different variables that play differently on all of those communities. In looking at reviewing the model we are also saying that we probably need to look at the early years framework as well. So the framework is there. It is good to guide the service delivery, but how do we hold people, service providers, whether it is local government and/or other agencies, to account? How do they become accountable? They are being guided by the framework, yes, but I know—I live it in a bureaucracy on a regular basis—it is easy to tick off, but what does that tick-off delivery really deliver and to what degree and is it really reaching those very vulnerable cohorts who are falling through the cracks? So that is the first thing.

The second thing was building the capacity of the community in order to be able to navigate the system that we, once again, take for granted—and we do, and that is for obvious reasons—building their capacity in terms of information dissemination so that they are aware that this model is there. A lot of new communities do not even know that it is there. A little example just recently locally was libraries, that they are free of charge, that a family can come into the library and bring their children, they can access the toy library, they can go and borrow books. The family was astounded that they could do this, and that opens up a whole lot of doors there—connectivity, the social isolation, all of that stuff that we take for granted. So we need information dissemination in written format, in multilingual format—but it does not start and stop there because, as we know, a lot of the multilingual stuff assumes literacy of people. We cannot do that, because a lot of people are coming to the table with no literacy in their own language let alone in the English language, so that is a very important consideration. We need skill training and skill transference so that they are able to maybe build their capacity not just to navigate the system but to participate in the system. Again, we take it for granted that

everyone has the confidence to be able to do that; well, many people do not. We need to be building them up so that the employability of these people is also ticked off, and that means building them as a resource base in the service delivery of this model so that we are building up people in terms of their skills and their training so that they can then be employed from the community, from the grassroots, because they have the cultural-specific and linguistic-specific expertise to bring that to the table. It is very important.

The third thing was the relationship with local government. Local government is flaunted as the closest level of government to the people. You know, we have all heard that. Well, we are. I can be at the dentist with my kids and there they are, or I can be in the supermarket in that aisle and they will be in that aisle, but they will find me—and that is okay. People out there do not understand the different tiers of government—generally they do not. They just think if you are there and you are a face for them, then you are going to hear all about it. In terms of service delivery, it is maternal and child health, it is the playgroups and it is the preschool stuff. That all falls under the remit of local government. So how do we activate local government's role so that it works in real partnership and collaboration, not just with other levels of government but very importantly with grassroots? By mobilising community at the grassroots level so that they are having direct input, collaboration and discussion, the dialogue is happening about what the issues are out there, and local government takes that on board. I know in local government we say that we are working with vulnerable families. Okay. So for example in the City of Whittlesea we have got a 78 per cent uptake, participatory rate, in the preschool space, but what happens to that other 22 per cent? It is a smaller percentage and a smaller cohort of people, but the needs are intense needs which need a targeted approach. Where are we holding that to account? I can ask the questions at that chamber table in local government, but you are sort of removed from the bureaucracy somewhat. Where do they go with that? Who holds them to account? How do we know that these very vulnerable people, who are trying to settle out there, are getting the kind of attention that they need and deserve? I might stop there.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Kris, for coming along and sharing your vast experience with us, which is fantastic. You are wearing two hats, which is really good. So thank you for that information. We have heard a lot about the value of playgroups during these hearings, not just in Melbourne metro but out in the rural and regional areas as well, and what a critical part they are playing for CALD children and their families. Do you see a role for multicultural playgroups specifically, and if so, how do you see that working?

Ms PAVLIDIS: Absolutely I do, Chris. I just think that is a given, you know. Because if we are talking about people who are not engaging, first of all that model of playgroup is a little bit foreign to many people, but there is a synergy. You know, people were doing stuff in their country of origin that was similar to a playgroup model; it is just that they did not call it playgroup. It was not institutionalised. Again it is going back, Chris, in my view, to these people at the grassroots level. Let us talk to them and let us see what their understanding of caring for a child is. You know that cliché that says—I am trying to remember how it goes. It takes a—

Ms COUZENS: Yes, it takes a village to raise a child.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Yes, yes. Well, that is happening in different shapes, forms and scales, but it is happening. That is what people are doing. They are extending that a little bit to the grandparents' role and having playgroups with grandparents, where a lot of the extended family or the aunt, but often a grandparent, is doing a lot of that caring and supporting them in that role too. If you are bringing that extended family component in, it has got to be multilingual or bilingual; it has got to be. I think there is an absolutely invaluable role for playgroups. That was your question?

Ms COUZENS: Yes. Thank you. My other question is around local government. We have heard that with local government some do it great, some do it okay and some do it really badly. Do you see a consistent role in local government, in terms of good services, as the only way that it could be delivered on the ground?

Ms PAVLIDIS: Look, inherent in that there are a couple of issues, because you are right. We have 79 LGAs. If you are talking about the multicultural space, I can tell you confidently because I used to sit on the MAV's—the Municipal Association of Victoria's—multicultural advisory committee for years. But now they have got rid of it, which is another issue. But it was always the same faces. It was like you were having talkfests with each other all the time and we were saying the same things. It is 2019, and for 30 years we have been saying the same thing. We have made a little progress. I would say 12 of the LGAs stand out to my mind who

even enter that space. We had people that would come to one meeting and say, 'Oh, we don't have ethnic issues'. This is in Victoria!

Ms COUZENS: I did say some do it good, some do it bad.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Yes, well, that is right. You have got one extreme perspective to the other. I think it does need a coordinated approach. You know when we were talking multicultural, VMC used to do—this is a few years back—the whole-of-government approach where that report was commissioned. The whole idea behind that was to infiltrate at all levels of bureaucracy so it is not just sitting in one, 'Oh, let's just handball it to the multis, they'll take care of it'.

I always say as long as it is treated as on the periphery that is reflected in the periphery budget, and therefore you are always going to stay there. And I have said this to Dan Andrews when we talk about multiculturalism. It is the mainstream in Victoria, and I said once, 'How do you negotiate that, Dan, in a monocultural regime?'. He goes, 'What do you mean?'. I said, 'Well, let's talk about local governments, because that is something I am comfortable with'. Because that is the reality, you know? So I think local government needs to be held accountable more than it does. There is not consistency, absolutely there is not, but they get away with it.

People vote people in for a whole range of reasons. Some of them have told me, 'Oh, it's because of who looks best on the ballot paper'.

Mr TAK: That is the reality.

Ms PAVLIDIS: People do not really scratch below the surface. When you have got LGAs saying to you, 'We don't have an ethnic issue', I mean, what does that mean? I had to say to one of our directors recently, 'You're a white Anglo male. Do you not have culture?', because he said to me, 'You can't use that word because you'll offend all the white Anglo women'. I went, 'What?'. And all I said was you need to put a cultural lens over the agenda equity stream. You cannot use that word in 2019.

Coordinated approach: yes, absolutely. Again, look, there are some LGAs that have got a higher population of young families—because we are talking about early childhood—where the issues are more prevalent and there is a lot more targeted attention. But when you are talking about the multicultural space in general, I could talk for ages.

Ms COUZENS: Do you see the MAV as having a role in that?

Ms PAVLIDIS: Well, you know, Chris, I am a bit cynical. Maybe I have been doing this for too long. Who is here from the MAV?

Ms COUZENS: That is all right, they are not here.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Not here? All right. Can they hear me out there?

The CHAIR: No, it is in Hansard.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Oh, that is all right. They know what I think anyway.

MAV is meant to be the peak body, you know, representing local government, and in my view it needs to do a lot more about demonstrating leadership on a whole range of issues. You know, walking the talk—I know it is easier to sit back and criticise, but I have been living this. This is my 14th year, so I have seen. Yes, some steps have been made, but in this space I think MAV does have a role to play. Again, the local government sector is not a homogenous group of people. We keep saying that, and like you said very eloquently, 'You've got there, there and there', and that is pretty accurate.

Different issues—some councils do it better than others. Darebin likes to think of themselves—they get rid of all the controversial issues, don't they? They tackle them head-on, but then there is consequence. There is a way to do things. It is very important to bring the community with us; we have always got to bring the community with us. With any change you want to implement, if people are not taking ownership of the change, well, you have got an uphill battle.

Ms COUZENS: We have heard a bit about interpreter services, as I said, in metro and regional and rural communities and the difficulty in accessing those services. Firstly, is it your understanding that there is an issue out there? If so, how do we meet those challenges to ensure that right from the very beginning those families are getting the information as to where to access their kindergarten, how to access interpreter services, how to get their kinder forms of 15 pages completed, all of those things?

Ms PAVLIDIS: I know you are asking me about interpreter services, Chris, but what came to mind real quickly was going back to the fundamental basic issue, which is survival settlement. When they are arriving here, particularly for the new and emerging communities but even some that have been here for a little longer and are still struggling to navigate the system, I think we need to be looking at the role we all have at different levels of government and community in assisting them to settle and how we best support them or better support people—families and individuals—to settle effectively. So when they are struggling with all the basic things—like shelter, the accommodation stuff, the income source, getting the kids to school, getting employment very importantly—sometimes the preschool stuff takes a backburner role or gets distracted because they are struggling with this very basic stuff that they have got to contend with.

Interpreting and translating services, I think people are very resourceful when they are helped a little bit—just a little bit—in networking, finding other people in their community or in a similar community who make them feel a little bit more comfortable and settled and confident therefore. Then you start that kind of information flow. Interpreters, translators, hospitals—the institutions like to think they have them, and they do to some extent. There is a lot of competition now—you know, the other kinds of services that have popped up here and there. I hear about the backlog. I hear about the quality. I hear about professionalism—how far does the interpreter get involved in the dialogue and give their view when they should not? I come from that era where I was the interpreter, you know? We were all, weren't we? I mean, how hard was that. Sorry, but it was! Because when there is suddenly a power imbalance and you are being dragged along to legal appointments and I have got to have the legal jargon in Greek—well, I do not have it. My Greek is okay but it is not jargonistic with legal. So do they take their children? I do not know. I still go into different things where they go around looking for interpreters because they have not booked a professional interpreter. What was your question, sorry?

Ms COUZENS: Just what the issues are around interpreters and translation for families.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Can I just say with translation that sometimes I read in Greek the translations and I am going, 'Whoa'. You think, 'Where did you get this from?'. It is really removed. It does not need to be jargonistic, it just needs to have the essence of the message you are trying to transfer across. So yes, there is always room for improving.

Mr TAK: Just before I ask my question I would just like to continue with interpreting and translation. I know that the State Government is providing scholarships to prospective candidates in conjunction with RMIT, but they could not find enough candidates to form a class at their different levels. But sometimes the issue comes back to trust—there are trust issues in terms of the interpreter and the recipient.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Absolutely. I think because if people are engaging a professional—I know they are professional interpreters, but you are bringing an external into your very intimate personal space. But even within their own communities—you might have found this—people hesitate. I have got a social work background, so when I used to practice clinically, people in the Greek community did not want—

Mr TAK: The Greeks.

Ms PAVLIDIS: No, because they do not want you knowing their issues, you know? So there is a bit of that going on. Plus it is always a big thing. I do not know how you get around it because when you are dealing with very complicated matters, if they are legal matters, you really need someone that is removed from you and is a professional, qualified interpreter. Did you mean recruiting, sorry?

Mr TAK: Yes, that is right. And what you see sometimes, for example, in the Burmese Myanmar there are a different sub-ethnic groups that are rivals with each other, so that is also another issue.

Ms PAVLIDIS: That is another layer.

Mr TAK: So to come back to my question, you talked about, ‘Let’s talk to them’. From the ECCV, from the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria, which way or what are the key sorts of points or which organisations do you talk to in order to engage with them? Community leaders, schools?

Ms PAVLIDIS: Can I just clarify, is that for recruiting interpreters or just generally?

Mr TAK: No, generally.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Generally. Well, ECCV engages really well. We have got an organisational member base, not individual people, of about 220 organisations, and if you multiply that by their membership, it is about 70 000 people. So the network is there. It has been established over a long period of time. There is a level of trust. So when we hold a members’ forum people come. The cliché is you go out to where the people are; do not expect them to come to you. So going out to their communities where they are comfortable, where they meet—whether it is around places of faith, whether it is around their cultural events that are important in their calendar—I do not think that is hard. We do it. That is not really a challenge at the moment. Well, I should not speak too soon. It is not difficult to do. I do not know if I have answered your question.

Mr TAK: Yes, that is fine.

The CHAIR: I just had a question in relation to increasing our workforce to better reflect our diverse communities, and I suppose the role that each level of government can play. Some are doing it better than others. We are still finding in many workplaces, organisations, departments, and in particular in this area, there continues to be a challenge in recruiting culturally diverse members of our community.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Sorry, Natalie, are you referring specifically to the early childhood sector or in general?

The CHAIR: In general, but there continues to be a challenge to attract—I suppose what are some of the things Government can do, and I do not just mean state but also federal and local government and organisations, to recruit—whether it is in programs, mentoring, scholarships—to better reflect our diverse communities?

Ms PAVLIDIS: Well, it is all of that that you just said, Natalie. I will start with local government. If it is not in policy, it will not be implemented. So we develop the policies and we make sure we push at our chamber table to make sure the policy is saying, ‘This, this, this and that’, because often bureaus do not get it—bureaucracy—or they do not think it is as important. That is where we have a role, the elected people, to go, ‘This is our community out there. It needs to be reflected here’. Whether you call it affirmative action practices, like what has happened in cabinet in the State Parliament at least; that has had a huge impact, I think. Sometimes you need a concerted effort. There are the pros and cons about quotas or whatever we call it, but sometimes you need that. We are still trying to play catch-up. You just outlined that really well. We are. You can look at whatever sector—women in general, but then the other minority, which is people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

As we know, there are certain sectors that are better represented in particular areas of expertise, but generally mentoring is really important. I think we are doing that at the ECCV now. We have the Intercultural Young Advocacy Leaders program. That is a group of 12 culturally diverse young people. They are all doing their own thing, but it is exposing them to this level of leadership, if you want to call it that—sort of succession planning. But not just saying, ‘Come and sit at our board table and at our meeting’. We were at the FECCA conference in Hobart. They get up there and they do their presentation in front of 500 delegates. I mean, these are kids—well, they are not kids, they are young adults—who normally would not have that opportunity, so it is opening that door.

Last year as the mayor I did this thing called Walk with the Mayor, and I went out and targeted the high schools I went to. I sort of had a bit of a bias, sorry, to women, because I thought there are a lot of young women who do not get this opportunity. I went to an Islamic school, I went to a Catholic school, I went to a public school to get that cross thing, and they loved it. I brought them in to Parliament. They met with different ministers. They loved all that. But they had never done it before. So mentoring—real mentoring is so important. We had Josh Bull launch our IYAL inaugural forum on Thursday and somebody from the floor put to him, ‘Would you be open to having somebody in your office for a’—what do they call it?

Ms SETTLE: Intern.

The CHAIR: Work experience.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Like an intern, yes. Well, he had to say yes. But that opens doors. Parliament is over there, and even council, they only go there if they absolutely have to to pay their rates—they would just never go there. Once you are getting people in the door it breaks down a lot of that intimidation.

The CHAIR: If I could just add to that—and this is something that I have asked previously to a couple of presenters—would you support the notion of having a quota for CALD communities? Government, as you have rightly said, have been on the front foot for AA, so you know where I am going with the question of having a quota for cultural and linguistic backgrounds. And of course merit would be part of the process, but trying to increase in the short to medium term and having that as policy through government.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Absolutely, Natalie, and I think what you said about merit is crucial, because it is not just being tokenistic, ‘There’s an empty vacant seat. Let’s put someone in there because they tick off’. No, because then that backfires big time. It is like when you are recruiting for local government, and we are in that process at the moment for next year. We have got party-endorsed candidates up there. I have been saying the same thing: it is not just about picking whoever because we need somebody who looks like that. We have got to make sure people are coming to the table with something. They have got to be offering something. It is not just because they want a title. Many people do just want that. We know that. So I think there needs to be a concerted effort and a considered approach to recruiting properly and effectively. But before we even recruit, perhaps supporting people so that they have got capacity built in in some way—

The CHAIR: Confidence.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Yes, the personal things about confidence, but also the skill. What are they bringing to the table? We did a thing at ECCV earlier this year where I did a bit of what I call a stocktake of the directors sitting around the table and identified where we had gaps. So we needed legal, we needed accounting and now we have co-opted people. We needed South Sudanese. Yes, it is a tick-off, but we have got Maker who is a South Sudanese barrister, so he is now co-opted onto our board. We have got Nikki Jain from the Indian community who is an accountant. It is not hard to do; it just needs a commitment, I think, to it and you do it. But also people need to know—you know there is that clichéd saying about women that you have got to see it to be—

The CHAIR: ‘You can’t be what you can’t see’.

Ms PAVLIDIS: That, yes. Look, I will tell you something, Nat, I never saw it. And you can go out and find it, but you need guidance, you need support, and I think we all have got a role to play in that.

The CHAIR: Absolutely. Thank you. You have answered my question adequately.

Thank you very much, Kris, for presenting today. It has been a fantastic presentation. I thank the Ethnic Communities Council of Victoria on behalf of our Committee. Your submission has been very valuable. We will now deliberate and take into consideration all submissions. Next year our final report will tabled in Parliament with some strong recommendations. Again I take the opportunity to thank you today for not only giving us one perspective but also the local government perspective as well.

Ms PAVLIDIS: Thank you, each and every one of you—all of you—for the opportunity. I think it is such an important milestone in a person’s life that we have got to do it properly, and if anything it does need the resource base to be able to do it.

The CHAIR: Again, thanks for all the work that you do.

Ms PAVLIDIS: We do it because we believe in it—pushing the proverbial uphill! Thanks to all of you.

The CHAIR: Thanks, Kris. Good on you.

Witness withdrew.