

TRANSCRIPT

LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY LEGAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES COMMITTEE

Inquiry into Early Childhood Engagement of CALD Communities

Bendigo—Wednesday, 23 October 2019

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WITNESS

Mr Mark Hands, Chief Executive Officer, Goldfields Library Corporation.

The CHAIR: I declare open the public hearings for the Legal and Social Issues Committee's Inquiry into early childhood engagement of cultural and linguistic diverse communities. All mobile phones should be turned to silent. I welcome Mark Hands, the Chief Executive Officer of Goldfields Libraries, here today. 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 recorded by Hansard. You will be provided with a proof version of the transcript for you to check as soon as it is available. A verified transcript, PowerPoint presentations and handouts will also be placed on the Committee's website as soon as possible. I now invite you to do a 5–10-minute brief, and then it will be concluded by the Committee providing some questions to you.

Mr HANDS: I guess I would like to start by indicating that from our perspective as a library corporation we are covering four municipalities within the central Victorian region. There could not be more different communities than those we engage with—anything from the likes of Pyramid Hill in Loddon shire, where we actually have a very small population but actually quite a concentrated Filipino community up there, through to Bendigo, with quite a diverse range of people and more than 100 000 people in that population, and we are also delivering services in Mount Alexander and Macedon Ranges. I think for us our response to cultural diversity is quite different within these different communities, as it should be.

I want to start with just a very quick story of someone who had some funding to do an art project and decided to do it in partnership with the library. It was here in Bendigo. It was someone who had come across actually from Europe, but Bendigo was the first place they had come to in Australia and they ended up staying here. When they launched this art installation, which was very much about art as a universal language across cultures, one of the first things they said was the library was their first friend in Bendigo. I think people often talk about libraries in emotive terms even though they are just community spaces. But that really struck me, a few years ago, as an opportunity to really reflect the welcoming and inclusive values that we wanted to establish in our community in what we do in the library.

To that end we have partnered with our councils, and in particular I guess I wanted to focus on the City of Greater Bendigo, around a cultural inclusion program and looked at ways that libraries are seen as very non-judgemental and non-assessed spaces. They are not a space you come to for a particular solution, but they are a great space where we can really be agile in addressing the needs of community. One of the things about regional and rural Victoria is that there is often cultural diversity, but the number of people from any particular culture can be very, very small. So we can look at the City of Greater Bendigo, for instance, and see that there is a great deal of cultural diversity, but finding your place in that and your group, in amongst trying to navigate a new culture or whatever it might be or a new community, can be really quite challenging. So we looked at ways, with the City of Greater Bendigo, to welcome these people into our community and provide meaningful engagement and interaction through library services. One of the things we did through this multicultural libraries project was really look at how we engage community champions across a number of different cultural backgrounds with the library. What we realised was that generally our staff and more or less our patrons were very middle-class white people. So we needed to see in our library those people that were reflected in our community, and we really were not.

So initially we looked at this community champions opportunity and we engaged people from a number of those key populations that we know have reasonable population cohorts within the City of Greater Bendigo. We did a couple of things with them. There was the cultural safety audit that was conducted by the champions. We wanted them to kind of talk to us about what it was to navigate a library service. It was incredibly enlightening for both them and our staff. It was a great opportunity for our staff to realise just how different libraries are seen in different cultures and how we want our library to be seen in our community. Further on from that, as part of our all-staff PD days we had those cultural ambassadors come and speak to us about their story and the way that they had arrived here.

Little World Storytimes—one of the things that we, I think, have the opportunity to do within libraries is introduce cultural inclusion without labelling it as cultural inclusion. When we run something about cultural inclusion we get all those people who are already champions and believe in it, whereas there are probably a whole lot of people who passively agree with it without really taking any active engagement or necessarily talking about it with their kids, which we see as really important in terms of a generational shift. Being able to say ‘This is about story time. This is about your child’s literacy’ but introducing these cultural stories and opportunities to see different people talking about different ways of living was a great thing.

I think that is something that is a real point of difference for libraries—that we have these programs that a lot of people are coming to. We have 40 000 people in Bendigo that are signed-up members. Some of those would represent their whole family—that is one library card for a family—so we do have great reach into our community. I think if we can have those key messages being reinforced through programs that are not labelled as something to do with cultural inclusion, then we are getting to a different cohort and just normalising and celebrating, and also breaking down some of the mythology as well that surrounds cultural diversity.

Conversation club is another one. We have been a partner in providing space for conversation clubs to happen. We also looked at the way that we could potentially present collection. One of the challenges, I think, with a restricted space for collection is: how do we best provide a whole diverse range of collection in different languages, and different stories? And one of the ways we have looked at doing that is through a digital interface—so being able to refresh collection without taking space in the library necessarily. It is a two-way thing for us in that we are trying to present culturally significant stories to a mainstream audience as well as then provide in-language stories for people to be still, I guess, connected with their culture within this community.

I think out of all of that the key learnings for us were where we can have programs where we can introduce cultural diversity and the celebration of different cultures but not label it as such we actually get much better buy-in. I know we have run something—I cannot remember the name of it—where we basically had something set up where people could come in and hear cultural stories around how people arrived in Australia and their journey. We really did not get much mainstream take-up of that. I do not think it was particularly successful, but where we can introduce it into established programs that actually have multiple purposes, we actually see that as a great opportunity to convince and influence different generations and tick a number of boxes for people.

One of the really great stories I think was around our development of local storybooks, where we involve children from the Afghan and Karen communities. We ran quite an extensive program, which involved a bit of investment, around developing actual children’s books and children’s picture books. So children from those communities developed the stories and the art and we facilitated that process to the point where the book was published and it is on our shelves. It is really local content. I think it was great seeing these kids and parents see their work published and on our shelves, available for loan. It was then published with an ISBN so it could be purchased by other libraries as well. That has been a great piece of work to do.

I guess there are other things that we have done that have been very much about making cultural diversity fun. Part of that has been things like looking at our strong connections with the Chinese community here in Bendigo and doing things like having dragon dancers through the library—so coming in, firecrackers going off, drums—and it is super noisy, coming through the library. It is very different and people think, ‘What’s happening here?’, which is fantastic and one of the things that we want to do. The Bollywood dance-off was another one, and drumming workshops—so things that are very much about an enjoyable aspect of culture that people can connect with in a very non-confrontational way.

There are lots of interesting stories as well, and I guess I will leave you with some of that individual kind of impact that we have had. In particular one of our multicultural champions, one of the ambassadors that I talked about at the start, is now working part time at the library. She was successful and engaged to the point where she was successful against anyone else in the community for a position and is now working part time. We are really keen to keep working with those people, those cultural ambassadors, who come with such energy and enthusiasm, to get them involved and get them to a point where they are competitive and employable, which is fantastic.

Another great story to probably finish off with is that in Castlemaine a Muslim mother and her young son have been attending Toddler Time regularly for about a year. They were incredibly quiet and shy and unsure at the start but began talking to the staff presenter, who then started doing some work with that person around borrowing books for their child and helping them with their English. The outcome of that story is that there was a point where there was no story time presenter—they were sick—and we were looking for a story time presenter. And this mum got up and actually presented story time. By the time the staff had run around out the back making phone calls trying to find someone, they came out and she was running story time for us. This was a complete shift. Sometimes besides all the statistics it is just great to see that individual impact that can happen in our communities.

One of the things that I talk about for our libraries is inclusion first, then the service—so include people first, and then provide them with whatever service it is that they want. So make it a welcoming space. I think that is a great example of that in action.

The CHAIR: Excellent. Thank you very much, Mark, for your submission. I have just got a couple of questions. When it comes to childhood development, do you think that some of the culturally diverse families are aware of the benefits?

Mr HANDS: Good question. The stories that we have heard would indicate no, not particularly, and I think there is some real work to do there. I think the insights we gained through our ambassadors, the stories that we heard, showed us that some of the things that you absolutely take for granted as part of your culture or community or society that you live in are things that are so unfamiliar to these people. So I think the stories that we have heard have been an incredible learning experience for me around going: wow, I am at totally the wrong level in thinking about how our cultural communities potentially understand what a library service is and that it is free or that it is available for them and that there are so many other services available to them.

The CHAIR: Just a question in relation to the advance of technology and clearly the advance of iPads and iPhones. How do you compete, with library services, when it is readily now available on your palm and at some point families do, through their children, start engaging in technology?

Mr HANDS: I think the role of libraries as a source of information from across the world, that might have been the case pre-internet. Now libraries are about local content and local community. Our collection and use of physical collection is still the biggest thing that we do. There is no doubt about that, but if you look at all of the other things that we provide and the things that people are asking for, it is around comfy chairs and seats. In fact someone else that I work with who moved here from Europe—they were not coming as a refugee or anything—has said, ‘Your library is like a community living room’.

Although I often hear about cutting-edge libraries in Europe, they said a lot of libraries in Europe are still very traditional, quiet spaces where you are kind of frowned upon for undertaking activities and those sorts of things. I think from that perspective libraries have had to keep shifting their focus, because, yes, you can get lots of information about the world around you through technology. Then it is about going: okay, where do libraries fit now? I think they are that opportunity to show equality. It is a free space, and it has become that community living room. It is not unlike our—I do not know how much you know about the Old Church on the Hill, but I kind of look at this and go this is how libraries should be as well. This is the same sort of thing.

The CHAIR: I just remember—my background is Turkish, and I recall there used to be so much excitement with the library when we had in my community the first Turkish section of books available or the first Vietnamese, and it was such a community. An open day, and there was such excitement a while back, and now with the rise of technology, TV, language channels and all that sort of stuff, that sense of excitement about having a particular ethnicity available in a library I think has simmered down a little bit, which is a real pity. But, yes, it is really important to know, and I do congratulate you that you are trying to have that dragon going through the library, because that is an impact for a community. ‘Oh, a dragon coming through’—I know from my Vietnamese community, the way that we revitalised our library and our shopping precinct was to engage with the local dragon, dancing, the moon lantern festival and all that sort of stuff and try to complement the existing infrastructure and promote cultural awareness. That is really important, so I thank you for doing that.

Mr HANDS: Absolutely.

Ms COUZENS: Thanks, Mark. We appreciate you coming today, and I could not agree with you more about libraries becoming the community lounge room. Geelong is very similar; ours is huge.

Mr HANDS: Absolutely—a great example. Yes, a big lounge room!

Ms COUZENS: There are lots of different activities on offer in the libraries around our community. It sounds like it is exactly the same here.

Mr HANDS: It is very similar, yes.

Ms COUZENS: Thank you for coming today and sharing that with us.

You talk about a lot of programs, which is fantastic. In terms of staff training, are they doing cultural training to engage with the CALD community? Can you just walk us through that a bit?

Mr HANDS: Yes, to some extent. I think that is the journey for our staff, which is still ongoing. We have had that cultural awareness audit and some cultural awareness training. What we have done is made sure that they are working alongside some of our cultural ambassadors, because I think librarians were all about cataloguing and now they are all about people, so it is a big shift for some of these staff. Yes, look—effectively we are not recruiting many librarians, but with the librarians that we have it is kind of two pronged. We are looking at who it is we want to recruit into the organisation to do what we are doing now versus professional development for those staff who trained as cataloguers and database managers to move them into a different space. Yes, I think that is a challenge. Recently there was a CEO summit for all the library services in Victoria, and that was one of the big things that came up—building staff capacity and capability around dealing with people and that welcome that is given, not just across cultural differences but many differences.

Ms COUZENS: Do you have or plan to have a community engagement officer?

Mr HANDS: It is funny you should say that. I am partway through a restructure right now that involves allocating EFT, and we are looking at probably about three or three and a half days a week for a manager of community engagement.

Ms COUZENS: And that will encompass all communities—CALD, Aboriginal communities, all that sort of stuff?

Mr HANDS: Yes, at a regional level. It is really around engaging all of us—all the groups—and thinking about, again, a mixture of building partnerships but also being able to build our managers' capacity around that at each of our branches. We cover 13 000 square kilometres, and we are in communities of 500 people or 75 000 people, so they are very different kinds of skills and connection points.

Ms COUZENS: I know there are never enough resources, but what key resources do you think are required to meet the needs of the CALD community in your area?

Mr HANDS: I think for me libraries are a really powerful tool for both local and State Government to consider investing in from the perspective of the fact that we are open every day. There is a network of libraries that are very well connected. I will say it is a very collegiate sector, so for me we represent an opportunity. We are kind of agile as well, and we can be a little bit cutting edge, so piloting things through library services is almost like an innovation testing ground. I would see that as an opportunity for Government to think about almost on a project-by-project basis, and working with other departments—we are not the best in our community at doing this, and we do not have the best connections, but we are so willing to partner with those organisations that do. We offer that opportunity for that space that is open pretty much every day, and you can come in and it is all there.

So for me, and I have talked about this within the sector as well, some sort of innovation fund that is really driving different ways of doing things. I think it is easy to fall back, and probably going back to that thing I mentioned around running cultural inclusion programs tends to get the same audience, and what we are wanting to do is try and change that audience as well and build a more mainstream understanding—break down some of the mythology that might be around that stuff.

Ms COUZENS: Yes. And just the last point: what do you see as the glaring gaps in your community around CALD communities and their children accessing services? I do not know whether you have a view on that, but it would be interesting to know.

Mr HANDS: Probably for me it is a coordinated approach. I think there might be overlaps in what happens, and then there are other areas where there may be gaps. It is almost providing an opportunity for the right groups to know about each other's business enough that we can act as a kind of referral opportunity or referral agency.

Ms COUZENS: So that collaboration in the community you see as being integral?

Mr HANDS: Yes. I know there are multicultural story times here, and I only know about that because I am friends with someone who coordinates a lot of stuff here. And things like the food safari—have you heard about the food safari here?

Ms COUZENS: Yes.

Mr HANDS: So there is that multicultural food catering business that is happening. I keep going, 'If we could just have that opportunity to sit down with these groups and kind of think about what the connection can be, how can we perhaps fund a food safari lunch a month at the library and just have people come along and sample food and find out about these things?'. There are those little connections that I think are kind of challenging to make at the moment, yes.

Ms COUZENS: Okay, great.

The CHAIR: Mark, can I thank you very much for your submission. This concludes today's hearing. You can keep up to date on the Inquiry's web page, and your submission today will take part in a report that will be handed down in the new year to Parliament. Thank you very much for taking the time.

Mr HANDS: Terrific. Thanks for the opportunity.

Committee adjourned.