

Response to the *Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities*

Victorian Government - March 2021

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MINISTERIAL FOREWORD

The Victorian Government welcomes the report and recommendations of the Victorian Legislative Assembly’s Legal and Social Issues Committee *Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities*.

The Committee’s valuable work and the input of those who provided evidence to the Inquiry, will further strengthen the Victorian Government’s commitment to inclusion and support for culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, including refugees and asylum seekers, and their engagement in early childhood services.

The comprehensive report will provide valuable intelligence for policymakers, researchers and government for years to come.

Ensuring all children have access to the same quality of education and health services, regardless of their background or circumstances is central to our commitment to making Victoria the Education State. Our Multicultural Policy Statement, *Victorian and Proud of It*, reinforces this commitment by recognising Victorians’ cultural and linguistic diversity as a great strength, which must be nurtured and supported.

Multiple studies have shown that the foundation for a child’s long-term development is laid in the early years, and that reducing health and educational inequities in early childhood can benefit individuals, families and communities well into the future. Participation in high-quality early childhood education is one of the most effective ways to give a child a good start in life; it supports their development and has a positive impact on their achievements at school and beyond.

We recognise that not all families can easily enjoy the benefits of our early childhood services. We therefore support measures that facilitate greater engagement of children and families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds in ways that are culturally appropriate, accessible and inclusive.

The coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic has emphasised the need to ensure that CALD communities are kept well-informed of significant events that could put their education, health or wellbeing at risk, and that they are able to understand and contribute to any mitigation strategies.

We have learned much from the Victorian Government’s successful CALD Communities Taskforce. The taskforce partnered with multicultural leaders and organisations to rapidly mobilise a comprehensive response to support multicultural communities during the pandemic. The 49 recommendations detailed in this report provide further opportunities to modify the way we work with families with young children to ensure their adequate engagement with critical services and information.

This Government response to the Inquiry supports and acknowledges the recommendations made. It outlines what the Victorian Government is already doing, and its plans to address these recommendations. Investments have been made in a series of initiatives that will address elements of the recommendations in the report. These include:

- expansion of Early Start Kindergarten to include children of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, providing eligible children across Victoria with 15 hours of free or low-cost kindergarten a week for two years before starting school

- a \$169.6 million investment in early childhood education in the 2020/21 State Budget, to provide free kindergarten programs for four-year-olds and eligible three-year-olds in Victorian Government-funded services in 2021. It will make kindergarten more accessible by helping families save around \$2000 for each child enrolled in a funded kindergarten program, including in long day care settings
- an almost \$5 billion investment over 10 years to enable children across the state to access two years of funded kindergarten. This commitment will introduce 15 hours per week of funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten for every child by 2029
- four years of investment expanding the capacity of Maternal and Child Health services to provide additional place-based supports to families who need it
- increased investment to expand the community hub network and deliver more culturally specific and multicultural supported playgroups.

The report also makes recommendations for improving access for and support of vulnerable people within CALD communities, including those with a disability or mental health condition, with a focus on early intervention. The Victorian Government is working to respond to and build on these recommendations, including ensuring services are equipped to meet the unique needs of these communities.

Spanning 2021–24, the new Victorian State Disability Plan will build on the Government’s commitment to making Victoria more inclusive of people with disability. Consultation for the plan has signaled the need for a greater focus on the additional layers of exclusion and discrimination experienced by people with disability from diverse communities. The plan will represent the views of those from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds as well as those who have arrived in Australia more recently. It will also represent people from culturally and linguistically diverse communities more generally, particularly those from new and emerging communities.

The Victorian Government has committed to implementing all recommendations from the Royal Commission into Victoria’s Mental Health System. Initiatives are already working to pave the way for a shift in the approach to mental health treatment, care and support in Victoria in response to the interim report. The implementation of recommendations in the Commission’s final report will build on these, working to reduce inequities in mental health outcomes and the additional barriers for culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians.

We continue to see the benefit of a range of initiatives delivered in partnership with communities, local government and community sector organisations. These include the Best Start program, developed by the Department of Education and Training. The Committee highlighted the program in its Inquiry report as a promising approach that promotes effective service planning and collaboration within local government areas and has proven to improve outcomes for children.

We acknowledge that there is work to be done across all departments in partnership with CALD communities, the Victorian Multicultural Commission, the Commonwealth Government, the Municipal Association of Victoria, local government and workforces, including the early childhood and Maternal and Child Health workforces.

We look forward to working closely with all partners to support this critical period of a child’s life.

Finally, we would like to again acknowledge the work of the Victorian Legislative Assembly's Legal and Social Issues Committee, as well as the individuals and organisations who lent their time and expertise to the Inquiry.

Ingrid Stitt MP
**Minister for Early
Childhood**

Martin Foley MP
Minister for Health

Ros Spence MP
**Minister for Multicultural
Affairs**

OVERVIEW

THE INQUIRY

The Legal and Social Issues Committee of the Victorian Legislative Assembly tabled the report of the *Inquiry into early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities* on 17 September 2020.

The 424-page report makes 49 recommendations relating to the education and health portfolios – mainly early childhood education and care and Maternal and Child Health. Recommendations also relate to broader settlement and language services policy areas. The Inquiry focused predominantly on people from refugee backgrounds as they typically require a higher level of support, as well as on newly arrived migrants.

Each chapter in this response identifies current initiatives that are working to support culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, as well as future priorities and actions that will respond to the Inquiry's recommendations. Victorians can expect to see these delivered from 2021.

This response has been prepared by the Department of Education and Training, together with the Department of Health (formerly the Department of Health and Human Services), Multicultural Affairs and the Department of Families, Fairness and Housing. It builds on the Victorian Government submission to the Inquiry (October 2019), focusing on initiatives introduced since then. It also considers the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

2020/21 STATE BUDGET OUTCOMES

The 2020/21 Victorian State Budget aimed to combat the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the state and included a number of initiatives to support culturally and linguistically diverse families.

Expansion of Early Start Kindergarten to include children of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds

Early Start Kindergarten provides access to up to 15 hours of free kindergarten per week to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children, and to children known to Child Protection. The program has been shown to increase the kindergarten participation rates of both cohorts.

The 2020/21 State Budget allocated funding to extend eligibility to children of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds. This gives these groups access to 15 hours of free or low-cost kindergarten across Victoria and in all service settings from 2021.

This is consistent with the Committee's recommendation to immediately extend eligibility for Early Start Kindergarten to children of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds until the roll-out of universal, funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten is completed.

Initiatives to support Victoria's multicultural communities

The 2020/21 State Budget included a number of programs and initiatives that specifically support refugees, asylum seekers and vulnerable multicultural communities. These initiatives include:

- \$34.3 million to support the economic recovery of Victoria's multicultural communities and young people, including through employment programs, social cohesion grants, and supported playgroups for migrant, refugee and asylum seeker children
- \$3.9 million to support the health needs of people seeking asylum, including mental health and trauma counselling, material aid, health assistance and subsidised medications, housing assistance and case coordination

- \$2.2 million to support improved settlement outcomes including extending legal support for asylum seekers and temporary visa holders and additional funding for the Community Hubs Program
- \$4.9 million to improve communication with and engagement of multicultural communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. This will ensure multicultural communities receive up-to-date advice on public health restrictions, health and safety requirements, and available supports
- \$1.4 million to establish an Anti-Racism Taskforce. The taskforce will guide the design and implementation of a whole-of-government Anti-Racism Strategy to achieve long-term behaviour change across the wider Victorian community. Funding also covers a grants program to support localised delivery of anti-racism communications campaigns.

Free Kinder in 2021

Kindergarten for four-year-olds and eligible three-year-olds in funded programs will be free in 2021 as part of a \$169.6 million investment in early childhood education in the 2020/21 State Budget. Free Kinder is a key initiative to support the social and economic recovery of Victorian families following the significant effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

This investment will save families around \$2000 for each child enrolled in a participating funded kindergarten program in 2021. Fees will also be reduced for families with children attending unfunded three-year-old programs in sessional (standalone) kindergarten services.

While four-year-old children from refugee and asylum seeker families can already access a free program in a standalone kindergarten setting, this funding will extend this opportunity to all children, and significantly reduce the cost of accessing kindergarten in a long day care setting.

As well as benefiting children, this will help parents, and particularly mothers, participate in the workforce as Victoria recovers from the worst effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

This offering is in addition to all regular Victorian Government kindergarten funding and the roll-out of funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, available across the state by 2022. The Free Kinder investment builds on the free sessional kindergarten provided for all fee-paying enrolments in an eligible participating funded kindergarten program during Terms 2 to 4 in 2020.

Free Kinder is being promoted to families in 25 languages other than English, and in accessible formats.

Responding to COVID-19 impacts in early childhood

Early intervention will support families and children experiencing increased or more complex vulnerability as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic by:

- providing family-focused support for vulnerable children transitioning to school
- expanding outreach services through the Access to Early Learning program, with a focus on public housing communities
- providing additional supports for engaging refugee-background and culturally and linguistically diverse families in kindergarten.

Tutors deployed to bring students up to speed

The 2020/21 State Budget included \$250 million in funding to address negative impacts on student learning and engagement that may have resulted from the move to remote learning during Terms 2 and 3 in 2020. The funding includes:

- \$240 million in 'Tutor Learning' funding for all Victorian government schools, and non-government schools needing support. Around 4100 teachers will be engaged to give students extra individual learning support in 2021 so they can catch up with any learning

they may have missed as a result of remote and flexible learning. Translated materials are available to support schools to communicate with families about the initiative

- \$8.6 million for Family Engagement Initiatives, including to engage 16 additional Koorie Engagement Support Officers (KESOs) and 60 additional Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) to support schools working with families to lift student outcomes and re-engage students with learning.

Autism assessment and diagnosis

The 2020/21 State Budget commits \$7.34 million over four years for additional publicly funded autism assessment and diagnosis. This equates to 3,125 additional assessments over the four-year period.

Maintaining early parenting support

Early parenting support and flexible delivery of parenting support to specific cohorts will be maintained until 30 June 2021. Funding of \$1.36 million will see that:

- Gateway Health continues to deliver the Positive Parenting Telephone Service for fathers, regional families and grandparents caring for grandchildren. The service delivers the evidence-based 'Triple P – Positive Parenting Program' via telephone and online to groups who have lower rates of participation in face-to-face parenting support
- delivery of evidence-based early parenting programs for families of children aged from birth to six years in the local government areas of Latrobe, Baw Baw and Wellington. This is part of the Latrobe Valley Early Parenting Initiative that seeks to improve child wellbeing and development outcomes by implementing a population wide approach to supporting parents.

KEY ELEMENTS ACROSS SERVICES

Barriers to participation and data

Recommendation 1

That the Victorian Government update the Child Development Information System to make 'year of arrival' a mandatory field, in addition to 'main language at home', 'interpreter required' and 'birth country'.

Recommendation 2

That the Victorian Government require state-funded health and early childhood services, including hospitals, Maternal and Child Health services and Early Parenting Centres, to collect the four standard information items of 'country of birth', 'language spoken at home', 'interpreter required' and 'year of arrival' in their administrative datasets. The Government should also pilot a further item regarding refugee status in an appropriate and supported setting to determine its applicability in datasets.

Recommendation 3

That the Victorian Government incorporate additional questions into the kindergarten enrolment form to assist in ascertaining the cultural background of families. Questions should also be asked of parents, including their country of birth and year of arrival.

Recommendation 4

That the Victorian Government enhance the Child Development Information System to systematically measure the participation of families in the Maternal and Child Health service and their attendance at Key Age and Stage appointments.

Recommendation 5

That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government that it requires funded settlement support services to formally advise local councils of the arrival of refugee families in the area to facilitate linking with local services.

Recommendation 6

That the Victorian Government raise for discussion at a national level, opportunities to improve the sharing of refugee settlement and health data across jurisdictions and all levels of government.

The Inquiry findings and recommendations emphasise the importance of collecting high-quality, relevant datasets to improve the early identification of vulnerable culturally and linguistically diverse families, and the care they are provided. Specifically, the Inquiry highlighted the importance of understanding the lived experience of families before their arrival to Australia, in order to provide better support.

The Committee recommends improved datasets that routinely record information for 'country of birth', 'language spoken at home', 'interpreter required' and 'year of arrival'. This should enhance early childhood services' knowledge and understanding of families' experiences, encourage early engagement with services throughout the early years, and strengthen ongoing service improvement.

The Committee also recommends that the participation of families in the Maternal and Child Health (MCH) Service Key Age and Stage (KAS) appointments be systematically measured.

The Victorian Government will continue to explore opportunities to routinely collect information to enhance families' experiences with early childhood services.

Data collection in Maternal and Child Health

The Department of Health (DoH) requires public and private maternity hospitals, Supported Playgroups and Early Parenting Centres (EPCs) to record 'country of birth', 'language spoken at home', 'interpreter required' and 'year of arrival' as part of their regular data collection processes.

DoH has recently updated guidance for MCH services to support and encourage higher completion rates for 'year of arrival', 'main language spoken at home', 'interpreter required' and 'birth country'. DoH continues to improve the capabilities of the Child Development Information System (CDIS) to best meet the needs of the MCH Service and the Victorian community.

As part of this activity, DoH will pursue opportunities to improve CDIS' capabilities, including mandatory fields and enabling routine reporting of culturally and linguistically diverse families' participation in MCH services. Over time, this will help to identify factors that support or deter families from participating in KAS visits, as part of ongoing system development work.

Data collection in early childhood education

The Department of Education and Training (DET) currently requires funded kindergarten service providers to collect 'language spoken at home' for all enrolments entered in the Kindergarten Information Management System (the DET kindergarten administrative data collection system).

A new kindergarten administrative data collection system is being developed, with 'country of birth', 'interpreter required' and 'year of arrival' to be included as required data fields. These new data fields are expected to be in place during 2021.

This will be supported by the inclusion of questions relating to the cultural background of families, including parents' country of birth and year of arrival, in the optional kindergarten enrolment form template (developed by DET in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria as part of the Central Registration and Enrolment Scheme best-practice materials).

Subject to privacy restrictions, DET will collate and actively share aggregate data to assist local governments, service delivery organisations and other Victorian Government departments in understanding and responding to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse families and children.

Data-sharing across governments and with service providers

In 2018, the findings of the Commonwealth Government-commissioned *Review into Integration, Employment and Settlement Outcomes for Refugees and Humanitarian Entrants in Australia*, noted the lack of centralised national coordination in the settlement of refugees. It specifically highlighted the unavailability of population-level data on refugees to support service planning and improvements. Further, the review found that even when information was being collected, it was not being shared across governments and with service providers in a timely fashion.

Based on the recommendations of the review the Commonwealth Government appointed a Commonwealth Coordinator-General for Migrant Services from 1 December 2019. The Coordinator-General is responsible for working closely with state, territory and local governments, industry and the community sector to coordinate refugee settlement, employment and integration across government programs.

In response to the review, the Commonwealth Government has also committed to identify new ways of distributing and sharing data and information with relevant agencies.

The Victorian Government has also emphasised the urgent need for a more coordinated national approach to the sharing of de-identified data across government agencies and settlement services to inform better case coordination and access to health and education supports for refugee families.

The Victorian Government, via its Multicultural Affairs portfolio, is committed to close collaboration with the Commonwealth Government, including through the office of the Coordinator-General for Migrant Services, to improve the collection and sharing of information – provided this is de-identified or meets all privacy and confidentiality requirements and standards. The Victorian Government will continue to advocate for a more transparent and coordinated approach to information sharing in relevant discussions through officials’ groups and appropriate forums.

Integrated and place-based responses

Recommendation 7

That the Victorian Government, in conjunction with local councils, the Municipal Association of Victoria and service providers, work together in growth areas with high levels of cultural diversity to ensure that appropriate planning and collaboration strategies are in place to meet the demand for early childhood services. This should include:

- service planning to ensure there is appropriate supply to meet demands
- clear referral pathways so that all service providers are equipped to assist culturally diverse families and children to access the services they need
- communication strategies for improved collaboration and coordination between service providers.

Recommendation 8

That the Victorian Government continue to fund community hubs in Victoria, in recognition that they are a well-established and evidence-based model, to improve the engagement of culturally diverse communities in early childhood services.

Recommendation 9

That the Victorian Government prioritise and expand funding for place-based and integrated models in early childhood service provision to improve engagement and access for culturally diverse families and their young children. These efforts should be community-driven to provide localised solutions in areas of need and must involve culturally diverse communities and their representative bodies, local councils, relevant service providers and the Municipal Association of Victoria.

Recommendation 10

That the Victorian Government support local councils to coordinate and fund service navigation positions that can directly assist culturally diverse families to navigate the early childhood service system.

Recommendation 11

That the Victorian Government fund effective outreach activities by local councils and service providers to ensure culturally diverse communities can access a range of early childhood services, including playgroups, health services and literacy-based programs.

The Committee heard from a broad range of organisations about their experience and ideas in offering or receiving early childhood services, and noted the diversity of the early childhood service system. The Inquiry’s findings and recommendations emphasise the importance of providing locally targeted services and community outreach, which operate in an integrated way to connect

and support all families, particularly those from a refugee or culturally and linguistically diverse background.

Many MCH services have established integrated models for early years services for communities, including working in partnership with other MCH, early childhood, health and family services.

These partnerships support links and referrals between the MCH Service and other services, including Supported Playgroups, kindergartens and other support organisations, to enable the provision of cohesive service delivery when the child, carer and/or family is involved with multiple services.

More broadly, the Victorian Government has made a significant investment to expand localised responses to vulnerable families over the past four years through the Enhanced MCH Service and Early Parenting Centres.

In addition, other targeted supports for families funded by the Victorian Government include:

- expansion of the Enhanced MCH Service to provide support for 15 per cent of vulnerable children aged up to three years old and their families for up to 20 hours (22 hours in regional areas)
- expansion of Supported Playgroups across the state, with some provided in community languages
- additional family violence consultations, available for 15 per cent of families, provided through local MCH services
- sleep and settling supports including group information sessions and family outreach consultations to 7000 vulnerable families and additional 24-hour support for sleep and settling through the MCH Line.

The Victorian Government is proud to invest in evidence-based initiatives that enable successful settlement outcomes for migrant and refugee families. The community hub model facilitates connections between refugee and migrant families and education, health services and other supports.

The Victorian Government has provided funding to Community Hubs Australia (CHA) to establish and support the operations of 16 community hubs in Brimbank, Dandenong, Geelong and Shepparton. During 2018/19, funding was provided to CHA to establish and operate regional community hub networks in Geelong and Shepparton. These consist of three hubs embedded within primary and secondary schools in each of these locations. The funding provided to CHA also supported the continued operation of 10 metropolitan hubs in the cities of Brimbank and Dandenong.

The 2020/21 State Budget allocated an additional \$600,000 for the continuation of the community hub network in Victoria. This will fund the continued operations of 16 hubs from January to December 2021, as well as a scoping study for new hub networks in four new locations.

Since 2018, Victorian Government funding has enabled CHA to deliver 4827 volunteering opportunities, find 371 jobs for participants, and make more than 1750 referrals to additional services and support, such as family support, MCH services, pre-school and community health services.

Community hubs work closely with agencies across the place-based system of early childhood services. A core part of the program design is the development of partnerships with education and health services. Since their establishment, these hubs have made valuable connections and partnerships within their local communities, to provide services based on local need.

Community hubs have also contributed to positive settlement outcomes in regional cities. In 2020, regional hubs in Geelong and Shepparton provided tailored support, English tuition, skills training and early learning opportunities to 492 families. There were more than 1100 attendances at English language classes and 1003 volunteering opportunities provided.

The Committee notes in its Inquiry report that it received a submission from the Southern Metropolitan Partnership, an advisory group established by the Victorian Government for the Southern Melbourne Area comprising the City of Greater Dandenong, City of Casey and Cardinia Shire. This submission to the Inquiry provided a report prepared in partnership with DET: *Engagement of recently arrived/hard to reach groups with early years services in Southern Melbourne Area*.

The report is a detailed analysis of the barriers to participation in early years services. It makes recommendations to improve these services, focusing on Afghani, Burmese and Tamil (Indian/Sinhalese) groups defined as both recently arrived and hard-to-reach in the Southern Melbourne Area.

In 2021, DET's Early Childhood Improvement Branch in the Southern Melbourne Area is continuing work aligned with this report as part of a place-based CALD project. This work includes:

- place-based responses to barriers to engagement, working with Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services, councils and community groups
- dissemination of translated messages about kindergarten
- professional development for a number of local ECEC services with a focus on cultural competence and working with interpreters
- advice to DET's central office Early Childhood Education branches on the findings of the project, to inform broader policy and programming.

The Victorian Government also offers a range of supports to the early childhood sector to establish, expand or enhance existing services These include:

- grants to support the development of Integrated Children's Centres which bring together kindergarten and a range of other early years and community services such as MCH, long day care and other services

Merri Health: Ready Set Prep!

Coordinated by Merri Health, Ready, Set, Prep! is a place-based, collective impact initiative which aims to improve early childhood development and school readiness for pre-school children and their families.

The project started in the suburb of Fawkner, and is currently scaling up across the northern part of Moreland.

In June 2020, Ready, Set, Prep! released the 'Transition to Primary School' resources. These support local migrant families to navigate the Victorian early childhood and education systems and answer some of the common questions that these families have about early childhood services, kindergarten and starting school.

Resources include a series of six short videos and a 'Journey to Primary School' roadmap poster, available in six community languages as well as English. The resources were co-designed with more than 200 stakeholders through focus groups that included many community members. Since their release they have reached more than 13,500 people.

The positive impact of Ready Set Prep! has been highlighted by Australian Early Development Census results. These show that the number of children starting school developmentally vulnerable on one or more domains has decreased during the four years that the initiative has undertaken collective action in Fawkner.

Merri Health was awarded the 2020 Victorian Multicultural Award for Excellence in Education in the Early Childhood category for Ready, Set, Prep!

- 10-year partnership with the Colman Foundation to establish the Our Place model at 10 sites in disadvantaged communities across Victoria. The Our Place model gives children and families access to tailored education, health and wellbeing services from a single location. The model recognises the value of schools as the hub of the community and facilitates partnerships between early years and primary school providers to integrate and coordinate services. This approach facilitates the engagement of families in education and supports children in their transition from early childhood to school.

Working in partnership with the Victorian Government, local governments fund and undertake a range of strategies to support culturally diverse families navigate and access early childhood and other services. These strategies include:

- providing culturally safe spaces and programs including within local libraries, MCH services, parent groups and other council services
- implementing central registration and enrolment schemes, to simplify the kindergarten registration and enrolment process for all families
- ensuring direct contact with families through service provision (including in-language provision)
- providing information in community languages, and making translated information available online
- employing frontline staff from a diverse range of backgrounds, including in customer service, community outreach and service navigation roles.

To further support families to navigate and access the early childhood service system during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Victorian Government provided additional funding for a range of specialist supports to address barriers to participation in kindergarten for refugee-background and culturally and linguistically diverse communities.

The support has been provided in partnership with specialist organisations, through tailored local responses and by improving access to information on kindergarten. It includes:

- a Family Learning Support Program pilot delivered by the Brotherhood of St Laurence. Bicultural workers are employed to work directly with vulnerable CALD families and children living in public housing (many of whom are newly arrived and/or from a refugee background) to connect to early childhood education and care services, prepare for school and use learning activities at home. The program is operating in Flemington and North Melbourne and is being expanded in 2021 to include public housing sites in Richmond, Collingwood and Fitzroy
- expansion of the Early Years Program, delivered by Foundation House, to additional priority metropolitan locations and regional locations from 2021. The aim of the program is to build the capacity of early childhood services to work effectively with families from refugee backgrounds. The expanded Early Years Program will provide professional learning workshops, resources, consultation and advice to support early childhood services to address the increased disengagement of refugee-background families from kindergarten during the pandemic
- a series of four Kindergarten to Primary School Transitions webinars for families delivered by Foundation House in a culturally appropriate and accessible format for Arabic, Chin Hakha, Karen and Dinka-speaking communities by Foundation House
- outreach support to vulnerable CALD and refugee-background families, delivered by local government, working with services in prioritised areas to address engagement barriers and support enrolment in kindergarten and ongoing participation in early childhood education

- translation of new information and critical advice about kindergarten and transition to school into a range of community languages, accessible formats and communication channels for multicultural communities across Victoria.

The early childhood workforce

Recommendation 12

That, as part of service agreements with early childhood services such as kindergartens and Maternal and Child Health services, the Victorian Government mandate professional development and training activities in the areas of cultural competency and trauma-informed care for all staff.

Recommendation 13

That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government that cultural competency and trauma-informed care training be mandatory for all staff in their funded early childhood services.

Recommendation 14

That the Victorian Government establish a pool of qualified bicultural and bilingual workers that can be accessed by all early childhood services based on the needs of local communities.

Recommendation 15

That the Victorian Government make targeted investments to expand the bicultural and bilingual early childhood workforce. This should be a priority area for the growth of the early childhood education sector as part of the implementation of three-year-old kindergarten and the introduction of Free TAFE courses in early childhood education.

Recommendation 16

That the Victorian Government coordinate planning of workforce development activities within local government areas to increase the bicultural and bilingual workforce, particularly in rural and regional areas. This coordination should involve all relevant stakeholders including local councils, TAFES, regional offices of the Department of Education and Training and local settlement support services.

Recommendation 17

That the Victorian Government provide targeted funding to assist people from culturally diverse backgrounds to engage in training and development activities, such as Free TAFE, in the early childhood sector. This should include scholarships, stipend funds and mentoring support. Key community organisations should be encouraged to provide mentoring support.

Recommendation 18

That the Victorian Government develop an early childhood workforce strategy that sets out essential strategies and actions for engagement with culturally diverse children, families and communities. At a minimum, this must include:

- strategies and actions to increase the number of bicultural and bilingual workers in early childhood services, including through the establishment of a pool of workers
- training and professional development activities in the areas of cultural competence and trauma-informed care
- strategies and actions that relate specifically to building capacity of the regional workforce in working with culturally diverse children, families and communities.

The Inquiry's findings and recommendations emphasised the need to address the gaps in building a diverse early childhood workforce. This workforce must reflect and appropriately respond to the needs of the communities it serves, contributing to services that are culturally safe and inclusive.

The Maternal and Child Health workforce

In recent years, the Victorian Government has invested in several workforce attraction and development initiatives to ensure that the MCH workforce has the capacity to respond to the needs of a growing and changing Victorian population.

This includes the annual MCH Scholarship Program to support workforce attraction and development. As nurses from diverse backgrounds are prioritised for scholarships, this program provides opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse registered nurses and midwives to undertake the required postgraduate study to become a qualified MCH nurse.

In 2020, 116 nurses received a MCH Nursing Scholarship. This included 12 nurses from a culturally and/or linguistically diverse background, representing over 10 per cent of all MCH Nursing Scholarships.

The *MCH Service Program Standards (2009)* require culturally competent service delivery, to support culturally safe and competent practices. The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring training packages developed for the MCH workforce incorporate a culturally and linguistically diverse lens, to assist MCH nurses to support diverse families and communities and respond to families with complex needs.

The MCH workforce (including nurses working in Early Parenting Centres) has completed trauma-informed practice training developed by Deakin University, the My Early Relational Trauma Informed Learning (MERTIL) program.

This training gives MCH nurses skills to understand and appropriately respond to families who have experienced trauma and includes a focus on the specific needs of refugee children and their families. The MCH workforce and MCH students continue to have access to the training program, and planning is underway to incorporate trauma-informed training into postgraduate courses for child and family nursing.

The early childhood education and care workforce

As highlighted by the Committee, targeted action and investment is needed to ensure that the early childhood education and care workforce responds to the needs of culturally diverse communities. A number of new and expanded initiatives and responses are being developed to address the projected kindergarten workforce supply needs related to the roll-out of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten across Victoria, and to respond to the need for a more culturally and linguistically diverse workforce.

The roll-out of universal, funded Three-Year-Old Kindergarten will mean the creation of more than 6000 teaching jobs across the state. More than 4000 new teachers and 2000 new educators are needed over the next 10 years to meet the anticipated demand.

DET recognises that increased participation and representation by multicultural communities in the early childhood workforce would better reflect the diversity of Victoria's population. Communications and engagement activities target multicultural populations, promoting early childhood education as a rewarding career, and motivating prospective candidates to consider a career as a kindergarten teacher.

Discussions with Victoria's 79 councils in the development of the Kindergarten Infrastructure and Service Plans have identified workforce constraints as a barrier to the implementation of the Three-Year-Old Kindergarten reform. These constraints included, in some local government areas, a need for culturally and linguistically diverse staff. This reinforces the importance of the local and centrally targeted responses led by DET.

As DET outlined in its submission to the Inquiry, the introduction from 1 January 2020 of Free TAFE for Certificate III in Early Childhood Education and Care, and for the Diploma of Early

Childhood Education and Care, as well as scholarships for further study and training, is opening up opportunities for culturally and linguistically diverse people to become teachers and educators at kindergartens.

In addition, the Asylum Seeker Vocational Education and Training program is designed to increase support for eligible asylum seekers and refugees with temporary protection to access government-subsidised training. Partnerships between the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, the Victorian Trades Hall Council and a Learn Local provider seek to address the poor employment outcomes for this cohort and promote their participation in apprenticeships and traineeships. This has included arranging for people who have completed early childhood qualifications to gain work experience by caring for the children of current participants of the program so they can attend classes.

The 2020/21 State Budget has also allocated \$34.3 million over two years to support the economic recovery of Victoria's multicultural communities and young people. This will fund culturally responsive employment programs that will provide individualised support to culturally and linguistically diverse and young jobseekers, who face high levels of disadvantage, preparing them for work and helping to address employment barriers.

This suite of integrated employment supports will service culturally and linguistically diverse Victorians who aspire to a career as early childhood educators, ensuring that they effectively connect to training and employment pathways in the early childhood sector.

As noted in the Government submission to the Inquiry, School Readiness Funding (SRF) helps kindergartens to access programs and supports, and engage with specialists, such as speech pathology and language and literacy experts. These experts can build the capability of families and educators to support children in three priority areas: Communication (language development), Wellbeing (social and emotional) and Access and Inclusion. In 2021, SRF will be available in all Victorian kindergarten settings, including long day care, for both three and four-year-old children in funded kindergarten programs. Kindergarten services will receive SRF once they start to deliver funded kindergarten programs for three-year-olds.

Kindergarten service providers have access to professional development, including fka Children's Services' programs specialising in cultural inclusion, through the SRF Menu of evidence-informed programs and supports. They can also access professional learning via the DET-funded Foundation House Early Years program.

The Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, a statutory authority in DET, has also developed a practice guide for early childhood educators to support children's rights to maintain their home or family language while acquiring English as their second language. Aligned with the Victorian Early Years Learning and Development Framework, training resources, including video materials, are planned for development with fka Children's Services, which will also deliver related professional learning.

Bicultural and bilingual workers in early childhood

The Committee acknowledges that Enhanced MCH programs can employ other practitioners and allied health professionals to complement the work of MCH nurses. These practitioners may include bicultural and bilingual workers.

Many local governments employ bicultural workers to facilitate playgroups and promote available services, including MCH, to culturally and linguistically diverse and refugee-background families. Local councils also work with refugee peak organisations to support community access to early childhood services.

As noted previously, the Victorian Government is providing a package of supports for families and kindergarten services in response to disrupted learning experienced in 2020 amid the COVID-19

pandemic. This includes funding for a limited number of skilled, qualified outreach workers for six months in priority local government areas.

Outreach workers will work directly with vulnerable CALD families and services in prioritised areas to address engagement barriers and to support transition and ongoing participation in education. Outreach workers will support children and families to engage in kindergarten in 2021 and 2022 by:

- promoting the new Free Kinder initiative and the expansion of Early Start Kindergarten for refugee and asylum seeker children
- identifying vulnerable CALD families and children eligible for Three-Year-Old Kindergarten, Four-Year-Old Kindergarten and Early Start Kindergarten in 2021, including:
 - attending community and Supported Playgroups to promote kindergarten and give families enrolment information (in a range of community languages and accessible formats)
 - working with relevant organisations, including those delivering migrant and refugee settlement services as well as specialist organisations such as Foundation House, to identify and enrol children eligible for kindergarten
 - working with LOOKOUT Early Childhood Learning Advisors to identify children in out-of-home care
- supporting families to enrol in and attend kindergarten in 2021, and/or register for kindergarten or school in 2022
- providing mentoring and professional learning for educators to engage vulnerable CALD families at their service with support for reflection, and on-site coaching to extend their inclusive and collaborative practices.

As part of measures to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, DET is also funding the delivery of the Brotherhood of St Laurence Family Learning Support Program pilot. The program's bicultural workers engage directly with vulnerable culturally and linguistically diverse families and children living in public housing towers, support them to connect to early childhood education and care services and to transition to school and kindergarten. The program is being expanded in 2021 to include additional public housing sites in Richmond, Collingwood and Fitzroy. This expanded program will run until June 2021.

More broadly, the Victorian Government funds a number of workforce initiatives to increase the supply of early childhood educators. These include:

- the Early Childhood Scholarships and Incentives Program, which is widely available. Since commencing in October 2018, the program has supported more than 1650 people to study for early childhood qualifications
- the Provisionally Registered Teacher Grant Program. This supports provisionally registered teachers and their mentors to work through the process of achieving full teacher registration with the Victorian Institute of Teaching

- the innovative Initial Teacher Education program with Deakin University. This fast-tracked early childhood teaching degree for diploma-qualified educators seeks to reduce financial barriers to participation and enable a more diverse group of people to gain early childhood teaching qualification.

The Victorian Government will continue to explore potential policy initiatives that could improve the diversity of the early childhood education workforce. This is part of its longer-term workforce strategy, and in-line with the Inquiry's findings and recommendations.

The Government, through DET's meetings with the Commonwealth Government, will also raise the Inquiry's findings and recommendations in relation to cultural competency and trauma-informed care training for early childhood services.

ECMS, Tarneit Central Kindergarten

The Early Childhood Language Program provides funding to participating early childhood services to employ a bilingual language teacher to deliver a language program. This program employs more than 100 language teachers with many from culturally diverse backgrounds. These teachers are offered intensive professional learning, mentoring and networking opportunities to support their delivery of the language program in kindergarten.

Tarneit Central Kindergarten is proud to be a bilingual multicultural service, with a philosophy and foundation of immersing children in diverse cultures through open-ended play based cultural experiences, celebrations and events.

The kindergarten's Bilingual Early Childhood Language Program gives children the opportunity to learn in Punjabi. Approximately one third of children and their families attending the kindergarten speak Punjabi as either a first or second language. This program has empowered and given these children a platform to share their language and culture with their peers and educators.

It has also had many benefits on children who do not speak Punjabi as a home language, including noticing and discussing the similarities and differences between their own home life and culture and the Punjabi culture. The kindergarten educators have observed that the children have become more connected with one another and more willing to share aspects of their own culture.

The bilingual program has also been positive for families generally. Families have been able to discuss more wide-ranging issues with the bilingual teachers, such as difficulties in participating in kindergarten among those who do not drive or who work longer hours. The teachers have been able to find solutions so children are still able to participate in the kindergarten program. This has included linking families with each other, as well as linking families to a local Family Day Care, so that children can attend kindergarten on the same day as childcare.

ECMS Tarneit Central Kindergarten was highly commended for its Early Childhood Language Program in the 2020 Victorian Multicultural Awards for Excellence (Education category - Early Childhood).

Language services

Recommendation 19

That the Victorian Government conduct research into effective ways to enhance health literacy among culturally diverse communities in health settings, including the role of language services and the use of bilingual and bicultural workers.

Recommendation 20

That the Victorian Government, in consultation with the Municipal Association of Victoria, work with language service providers to enhance their capacity to deliver interpreting services via video conferencing when face-to-face interpreters are unavailable.

Recommendation 21

That the Victorian Government advocate to the Commonwealth Government that it provide funding for its childcare services to access the National Translating and Interpreting Service to facilitate better communication and engagement between services and culturally diverse families.

Recommendation 22

That the Victorian Government develop specific guidelines for the provision of language services in early childhood services and work to ensure that they be consistently adopted across all early childhood health, education and care services in Victoria.

Many Inquiry participants identified language barriers as one of the key issues disadvantaging culturally diverse communities when using early childhood services. Not only do language barriers limit people's awareness of the availability and benefits of services, they also make it harder for them to confidently navigate a system. Children's ability to fully engage in early childhood services is highly dependent on their parents' ability to access and navigate these services.

As noted in the Inquiry report, multiculturalism is the mainstream in Victoria. The Victorian Government is committed to assisting those with diverse backgrounds to successfully participate and contribute to the state. To achieve this, we must encourage the whole community to recognise that Victoria's diversity is its greatest strength. The Committee commended the Victorian Government's commitment to provide access to language services and particularly recognised the increased investment in this area.

The Victorian Government recognises the vital role that language services play in our diverse, multicultural society. More than one million Victorians speak a language other than English at home, and more than 200,000 Victorians have limited English proficiency. While diversity brings significant social, cultural, and economic benefits, there is also a need to invest in various measures to ensure equality of access to essential services. Language services are critical for many Victorians to access government services and information.

The Government's multicultural policy *Victorian. And proud of it*, recognises the importance of Victorians having access to the services they need. This includes ensuring that those who cannot communicate effectively through spoken or written English have access to professional interpreting and translation services:

- when required to make significant decisions concerning their lives
- when being informed of their rights
- where essential information needs to be communicated to inform decision-making, including obtaining informed consent; and that
- interpreters and translators should be credentialed by the National Accreditation Authority for Translators and Interpreters (NAATI) at the Certified Interpreter/Translator level.

The Victorian Government recognises that the responsibility to provide culturally appropriate services includes but is not limited to, providing language services. Departments and funded agencies are required under the *Multicultural Victoria Act 2011* to develop 'cultural diversity plans' to enhance the provision of culturally sensitive service delivery. All Victorian Government departments and agencies comply with this requirement.

Enhancing health literacy among culturally diverse communities in health settings

The Inquiry highlighted the important role that language services play in Victoria, not only in promoting social cohesion, but also in helping culturally diverse communities to participate in daily life, engage with services and integrate into the broader community.

In a multilingual society such as Victoria, health literacy can only be achieved through the effective use of language services. Regarding early childhood engagement, Inquiry participants noted that low health literacy can create a major barrier for people to understanding the benefits and importance of early childhood services and other family support services, including pregnancy care, early intervention and early childhood education and care.

The Committee recommended that the Victorian Government conduct research into effective ways to enhance health literacy among culturally diverse communities in health settings, including the role of language services and the use of bilingual and bicultural workers.

As part of the MCH Service, key maternal, infant and child health promotion and safety information is translated into the 10 most common community languages: Arabic, Burmese, Chinese (simplified), Chin Hakha, Dari, Karen, Khmer, Persian, Punjabi and Vietnamese. The MCH App (both its content and navigation) is also available in eight languages other than English: Arabic, Chinese, Dari, Khmer, Persian, Punjabi, Spanish and Vietnamese. In 2020, about two per cent of families selected to use the MCH App in languages other than English including simplified Chinese (1400), Punjabi (533), Vietnamese (280) and Arabic (247).

The Victorian Government, through both Multicultural Affairs and DoH, regularly meets with recipients of DoH's Language Service Innovation Grants. These recipients have Community of Practice sessions where information and lessons are shared about each of the recipients' respective programs. This ongoing relationship with recipients presents opportunities for collaboration and knowledge-sharing. Many of the recipients are hospitals or other health care settings, and are conducting their own research and analysis into enhancing health literacy in CALD communities and increasing and normalising the use of interpreters.

DoH also funds the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health (CEH). The centre, which works to improve the health and wellbeing of people from refugee and migrant backgrounds by delivering training to service providers and sector support in healthy literacy, cultural competency and language services. In addition, CEH maintains a migrant and refugee health library, which includes translated health information as well as educational resources for service providers.

Enhancing the capacity to deliver language services in early childhood settings

The Inquiry highlighted issues relating to the availability and capability of interpreter services. The limited availability of interpreter services in regional and rural areas can lead to issues with confidentiality among known interpreters, or an over-reliance on male or phone interpreters, who are not always appropriate. The Committee also found that the use of non-accredited interpreters, such as family and friends, in health settings is highly problematic. Family and friends generally as they have no specialist training in interpreting and cannot be expected to remain impartial, neutral or confidential.

The Committee recommended that the Victorian Government work with language service providers to enhance their capacity to deliver interpreting services via video conferencing, when face-to-face interpreters are unavailable.

The Government is committed to improving the availability and enhancing the capacity of language services, recognising that this is essential to ensuring equitable and inclusive access to critical services for all Victorians.

In 2017/18, VITS LanguageLoop launched a fully on-demand video interpreting app, VideoLoop, including multilingual 'chatbots' (programs that simulate conversation with human users). VideoLoop connects clients and their non-English speaking customers with interpreters through a customised app. (The use of such video interpreting solutions has accelerated exponentially across various industries as social distancing requirements limit traditional on-site interpreting.).

In 2017, the Victorian Government announced the single largest funding increase for interpreter services in Victoria's history. The Government's investment supported broad reforms to language services procurement and sets out to improve the levels of interpreter remuneration, work conditions and job security to strengthen the quality and viability of Victoria's language services industry into the future. It is expected that a better-paid workforce will increase the supply of professional interpreters within critical essential services.

The Government is also enhancing the accessibility and professionalism of interpreters through its Interpreter Scholarship Program (ISP). The program, run through RMIT, aims to encourage enrolments in interpreting courses for languages where there is a shortage of interpreters and translators. Scholarships and bursaries have been offered through ISP since 2003, and it has supported more than 700 scholarship positions and helped more than 500 interpreters to gain official certification with NAATI.

By improving the professional standing of interpreters and making interpreting a more attractive career choice, the Government hopes to improve the availability and effectiveness of language services, not only in early childhood services, but across the health, education and justice sectors, and the public service.

Advocating to the Commonwealth for the provision of language services

As noted by the Committee in the Inquiry report, both Commonwealth and Victorian Government-funded language services provide interpretation and translation services in Victoria. The Committee reported that a large proportion of childcare services in Victoria are solely funded by the Commonwealth Government; however, many of these services are not eligible to use Commonwealth-funded language services.

Inquiry participants emphasised the need for the Commonwealth Government to extend access to free interpreting services through the national Translation and Interpreting Service (TIS) to all childcare services, in the same way that state-funded kindergartens are eligible to access the Victorian interpreting service. The Victorian Government supports this and is committed to advocating to the Commonwealth for this change.

Supporting the early childhood sector to work with language services

The Victorian Government funds interpreters for departmental programs and funded services, including early childhood services (such as the MCH Service and kindergarten service providers), public health services and local councils.

The Government also provides guidance on how to use language services effectively, including its:

- 'Using interpreting services' website which includes guidelines on preparing and arranging for an interpreter, using translation services, and online language accessibility
- *How to work with interpreting and translating services guide* (DoH)
- *Language Services Policy* (DoH) which supports and responds to the needs of linguistically diverse people including migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum, and identifies when language services should be offered based on policy requirements and best practice

- *Interpreting and Translation Services Operations Guide* (DET)

Further, in 2020, DET commissioned Foundation House to develop fact sheets to support the use of interpreters by kindergarten providers.

Both DoH and DET will consider the development of specific language service guidelines for early childhood settings. In the meantime, greater promotion of the existing guidelines may support consistent implementation and adoption of language services across MCH services and in other early childhood settings.

CHILDHOOD HEALTH SERVICES

MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH

Recommendation 23

That the Victorian Government review the evaluation findings from the Group Pregnancy Care study with a view to fund the broad implementation of the model in appropriate community settings for mothers from refugee backgrounds.

Recommendation 24

That the Victorian Government, the Municipal Association of Victoria and community groups work together to develop a Maternal and Child Health Service Best Practice Toolkit for Cultural Inclusiveness. It should include strategies to engage and support culturally diverse families on matters relating to:

- translating materials in the main languages of surrounding communities
- alternative ways of communicating with families, such as text message reminders for appointments
- adopting uniform enrolment processes for MCH services and kindergartens
- flexible appointment arrangements, such as home visits
- outreach services
- new parent groups in community languages
- use of bilingual and bicultural workers.

Recommendation 25

That the Victorian Government and the Municipal Association of Victoria review the flexible funding component of its current funding model of Maternal and Child Health services to allow for extended consultations, additional appointments, and home visits for families from refugee backgrounds.

Recommendation 26

That the Victorian Government ensure that Maternal and Child Health services undertake initial appointments in the home where families from refugee backgrounds arrive in Victoria with a young child.

Recommendation 27

That the Victorian Government identify families from refugee backgrounds as a priority access group for the Enhanced Maternal and Child Health Service.

Recommendation 28

That the Victorian Government fund additional Maternal and Child Health service consultations, where needed and potentially beyond when children turn three, for families from refugee backgrounds.

Recommendation 29

That the Victorian Government ensure that Early Parenting Centres are culturally accessible and safe, and that all staff routinely participate in training to enhance their cultural competency and trauma-informed care practices.

Perinatal services in Victoria

The Committee identified a need for trauma-informed, continuity of care programs that support culturally diverse families. The Inquiry called, in particular, for an increased focus on those from refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, from pre-pregnancy to birth and the introduction to the MCH Service. Group Pregnancy Care was identified as an important model to support vulnerable women through the perinatal period. The Inquiry recommended that, following review of the

evaluation findings from the Group Pregnancy Care study, that this model be broadly implemented in appropriate community settings for mothers from refugee backgrounds.

The Group Pregnancy Care research findings from Murdoch Children's Research Institute (Bridging the Gap) are expected in March 2021. The findings should inform development of models of pregnancy care for mothers from refugee backgrounds.

In the meantime, DoH will continue to support health services to expand models of care that improve continuity for all women with increased needs or vulnerability, such as the Northern Hospital's Maternity Partnerships Project.

Participation of culturally diverse families in MCH services

The MCH Service plays an important role in optimising the health, development, safety, learning and wellbeing of children from culturally diverse communities.

The Committee identified that culturally diverse families may engage more with MCH services if bicultural and bilingual staff worked alongside MCH nurses as paraprofessionals to assist in building trusting relationships between families and MCH nurses, and to support nurses to screen for language and developmental delays.

The *MCH Service Guidelines* (2019) provide guidance and advice about culturally competent service delivery. In the *MCH Program Standards* (2009), culturally competent care is a criterion to measure delivery of universal MCH service access.

Further, the monthly MCH Service Bulletin and bi-annual statewide MCH Nurse Conference provide professional development opportunities for MCH services. These can include sharing of experiences and approaches, which may include place-based best-practice approaches to cultural inclusiveness.

The Victorian Government will pursue opportunities to develop a best practice toolkit that supports a place-based approach to engage and support culturally diverse families. This will supplement supports already in place to encourage best practice for cultural inclusiveness, such as:

- appointment reminders for MCH App users
- comprehensive follow-up by MCH services to encourage ongoing attendance at KAS consultations if a family's engagement is poor or inconsistent
- council-wide standardised kindergarten enrolment via a local government's Central Enrolment scheme (where available)

MCH Service, Brimbank

During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Brimbank City Council MCH team provided a phone-based assessment and brought clients into the centre if there was an identified concern.

The team found that local CALD families, and particularly some Vietnamese families, were anxious about attending the centre for an appointment, even when the nurse had a concern and wanted to review their baby's health.

Brimbank has a BEAR Bus (early years outreach bus) fitted out with MCH equipment. During the second wave of the pandemic, it used the bus to service vulnerable families.

Assessments were conducted over the phone, then the BEAR attended clients' homes. Clients were happy to receive this 'kerbside service', with nurses using full personal protective equipment to complete the assessments.

Many clients reported an increase in feelings of isolation and anxiety during this time, and welcomed the physical presence of the nurse.

While Brimbank's Universal MCH program has returned to face-to-face assessments, the Enhanced MCH program stills uses the bus regularly to see high-need families.

- additional consultations, home visits and additional outreach activities via the Universal MCH program's flexible funding component
- culturally specific parent groups.

Structural barriers to engaging with families from refugee backgrounds

The Inquiry heard that structural barriers can compromise the experience of culturally diverse families, and their ability to engage with MCH services. The Universal MCH program's flexible funding component offers additional support to children and families, including refugee families, in addition to the 10 KAS consultations.

Designed to support accessibility and engagement, this support includes:

- additional consultations
- telephone consultations
- drop-in group sessions
- community-strengthening activities
- an additional family violence consultation.

To ensure additional supports meet and respond to community and family needs, individual MCH service providers determine how their flexible funding is used within their local government area.

The Enhanced MCH program – which has significantly expanded from 2018/19 to now support 15 per cent of vulnerable children aged up to three years old – also provides flexible, targeted care to vulnerable families with a focus on building parent capacity, including through additional hours of support.

From 2018, MCH services have also been funded to deliver additional family violence consultations for families experiencing or at risk of experiencing family violence. With about 25 to 30 per cent of MCH service activity dedicated to delivering universal additional supports, these activities and the Enhanced MCH program can take place in the home, community or at an MCH centre.

The principles of the MCH funding model are determined through a Memorandum of Understanding between DoH and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV). DoH will continue to work with MAV to review and consider best practice for the MCH funding model.

In addition, the Victorian Government will work with settlement services to develop formal processes to ensure MCH services are notified of the arrival of new families in their local government area. This will help to enable connections with early years services as early as possible.

Extending MCH services

The Victorian Government is committed to exploring opportunities to improve engagement of children between the ages of two and five, where needed. It acknowledges the importance of continually reviewing early childhood service provision against community needs and the best available evidence. As such, DoH has commissioned a review of the evidence on surveillance and screening tools, interventions and health promotion for children and families in the early years.

Screening tools and interventions will be assessed to determine whether they are appropriate for culturally and linguistically diverse populations, and the views of diverse community research experts will be sought. Recommendations from this review will inform ongoing review and improvement of early years services.

Following the current evaluation of the Enhanced MCH program, the MCH Program Guidelines may be reviewed if the service eligibility criteria does not sufficiently support the inclusion of families from refugee backgrounds.

Early Parenting Centres

The 2019/20 State Budget committed to expanding Victoria's Early Parenting Centre (EPC) network from three to 10, with new centres to be built in both regional and metropolitan areas.

The strategic framework for expanding Victoria's EPC network is based on the principles of equity of access and responsiveness to diverse families. This means removing barriers to access and providing a culturally safe service that responds to the different needs and concerns of Victorians from diverse cultural backgrounds.

The expanded EPC network will aim to address barriers to access, and to tailor support for culturally and linguistically diverse people including migrants, refugees and asylum seekers. The establishment of new EPCs is an opportunity to design explicitly for diversity and to address access barriers at each planning and design phase.

MENTAL HEALTH AND DISABILITY

Recommendation 30

That the Victorian Government identify children and young people of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds as a priority group for access to child and youth mental health services.

Recommendation 31

That the Victorian Government collaborate with community groups to develop culturally appropriate information to improve awareness of mental health issues among culturally diverse communities and how to access support.

Recommendation 32

That the Victorian Government work with culturally diverse communities and relevant stakeholders to develop culturally appropriate and accessible information to improve awareness of disabilities, language and developmental delays, and how to access support.

Recommendation 33

That the Victorian Government explore how it can build a culturally diverse speech therapy workforce to ensure speech and language assessments are conducted in a child's first language.

Recommendation 34

That the Victorian Government advocate to the National Disability Insurance Agency to fund the Translation and Interpreting Service to provide translations of key assessment reports and material into parents' first languages.

Recommendation 35

That the Victorian Government provide ongoing funding to allow children with a disability whose families are seeking asylum to access early intervention supports.

Recommendation 36

That the Victorian Government advocate to the National Disability Insurance Agency to require Early Childhood Early Intervention services to consider refugee status in triage to ensure children receive timely and appropriate access to support services.

Recommendation 37

That the Victorian Government advocate to the National Disability Insurance Agency and Early Childhood Early Intervention partners to ensure that Early Childhood Early Intervention access is

based on function rather than named diagnosis in line with National Disability Insurance Scheme eligibility requirements.

Recommendation 38

That the Victorian Government advocate to the National Disability Insurance Agency that it implement its *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Strategy 2018* and support culturally diverse families to navigate the National Disability Insurance Scheme.

A broad range of organisations shared their expertise and ideas with the Committee in submissions and at public hearings, regarding early childhood engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities in mental health and disability services.

These insights highlighted the many barriers that culturally diverse families face to accessing these services. The Inquiry findings and recommendations emphasise the importance of culturally appropriate and accessible information to improve awareness of mental health issues among communities, and how to access support.

Mental health

The Committee heard about barriers to awareness of mental health services among culturally diverse families, as well as barriers to overall 'mental health literacy' which can in turn prevent communities from receiving appropriate support.

Mental health services

In October 2018, the Victorian Government announced the Royal Commission into Victoria's Mental Health System (the Royal Commission). The final report emphasises improving the system to respond better to the mental health needs of women in the perinatal period, children, youth and families, including those from diverse backgrounds.

The Victorian Government recognises the importance of prioritising access to mental health services for children and young people of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds, and is pursuing opportunities to respond to the recommendations of both the Royal Commission and the Inquiry.

Building mental health literacy

Expanding on initiatives established in response to COVID-19 in 2020, DoH is supporting the development of culturally appropriate, accessible information to improve awareness of mental health issues and access to support among culturally diverse communities.

This has included providing funding to:

Enhanced MCH support, Dandenong

During the second wave of COVID-19 in Victoria, the City of Greater Dandenong MCH provided service to a Sudanese single mother with three children – two school-age children undertaking home schooling and a newborn.

This mother had significant mental health concerns and was socially isolated. Referred into the Enhanced MCH program the mother was initially engaged over the phone. However, during the consultation, the nurse was alerted to potential problems with parent-infant interaction.

The nurse decided to conduct a home visit. She wore PPE, which was also provided to the mother (for both security and reassurance). The nurse discovered that eye gaze was an issue. The client was referred to the GP and the infant eventually diagnosed with bilateral cataracts. The mother, who was struggling mental health issues and had little support, was understandably distressed.

She had been struggling to stay connected to her psychologist, with appointments at the time via telehealth only.

A social worker in the Enhanced MCH program supported the mother to re-engage with her psychologist, and to form social connections in her neighbourhood and with local services.

- Foundation House, to help people of refugee backgrounds identify signs of mental illness early and prevent symptoms from escalating, as well as to co-design resources on mental health with new and emerging communities
- Red Cross and the Asylum Seeker Resource Centre, to deliver practical assistance so asylum seekers and other temporary migrants can engage meaningfully in mental health supports
- the Victorian Multicultural Commission to establish an online hub to provide a 'one-stop-shop' platform to support multicultural Victorians to better access mental health resources and support
- Neami National, to dedicate capacity in their Partners in Wellbeing program to engage culturally diverse communities to make safe, warm referrals to mental health and wellbeing supports.

Further, DoH supports initiatives to improve the awareness and capability of the mental health workforce to respond to and support culturally diverse children and young people accessing mental health services. This includes providing funding for:

- the Centre for Mental Health Learning, which helps to coordinate learning and development activities, practice support resources, research, increased collaboration and access to expertise to strengthen and sustain a flexible, curious and knowledgeable mental health workforce
- the Victorian Transcultural Mental Health Service, which delivers a range of capacity-building activities to support the mental health of diverse people, communities and systems.

Disability

Disability awareness and accessing support

The Committee heard that cultural attitudes towards disability among culturally diverse communities can negatively impact awareness of disabilities, and of language and developmental delays.

DoH supports initiatives that seek to improve awareness of disabilities, and of language and developmental delays, and how to access support. This includes by providing funding to the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health (CEH) to manage and improve the Health Translations portal of links to high-quality translated health information and resources, including on disability, child development and supports. CEH received additional funding in 2018/19 to improve linkages to translated resources from the Better Health Channel.

For families attending Supported Playgroups and MCH services, resources are available in community languages, and Supported Playgroup facilitators have been trained in assisting language development and communication skills in young children.

Identifying learning and developmental delays in culturally diverse children

The Inquiry found that while early identification and intervention leads to improved developmental outcomes, there are many challenges in diagnosing disabilities and assessing language and developmental delays in culturally diverse children, including learning and developmental delays being attributed to issues with learning and using English.

To support early identification of learning and developmental issues, and interventions in response to these, MCH nurses undertook training in 2018/19 to build their skills and confidence in detecting early signs of autism spectrum disorder in children under three. As part of the Universal MCH program, MCH nurses routinely screen for developmental issues throughout KAS consultations, particularly at the 12, 18 and 24-month visits.

Speech Pathology Australia set the program accreditation standards for the speech pathologist workforce and are working to grow and support an increasingly diverse and culturally responsive workforce.

The Victorian Government will continue to consider opportunities to support diversity in the speech pathology workforce to meet the intent of the Inquiry. These include:

- considering how qualified interpreters may be best used to support language assessments
- supporting a review of program accreditation standards to align paediatric practice with best practice for culturally diverse communities
- supporting the university sector to provide incentives to support a diverse student intake.

The National Disability Insurance Scheme

The Victorian Government will advocate to the National Disability Insurance Agency (NDIA) on the Inquiry's findings and recommendations as part of its ongoing consultations, collaboration and feedback on NDIA initiatives, policies and processes.

This will include pursuing recommendations of the Inquiry with NDIA during its consultations, currently underway, on the following reforms:

- access and eligibility operations and processes, including independent assessments
- planning, personalised budgets and plan flexibility
- supporting young children and their families early, to reach their full potential.

From 2021/22, NDIA plans to implement independent assessments for access and planning decisions for young children. Victoria is advocating to the Commonwealth to increase its consultation with the sector to understand how these proposed reforms will affect the sector.

Matters arising through the Inquiry that the Victorian Government proposes to raise with the Commonwealth include:

- the provision of accessible and culturally appropriate information and support on how to access the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS) in the context of implementing NDIA's *Cultural and Linguistic Diversity Strategy*, National Community Connectors program and Early Childhood Early Intervention (ECEI) approach
- the availability of culturally diverse and culturally competent early childhood practitioners and enhancing cultural competency within the NDIA and its early childhood partners
- the need for assessments to be conducted in the child's first language, as well as for the provision of reports, materials and resources, and NDIS plans in parents' first languages
- ensuring increased visibility of CALD communities through provision of information and links to services in the child's local community and access to mainstream supports
- the need to monitor the child's progress and assist with transition phases in their life, including by assisting their family
- ensuring greater and earlier access to support without delays, as well as identifying and addressing barriers to accessing appropriate supports through the NDIA ECEI approach (for example, providing short-term early intervention through the NDIA Early Childhood partners, for children who are ineligible for the NDIS due to residency, as well as referral to the DET's Continuity of Support program of Early Childhood Intervention.)

Continuity of Support

The Victorian Government, through DET, provides Continuity of Support (COS) to children who do not have Australian residency status, and therefore are not eligible to receive funding through the NDIS. DET funds family-centred therapeutic supports for these children, delivered by early

childhood intervention providers. ECEI partners appointed by NDIA play a key role in referring children who are non-Australian residents to the COS program.

In the context of the Inquiry's findings and recommendations, DET will work with NDIA to ensure appropriate monitoring of children's residency status and eligibility for the NDIS, as well as timely and seamless transitions between service systems. This includes culturally appropriate and customised approaches for children and families of a refugee background.

CHILDHOOD LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

AWARENESS OF THE IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LEARNING

Recommendation 39

That the Victorian Government issue a clear and simple policy statement aimed at improving parents' understanding of the benefits of early childhood education. The statement should address a range of important factors including brain development, the role of parents as first educators and the value of play-based learning. These messages should be easily accessible to culturally diverse parents, be translated into community languages and available in Easy English and other accessible formats.

Recommendation 40

That the Victorian Government work with communities to undertake a public awareness campaign, based on the policy statement recommended in Recommendation 39, to improve understanding among culturally diverse communities of the benefits of early childhood education. The campaign should communicate important messages regarding the role of parents, the importance of play-based learning and options for early childhood education and care. The campaign should cover all areas of Victoria, using effective mediums including information sessions, translated materials and community radio.

Recommendation 41

That the Victorian Government develop strategies to create positions and harness community leaders and contacts to play a role in sharing information around the positive impacts of early childhood education. These strategies and programs should be developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders including culturally diverse communities, local councils and community organisations. This activity should be strongly linked to the public awareness campaign recommended in Recommendation 40.

Recommendation 42

That the Victorian Government continue to work with early childhood services providers such as Maternal and Child Health services, community hubs and libraries to ensure that they act as key referral points for culturally diverse families to learn about the benefits of early childhood education and the services that they can access. Such work should include:

- reviewing all current gaps in information to create improved linkages between early childhood services providers in local areas
- standardising the provision of information about early childhood education services to families.

The Inquiry report emphasised the need to increase targeted education in culturally diverse communities about the benefits of engaging in early childhood education opportunities, noting that these benefits are even greater for children from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Committee called for the provision of clear and accessible information, and awareness campaigns, and recommended utilising the influence of community leaders.

The Victorian Government acknowledges that effective communication is critical to the engagement of culturally and linguistically diverse communities in early childhood education.

Public awareness campaigns

Victorian Government departments and agencies are required to ensure that Victoria's multicultural communities are informed of government services and programs. In-line with Whole of Victorian Government guidelines, all existing early childhood education campaign advertising includes a minimum expenditure on multicultural media of at least five per cent of the overall budget. Some

early childhood education advertising campaigns will have a higher portion of investment in multicultural media, to reflect the target audience and strategic approach.

This advertising commitment is coupled with the production of translated materials for early childhood services, providers and stakeholders to distribute. In 2020, this included:

- translation of 17 key maternal, infant and child health promotion and safety information resources into 10 of the most common community languages
- translation of the Victorian Government's 'baby bundle' passport-booklet into 10 of the most common community languages. Available to first-time parents/carers, the booklets contain information to help parents navigate the transition to parenthood, with content licensed from the Raising Children Network. It includes information on sleep and settling, safety, and reading and sharing books with baby, as well as a list of emergency contacts
- in the context of COVID-19 restrictions, translation of key messages about attending kindergarten, learning from home and the importance of play-based learning into 12 community languages, including those of new and emerging local communities. The translated messages were disseminated in June 2020 in a format which allowed for the content to be easily sent via text message and shared in social media groups. The messages were shared through both early childhood education and care and multicultural sector organisations and were available on the DET website
- translation of a letter in plain English into easy simplified English and more than 30 community languages, including those of new and emerging communities. This helped early childhood education and care services to communicate with families about:
 - the return to on-site learning in Term 4, 2020
 - schools being ready to support children starting Prep in 2021
 - what families can do to stay healthy and safeThis letter was disseminated via a range of DET and community channels and housed on the Victorian Government's COVID-19 website (coronavirus.vic.gov.au)
- translated messages and content (social media 'tiles' and audio messages) focused on transition to school and enrolment in kindergarten in more than 30 languages. These were shared with families by community groups and leaders, and through DET's networks and communication channels
- expanding availability of 'Kindergarten Kids Love to Learn' material from three languages to more than 30 languages, including those of new and emerging communities.

DET also contributed support to fka Children's Services to develop a 'Learning at Home' webpage, with translated resources for families, and deliver a webinar for services and educators – the 'Engaging multilingual families in learning at home forum' (August 2020).

The Inquiry's findings and recommendations will be incorporated into future advertising campaigns and communications activities, with culturally and linguistically diverse community groups (particularly new arrivals to Victoria and people of a refugee background) as a core target audience. Ethno-specific communication channels, such as community radio, will be utilised, and communications will be translated and available in accessible formats such as Easy English.

Communicating the benefits of early childhood education

DET's existing communications activities and materials include messaging on the importance and benefits of early childhood education and care. Some of these materials are translated and have been distributed to multicultural communities. In light of the Inquiry's findings and recommendations, DET will also:

- develop a statement to improve parents and carers understanding of the benefits and importance of early childhood education. As per the Inquiry's recommendation, this statement will be available in Easy English and translated into community languages. The

statement will be shared with community groups for further dissemination, and published on DET's channels

- build awareness and understanding of the benefits of Three-Year-Old Kindergarten and early childhood education by partnering with intermediary organisations and influencers, such as community groups, to develop and implement engaging, respectful and useful communications
- work with key partner organisations such as Foundation House, to develop strategies to create positions and harness community leaders and contacts to play a role in sharing information on the benefits of early childhood education
- review and update its general kindergarten communications materials to further promote the benefits of kindergarten and drive enrolment and participation among culturally and linguistically diverse communities, including those more recently arrived or of refugee background. This will include:
 - simplifying and translating existing resources into a range of appropriate languages
 - developing new resources
 - distributing resources through MCH services, playgroups and libraries.

PLAYGROUPS

Recommendation 43

That the Victorian Government recognise the value of all forms of playgroups, including community playgroups and supported playgroups, in helping to engage culturally diverse communities in early opportunities for education and acting as a soft entry point to other services.

Recommendation 44

That the Victorian Government allocate specific, ongoing and flexible funding to support playgroups that target culturally diverse communities. This should include specific support for trauma-informed playgroups that assist families from refugee backgrounds.

The Committee identified that playgroups bring families and their preschool-aged children together to engage in play-based learning and social activities, and that both multicultural and culturally specific playgroups are highly valuable for culturally diverse communities.

Playgroups can enhance child development outcomes, improve school readiness, encourage play-based learning, provide information and support for parents and reduce social isolation. MCH services and public libraries are well placed to encourage participation in early childhood services such as playgroups.

The Victorian Government recognises the role of both community and supported playgroups in encouraging social connections and supporting engagement in early childhood education and has focused its investment on providing a targeted Supported Playgroups program for families with children from birth to school age experiencing disadvantage.

This ongoing program uses evidence-based strategies (smalltalk) to improve the quality of the early home-learning environment and everyday interactions to enhance children's wellbeing and developmental outcomes. The program is led by trained, qualified facilitators and about 50 per cent of participants are culturally diverse. Service providers use interpreters, bilingual facilitators and translated resources to support the engagement of culturally diverse families.

Since 2017, funding has also been provided to the Victorian Cooperative on Children's Services for Ethnic Groups (VICSEG) New Futures to run culturally specific supported playgroups and parent groups, recognising that culturally specific groups provide a range of benefits to refugee and asylum seeker families. Playgroups not only promote healthy development in children but also

provide a means for newly arrived families to build connections and access support. Additionally, culturally specific playgroups support bi-lingualism or multi-lingualism in children. This not only benefits children's cognitive development but enables families to remain connected to their culture. Investments in culturally specific playgroups facilitates successful settlement outcomes and supports the Government's social cohesion agenda.

In 2019, the Victorian Government provided funding to VICSEG New Futures to continue the delivery of culturally specific supported playgroups, 'Learning Together' programs and 'All Talk' programs in the north, west and southeast areas of Melbourne. (The innovative 'All Talk' program delivers bilingual supported playgroups which encourage children's bilingualism while also supporting parents to learn and practise English.)

The supported playgroups, 'Learning Together' and 'All Talk' programs are attended by parents and their children from backgrounds including: Assyrian-Chaldean, Iranian, Syrian, Burmese, Horn of African, Chinese, Vietnamese, Tamil, Indian, Afghani, Hazara, Bangladeshi, Nepalese, Philippine, South Sudanese and Pakistani. Throughout this time, more than 650 children and their parents have benefitted from this program.

The 2020/21 State Budget has allocated funding for the continuation of Supported Playgroups as part of its funding package to support the economic recovery of Victoria's multicultural communities and young people. Funding will continue to support playgroups that target culturally diverse communities, especially refugee and asylum seeker families.

Community playgroups also play an important role in connecting local families. The Commonwealth Government funds the establishment and maintenance of Victorian community playgroups by funding Playgroup Victoria to perform this role.

Playgroup Victoria was previously funded by the Victorian Government to develop resources to assist families to connect with and participate in community playgroups. Utilising the MCH workforce to promote the resources, they support first time parents to access social support and connection to their local community. These resources are now available for all MCH services to access and share with families to promote the benefits of playgroup.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AND CARE

Recommendation 45

That the Victorian Government immediately extend eligibility criteria for Early Start Kindergarten to include children of refugee and asylum seeker backgrounds as an interim measure until the roll out of universal three-year-old kindergarten is completed.

Recommendation 46

That the Victorian Government implement strategies to improve the participation of culturally diverse families in kindergarten where they may be experiencing cost pressures with paying fees.

Recommendation 47

That the Victorian Government adopt a state-wide approach to kindergarten enrolment, with a single, easily accessible and central enrolment process across Victoria. This should include consideration of a single enrolment form, which can be translated into relevant community languages for each local government area and tailored to suit local community needs where appropriate.

Recommendation 48

That the Victorian Government promote the use of cultural inclusion support packages under School Readiness Funding, as well as other packages, that are targeted towards building inclusion for culturally diverse families and their children in early childhood education and care services.

Recommendation 49

That the Victorian Government consider establishing requirements for the development of cultural inclusion strategies (or other actions aimed at inclusion) within early learning settings such as kindergartens.

The Victorian Government remains committed to delivering its reforms in early childhood education and care to ensure that Victorian children can be supported to have the best start in life. This includes:

- in an Australian first, investing nearly \$5 billion over this decade to deliver funded universal Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. From 2022, every three-year-old will have access to at least five hours per week in a funded kindergarten program, increasing to 15 hours by 2029
- investing \$160 million over four years in School Readiness Funding (SRF), another Australian-first program. The aim of SRF is to provide needs-based programs and supports to teachers, educators, children and services to reduce educational disadvantage
- the Child Information Sharing Scheme, which enables authorised organisations to appropriately share information with each other to promote children's wellbeing and safety. The Department is investing \$43.4 million over four years to support implementation of the scheme, with early childhood providers and schools to join from 2020
- the Early Childhood Language program, which provides funding to approximately 160 early childhood services to employ a bilingual language teacher to deliver a language program.

Encouraging kindergarten participation and attendance for all children, including those with a culturally and linguistically diverse background, is even more important in the context of these major, nation-leading investments in Victoria's kindergarten program.

DET continues to oversee a range of other initiatives and targeted support to encourage kindergarten participation and alleviate cost pressures for families, especially fees. This now includes the extension of Early Start Kindergarten to include children from refugee backgrounds.

Other strategies to improve participation

As noted in the Government submission to the Inquiry, the Kindergarten Fee Subsidy promotes kindergarten participation by enabling children with a refugee or humanitarian visa (as well as children from other target cohorts) to attend a funded 15-hour kindergarten program free of charge in the year before school.

Further support is provided via the Pre-Purchased Places program which reserves kindergarten places in approved services to enable children with a refugee or humanitarian visa (as well as other vulnerable and disadvantaged cohorts) to attend kindergarten outside the normal enrolment timelines and processes.

DET also funds access to kindergarten for children of asylum seekers who have not yet had their status as refugees assessed, even though the Commonwealth does not provide funding to Victoria for this.

The Victorian Government is continuing its programs that support kindergarten participation and inclusion, including the Preschool Field Officer Program and Kindergarten Inclusion Support, and is expanding its Access to Early Learning program.

Access to Early Learning

Access to Early Learning (AEL) currently operates its outreach service across seven sites in Victoria. Its effective, targeted early intervention program identifies vulnerable three-year-old children from families with complex needs and enables them to access and fully participate in two years of quality, universal early education and care.

AEL covers the cost of a 15-hour per week kindergarten program for all children engaged. It provides a degree-qualified facilitator who helps enrol participating children in kindergarten, and works with families to address any barriers to their engagement in kindergarten. The facilitator also works with families to strengthen the home learning environment through in-home learning interventions.

A significant proportion of families and children engaged in AEL are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. In 2019, approximately 31 per cent of all AEL families spoke a language other than English as their main language at home.

The 2020/21 State Budget allocated funding to expand AEL to seven additional sites. The expansion will focus on public housing communities and supporting newly arrived migrant families to access kindergarten.

Central Registration and Enrolment

The Victorian Government is committed to ensuring that children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can access the state's world-class kindergarten system. Central Registration and Enrolment provides an easily accessible way for families to secure a place for their child in kindergarten, without having to work through the different processes and priorities used by individual service providers. It also enables state-funded kindergarten places to be allocated equitably to eligible children, in-line with DET's Priority of Access criteria.

In February 2020, DET undertook an extensive consultation and co-design process to develop a suite of best-practice guides and resources to support families and carers registering their children in kindergarten.

The best-practice model is underpinned by six principles that promote consistent, inclusive and equitable access for families, service providers and support services. The model is supported by practical guides, tools and templates which can be easily adopted and tailored to meet councils' different needs. The resources include a detailed annual process for operating a best-practice

scheme, including communication materials for families and service providers, relevant forms (such as a standard kindergarten enrolment form) and templates.

Central enrolment will become more important in supporting access to kindergarten, especially for vulnerable and disadvantaged children. This is due to:

- the introduction of universal Three-Year-Old Kindergarten. The significant increase in children in kindergarten programs will make it vital for services to have accurate, consistent and timely data about the demand for places, allowing them to effectively monitor and proactively manage their capacity and the utilisation of services
- the need to respond to the ongoing social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. This includes mitigating any effects on kindergarten engagement and participation, including for families from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds who may find it more challenging to navigate the kindergarten system, and for families who may be experiencing increasing vulnerability because of the pandemic.

DET will continue to work with MAV and local government to further enhance central enrolment processes across Victoria. This will include developing ways to help families that are likely to experience language and cultural barriers to find and enrol in local kindergarten services.

Promoting inclusion

A consistent theme throughout the Inquiry was the need for services to provide inclusive and welcoming spaces for culturally diverse families.

The School Readiness Funding (SRF) Menu is a catalogue of evidence-informed programs, supports and professional services. It helps kindergartens spend their SRF funding on high-quality items that enhance children's development in the three priority areas – Communication (language development), Wellbeing (social and emotional), and Access and Inclusion.

As detailed in its submission to the Inquiry, the Victorian Government also manages a state-wide contract with fka Children's Services. fka delivers programs to support kindergartens to develop and embed a cultural inclusion strategy to ensure their pedagogy and practice respects multiple ways of being and understanding, and that children are supported in learning English as an additional language.

DET is also expanding support provided through Foundation House, building on the existing DET-funded Early Years Program, to assist Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) services in both metropolitan and regional areas to proactively engage families from a refugee background experiencing barriers to accessing kindergarten. This specialist support will explore the barriers and enablers to inclusion and develop strategies to promote the full inclusion of families from refugee backgrounds in ECEC services, providing professional learning, resources, consultation and advice.

Central Enrolment Development Grants

Central Registration and Enrolment Development Grants have supported (or are supporting) councils to explore the feasibility of a central enrolment scheme; establish a scheme; expand an existing scheme; and explore proactive ways of engaging vulnerable families. To date, this has included councils:

- improving their engagement of vulnerable children, in particular engagement of children eligible for Early Start Kindergarten
- developing kindergarten and enrolment promotional materials in community languages
- working more closely with MCH services to promote kindergarten and identify eligible children as part of the regular Key Ages and Stages consultations.

In partnership with MAV, the lessons from these projects were shared with councils via an online Showcase event in 2020 and were incorporated into the Central Registration and Enrolment best-practice materials.

COVID-19 AND EARLY CHILDHOOD

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore the unique challenges faced by Victoria's multicultural communities in terms of accessing public health information and navigating essential services.

Throughout the pandemic, the Victorian Government has worked to improve public health messaging for Victoria's diverse multicultural communities. This began at the start of the pandemic, and the Government is translating vital information into 58 languages which can be accessed quickly and easily online. A dedicated 'coronavirus hotline' has also been established to provide advice 24 hours a day, with access to interpreters, and an in-language advertising campaign ran throughout 2020.

The Government has invested an additional \$3 million to boost interpreting and translating services. This includes increasing access to interpreters, including in early childhood education facilities, and upskilling translators and interpreters on COVID-19-specific language translations via the Centre for Culture, Ethnicity and Health.

The Government has also implemented several initiatives to engage effectively with multicultural communities throughout the pandemic. These include:

- increasing audio and video in-language content, such as social media tiles, and production of a series of in-language videos in 56 languages with community ambassadors to share news of restrictions and how to stay safe
- funding a daily broadcast multilingual news service in 22 languages in partnership with the National Ethnic and Multicultural Broadcasters' Council, for distribution to Victorian community radio stations and online
- establishing a WhatsApp Community Leaders group to enable information to be shared quickly with multicultural community leaders and communities
- utilising long-established communication channels of the Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) to distribute health and other information via stakeholder meetings, the VMC Connect digital engagement platform, and VMC digital channels such as its newsletter, Facebook, Instagram and website.

Complementing this communications and translation work is a wide range of engagement strategies for collaborating with diverse communities. These include:

- 23 roundtables held from 3 June 2020 to 13 October 2020, to share critical information and gain insights into community experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic
- consultations with residents of public housing towers through the North Melbourne and Flemington Working Group, established on 7 July 2020. This group was co-chaired by the Victorian Multicultural Chairperson
- Multicultural Media Forums (July and November 2020), held to strengthen media relationships and identify opportunities for collaboration between government and multicultural media.

In August 2020, the CALD Communities Taskforce was established to coordinate Whole of Victorian Government engagement, communications and support for Victoria's multicultural communities. Within four months of its establishment, more than \$5.4 million had been allocated to more than 160 multicultural and multifaith organisations to help support people to stay safe during the pandemic. This funding has supported almost 92,000 individuals from more than 9000 families/households.

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION SUPPORT DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND LOCKDOWN

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented additional challenges to families experiencing vulnerability. Children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, and in particular those from refugee backgrounds or are newly arrived, already face barriers to attending and participating in a high-quality early childhood education program.

It is also likely that these cohorts of children faced additional barriers to engaging in learning from home during lockdown periods.

Measures to address these issues include:

- supporting children to re-engage with on-site learning after a period of non-attendance
- addressing the impact of disrupted learning on their transition to school and participation in kindergarten in 2021
- encouraging and supporting kindergarten services to stay connected and work with vulnerable families.

From the start of the pandemic, DET encouraged kindergarten services to stay connected and work with vulnerable families to support attendance. The key message was that re-establishing on-site attendance for all children (health permitting) would support their wellbeing, learning and development, and reduce the risk of disengagement from kindergarten. Services were encouraged to contact families experiencing vulnerability and were reminded that some may require extra support to re-engage with early childhood education and care.

Early childhood engagement with CALD families during COVID-19

Key organisations in the multicultural sector working in early childhood education during the pandemic offered important insights. These included:

- that some early childhood services were encountering difficulties in engaging with culturally and linguistically diverse families about their options in terms of learning from home or continuing to attend kindergarten
- that some refugee-background families left early childhood programs or were delayed in their return after the first wave of the pandemic in Victoria, or scaled back their child's attendance during Term 4, 2020 due to concerns about COVID-19
- the observation that while families may have continued to have concerns when restrictions eased, some parents (particularly those with school-aged children), said they felt it was better for their children to attend a formal education setting, as they did not feel well-equipped to support home-schooling/remote learning.

More time is required to understand the full impact and implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for culturally and linguistically diverse families and children, as well as service providers, services and early childhood educators.

An initial consideration for CALD children and other vulnerable cohorts was re-engagement back to on-site learning after a period of non-attendance as well as addressing the impact of disrupted learning as children and families prepared for the transition to school.

In May 2020, Foundation House and fka Children's Services were appointed the direct contact points for early childhood education and care services requiring additional advice on engaging and maintaining connections with a range of CALD families. These organisations are existing DET partners in improving the engagement of refugee-background and multilingual families in early childhood education. It was agreed that they would work together to ensure a cohesive response for the sector and for multicultural communities.

In addition to supports provided for all children, DET promoted to the early childhood sector:

- the free interpreting service for eligible early childhood services through LanguageLoop
- tip sheets developed by Foundation House for early childhood services including:
 - 'Building partnerships with families from refugee backgrounds'
 - 'Working effectively with interpreters'
 - 'Supporting transitions from early years to school for children and families from refugee backgrounds during COVID-19'
- key messages translated into 12 languages promoting the return to kindergarten and the importance of play-based learning. The 12 languages were Vietnamese, Arabic, Burmese, Chin Hakha, Chinese (simplified and traditional), Dari, Farsi, Karen, Khmer, Tamil and Turkish. These messages were shared with key partners including Foundation House, the Brotherhood of St Laurence and the Victorian Multicultural Commission for dissemination through community channels including through social media.

Support for transition from kindergarten to primary school

As outlined earlier, the 2020/21 State Budget included additional resources and initiatives to support children's transition to school in 2021, for families, early childhood educators and schoolteachers. Many of these activities were funded through the \$26.7 million early childhood education support package for Term 4, announced on 17 September 2020.

These additional supports targeted all children transitioning from kindergarten to school in 2020/21. They included information sessions for families, guidance for early childhood professionals, and professional development to support Foundation teachers to implement differentiated and play-based learning.

In Terms 2 and 3 of 2020, two rounds of Learning from Home grants were also provided to early childhood services not yet receiving SRF funding, to support children's continuity of learning during periods of remote learning. Early childhood services could use the funding to purchase resources or supports listed on the temporary Learning from Home item on the SRF Menu.

School engagement with CALD families

Remote learning was challenging for many students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Existing challenges were exacerbated and there are concerns that the disruption to learning may have long-term impacts on student achievement, wellbeing and mental health.

Many CALD students had to adapt to remote learning while also developing English language and literacy skills. Parents and carers faced additional barriers to supporting their children's learning, due to low digital literacy skills and/or limited English language ability.

Access to information technology and the internet emerged as a key issue for CALD students. Although schools and DET led large-scale initiatives to distribute devices to students across Victoria, there were delays, which affected the ability of some students to engage in remote learning.

During 2020, DET made several adaptations to support students from CALD backgrounds. These included:

- arranging for key resources to be translated into a wide range of community languages and promoted to/through schools, communities, service providers and other stakeholders.
Resources were:
 - 'Repeating a year level' (translated into 35 languages)
 - 'Talking to your child about Coronavirus' (translated into 20 languages),
 - 'Learning from home' (translated into 23 languages)
 - 'Staged return to on-site teaching' (translated into 28 languages)

- increasing the number of languages that resources are translated into based on student data about English as an Additional Language (EAL) and Likely Refugee Background status, and feedback from DET staff, peak community organisations (Foundation House, Centre for Multicultural Youth) and CALD community leaders (via the Victorian Multicultural Commission)
- promoting key translated resources to schools via the Schools Update, the intranet, and regular emails to key stakeholders
- updating internal procedures to ensure that TIS telephone interpreting services were available for CALD parents and carers who called the DET COVID-19 Parent Hotline
- promoting the availability of LanguageLoop telephone interpreting services for schools
- updating guidelines on interpreting and translation services in schools to expand the range of categories and word-count limits for document translations available via LanguageLoop
- creating a new EAL resource package on the FUSE website (a portal to direct teachers and students to educational resources), to support teaching and learning for EAL students, and adding new translated resources on e-safety, in response to concerns raised by peak community organisations about online safety during remote learning
- creating a multicultural campaign to promote key messages about the staged return to onsite schooling. This campaign included social media content (translated into Arabic, simplified Chinese, Punjabi and Vietnamese) and audio recordings (translated into Arabic, Cantonese, Mandarin, Punjabi and Vietnamese).

Some schools increased their use of telephone interpreter services, available through LanguageLoop, to communicate regularly with families, and used the Students at Risk Planning Tool to identify students from refugee backgrounds and provide additional support and assistance.

The Centre for Multicultural Youth (CMY) and Foundation House (DET's existing refugee education support providers) continued to support schools working with students and families from refugee backgrounds. During 2020, both organisations adapted how they deliver programs, providing professional learning, advice and resources to schools across Victoria virtually.

In collaboration with DET, Foundation House published new factsheets to support teachers and school leaders to strengthen understanding of practical strategies to support student learning and wellbeing during COVID-19 restrictions. These were:

- 'Supporting students from refugee backgrounds living in Melbourne's public housing during COVID-19 restrictions'
- 'Supporting students from refugee backgrounds during COVID-19 restrictions'

CMY also developed a series of factsheets to support homework club providers to transition to online program delivery and as restrictions eased, to transition back to face-to-face learning. These were:

- 'Child safety tips for online out of school learning support programs' (OSHLSPs)
- 'Supporting EAL families'
- 'Which online platform should you use for your virtual OSHLSP?'
- 'Online resources'
- 'Returning to face-to-face learning'
- 'Fun activities and games for online homework clubs'
- 'Checklist for returning to face-to-face delivery of OSHLSPs'

As mentioned previously, the 2020/21 State Budget included funding to expand the number of Multicultural Education Aides (MEAs) in schools for 2021. These aides provide a valuable service to schools, students and school communities by assisting with communication between the school

and parents of students from language backgrounds other than English. They also assist students in the classroom in small groups or on a one-to-one basis.

High-need government schools will receive extra funding to engage additional KESOs and MEAs during the 2021 school year. Additional MEAs will support schools to re-engage students from refugee backgrounds, identify students to participate in the Tutor Learning program, and strengthen engagement with families from refugee backgrounds.

Foundation House has also been engaged to provide additional support to MEAs during 2021. This includes:

- designing and delivering 12 online professional learning workshops to build MEA capacity to strengthen engagement between schools and families from refugee backgrounds
- coordinating six MEA networks in targeted locations to provide peer support, tailored advice and resources and access to professional learning
- developing a new suite of 10 online practical resources, such as good practice guides, case studies and videos of professional learning workshops, to be published on the School's In For Refugees website.

EARLY CHILDHOOD HEALTH SERVICE SUPPORT

Maternal and Child Health

The MCH Service continued to provide support to families amid the COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, responding flexibly to the limitations on face-to-face service delivery.

To support alternative service delivery in-line with public health advice issued by the Chief Health Officer, DoH, in partnership with the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), provided key information and direction to MCH services throughout the course of the pandemic response.

Alternative modes of MCH service delivery during COVID-19

Usual face-to-face MCH service delivery was affected at different points during both waves of the pandemic in 2020. Factors included public health restrictions, the availability of personal protective equipment and workforce capacity.

DoH provided advice on service delivery at various points throughout the pandemic response. This advice minimised face-to-face contact when necessary but prioritised contact for children from birth to eight weeks old, as well as Aboriginal parents, infants and children, and those with additional needs or complexity (such as those in the Enhanced MCH program).

Services such as the MCH Line and MCH App continued to be readily available during both waves of Victoria's COVID-19 pandemic. Over-the phone interpreting services were continually available 24 hours daily for families accessing help via the MCH Line.

The MCH App was enhanced to provide families with relevant information about COVID-19. This included responses to common questions about COVID-19, such as the symptoms of COVID-19, the risk of catching COVID-19 and where to seek help and advice.

In 2020, instances of families seeking support in languages other than English across state-wide support services were consistent with previous years. In 2020, around 1400 MCH App downloads were made in languages other than English compared with around 1600 in 2019. Likewise, 220 families requested an interpreter when seeking help via the MCH Line, compared with 240 in 2019.

While some MCH services experienced no change in the number of consultations with multicultural families, others reported an increased number of CALD families engaging with telehealth service delivery modes. This was the case where families were worried about virus transmission and did not want to come into the MCH centre for a consultation.

Additionally, telehealth and phone consultations enabled extended family members to be present. For example, MCH services reported that relatives stranded overseas and unable to return to Australia due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, were able to participate.

The flexibility of telehealth for MCH services, demonstrated COVID-19, should allow it to support future engagement of all families in MCH services. This extension of service provision may be particularly useful for families from CALD communities, and for others with additional needs. While uptake of telehealth and phone consultations was positive, the absence of physical appointments during lockdown periods highlighted challenges for MCH services in maintaining contact and engaging with all children and families.

MCH service delivery during the pandemic, provided mainly through telehealth platforms, presented both challenges and opportunities to engaging culturally and linguistically diverse families across Victoria, and to providing care to families and children. In collaboration with MAV, DoH undertook a detailed review of the introduction of telehealth to MCH services and families in response to the pandemic. This review explored what MCH services did differently as a result of the pandemic, and the impacts of telehealth changes, then identified potential improvements.

Informed by the recommendations of this review, new Clinical Practice Guidelines for MCH nurses (due in mid-2021) will consider the specific needs of CALD communities when delivering MCH services via telehealth to support family-centred, culturally safe and child-safe practice guidance.

Interpreter services

LanguageLoop continued to provide interpreting services for MCH services during COVID-19. While instances of on-site interpreting services in 2020 remained consistent with previous years, LanguageLoop provided more than double the number of over-the-phone interpreting services. In 2020, there were 5737 instances of over-the-phone interpreter services, compared with 2654 in 2019. The most common languages interpreted were Arabic (1174), Vietnamese (801), Burmese (391), Dari (298) Mandarin (253) and Karen (290), proportions consistent with previous years.

The increase in over-the-phone services was consistent across both waves of the pandemic, with 2037 instances of telephone interpreter services during the first wave (March to June 2020), compared with 914 for the same time in 2019; and 2905 during the second wave (July to November 2020), compared with 1076 for the same time in 2019.

Early Parenting Centres

COVID-19 physical and social distancing restrictions limited the ability of many services, including EPCs, to provide group, residential and face-to-face programs. In response, EPCs started using technology-based solutions, such as telehealth and web-conferencing, to continue to provide families services that respond to their needs. The success and acceptance by families of these alternative modes of service delivery has seen broad success and acceptance by families, cemented them within existing and new EPCs for all Victorian families.

Most referrals to EPCs come directly from MCH services. As a result of COVID-19 restrictions to face-to-face consultations, some centres reported a reduction in referrals to their service.

EPCs noted that some families struggled to commit to a telehealth program due to demands other than sleep and settling issues, including family members working from home, general fatigue and anxiety, home-schooling demands, and unwell or ageing parents.

Strategies used by different EPCs to engage with families during face-to-face restrictions included:

- using phone interpreters for families with limited English
- establishing a web-based parenting support hub to give families parenting resources to support them in 'normal' times, and particularly during COVID-19

- sending families resources in their home language if possible. (It was noted that more targeted, program-specific information in a greater range of languages is required.)

From July to November 2020, programs were predominantly conducted via telehealth or digital health platforms. A limited number of more vulnerable families were admitted to face-to-face programs. For example:

- the Mercy O’Connell Family Centre provided support to more than 350 families during the second wave of the pandemic, with most consultations being provided via telehealth or the day stay program
- Tweddle provided support to more than 200 families via its digital health platform, and about 170 families were provided with telehealth consultations. About 60 families also attended via face-to-face programs in accordance with social distancing measures
- the Queen Elizabeth Centre provided support to more than 300 families, with a limited number of families admitted to face-to-face residential programs

Supported Playgroups

Local councils are the service providers of the Supported Playgroups program. As such, councils with high numbers of families from CALD backgrounds were already well-placed to consider their needs with regards to Supported Playgroups during the pandemic.

Most councils quickly moved to remote service delivery. Those with high CALD populations used bilingual workers, interpreters and translated Supported Playgroups resources (smalltalk) to continue to provide a service to families. Supported Playgroups resources had already been translated into the most common languages.

Supported Playgroups providers have maintained high rates of engagement throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, from March to June 2020, one council reported providing services to families from 25 different countries of birth, and that more than 78 per cent of families participating in Supported Playgroups spoke a language other than English at home.

Supported Playgroups, Hume

Hume Council described how a single mother from a CALD background continued to engage with Supported Playgroups throughout 2020.

The mother attended weekly online group sessions, as well as online individual sessions, discussing smalltalk topics with the facilitator, with resources available in her native Turkish.

The facilitator told the family Hume’s online Turkish library sessions and connected the mother with other Turkish families involved in Supported Playgroups. The mother was also supported by the facilitator to enrol her child in Four-Year-Old Kindergarten for 2021.

Remote service delivery continued as restrictions eased, allowing service providers to plan how to resume in-person delivery. Providers will continue to access the supports and resources available to them during lockdowns as they work to engage culturally diverse families.

In the Hume local government area, up to 90 per cent of families enrolled in Supported Playgroups are newly arrived. All families were contacted during the COVID-19 restrictions, and each week they were provided with a ‘play pack’, including translated playgroup resources and suggestions for parents.