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**LA LSIC - OLDER VICTORIANS INQUIRY
SUBMISSION NO. 47
RECEIVED 14 DECEMBER 2021**

14 December 2021

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Inquiries
Legal and Social Issues
Parliament of Victoria

Dear Committee

Inquiry into support for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds - Submission from Whitehorse City Council

1. The Whitehorse Community

Data from the 2016 Census places Whitehorse amongst the top 10 municipalities in terms of cultural diversity:

- 40 per cent of Whitehorse residents were born overseas (9th highest out of 79 LGAs)
- 35 per cent of Whitehorse residents come from a non-English speaking background (8th highest out of 79 LGAs)
- 7.8 per cent (12,000 people) speak English "not well or not at all" (9th highest out of 79 LGAs)
- 6 per cent have arrived in the previous 2.5 years (6th highest out of 79 LGAs)

In 2016 China was the leading country of birth for the overseas-born population of Whitehorse (11.5%), followed by India (3%), the United Kingdom (3%), Malaysia (2.7%), Hong Kong (1.5%), Vietnam (1.5%), Sri Lanka (1.3%) and New Zealand (1.2%). The most common overseas countries of birth for residents aged 60 plus were the United Kingdom, China and Greece.

The demographic of Whitehorse changed dramatically between 2011 and 2016. During this period our Chinese-born population increased by 68%, our Indian-born population increased by 40% and our Iranian-born population increased by 48%. During this same period our Italian and Greek-born populations decreased by 15 per cent, consistent with trends across Australia and attributed to deaths and low migration.

In 2016 more than a quarter of residents (28.2 per cent) living in Box Hill were born in China. A very high Chinese speaking population and a hub for Asian shops and restaurants makes Box Hill one of Melbourne's important cultural precincts.

2. Council services, projects and programs for older Victorians

For the general community

- The *Whitehorse Seniors Participation Grant* offers annual funding for all local seniors groups
- The annual *Whitehorse Seniors Festival*
- The *Digital Ladder* project, offering digital literacy support to all seniors groups in Whitehorse from December 2021 – March 2022
- Activities and programming for older adults across Whitehorse Leisure Centres, Libraries and Neighbourhood Houses
- Council-managed venues and community halls that host seniors clubs, including 2 dedicated Senior Citizen Centres

Council-delivered programs and services (for registered clients)

- Commonwealth Home Support Program
- Home Care Packages program
- Regional Assessment Service
- Domestic Assistance
- Personal Care
- Respite Care
- Assistance with Food Preparation
- Delivered meals, Community Meals
- Transport (community access)
- Escorted activities- shopping, appointments etc.
- Social Support Groups and outings
- Home Maintenance
- Home Modifications

Special support for older Victorians from a migrant or refugee background

- 39.8% of Whitehorse residents accessing Commonwealth-funded home and aged care services (listed above) are from CALD backgrounds. Translated material in relation to these programs and services is provided in Greek, Italian, Simplified Chinese and Vietnamese
- The *Whitehorse Seniors Cultural Meals Subsidy* provides financial support for eligible multicultural seniors groups to share a meal during their session

3. Multicultural seniors groups in Whitehorse

Council is aware of 40 multicultural seniors groups that serve the Whitehorse community. More than a third of these groups target residents from a Chinese background; many of these groups are new (established within the last 10 years) and have a large and growing membership. In contrast, local seniors clubs representing residents from a variety of other backgrounds (Greek, Italian, Korean, Hungarian, Russian, Dutch, Indonesian, Sri Lankan, Indian, Fijian etc.) are well established (some for 40 years), with a much smaller and declining membership.

Seniors groups are a very important social resource within our community, particularly for our residents from a non-English speaking background who highly

value the practical and emotional support they receive in this informal setting. Many describe the club as their “lifeline” because it provides an invaluable opportunity to:

- express culture and communicate with peers in first language
- feel connected and safe
- access free or low cost activities that are culturally familiar and address needs, such as
 - sharing lunch and conversation
 - playing cards and board games
 - facilitated activities such as yoga, tai chi, group fitness, badminton, choir, dance, performance, painting..
 - guest speakers, health professionals, conversational English tutors

4. Addressing the Terms of Reference for this Inquiry

Who was consulted?

This response incorporates the opinions of:

- Council’s Community Development Officer who works closely with CALD and faith groups across the municipality, many of which are seniors groups
- Council’s Coordinator of Service Planning & Development for the Whitehorse Home and Community Services department, who has a practical understanding of client needs
- the community leaders / coordinators of 7 local organisations that provide critical social, settlement, and aged care support for older residents across the following cohorts:
 - the Chinese-Australian community (the largest migrant community in Whitehorse)
 - the Iranian-Australian community (a new and emerging migrant / refugee / asylum seeker community in Whitehorse)
 - the Sikh community (an established migrant community in Whitehorse)

Information from community leaders was collected via interview, November 2021.

Authority

- Statistical information and comments in this submission have been collected as part of the engagement process for the Whitehorse Community Vision and Whitehorse Council Plan, as well as information available to Council officers as part of their substantive work.
- Ideas put forward in Part C are offered to further the Committee’s understanding of issues and opportunities from a community perspective.
- The Manager Community Engagement & Development has read the submission.

(A) The adequacy of services for older Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds

The response from community leaders was that, broadly, government-funded services are not adequate. Primary concerns from the community are:

A1. Limited availability and effectiveness of Settlement Services for seniors

- In Whitehorse a large cohort of older migrants from Mainland China are on temporary or bridging visas with little or no access to government funded settlement services. Being assisted to settle is a critical need for all new members of our community regardless of visa type. Without adequate support, older migrants feel isolated and vulnerable. This support is not being provided via the formal migration process. Older migrants from Mainland China need:
 - information about Australian culture and local services
 - access to English language tutors in a culturally appropriate setting
 - support to navigate their local community.
- The AMEP has not been an effective program for older migrants from Mainland China (those who are eligible) because:
 - there are not enough opportunities to practise speaking English in a community setting built into the current AMEP curriculum
 - older participants who speak little or no English struggle to understand classes conducted in English (dedicated classes for Mandarin speaking students with bilingual tutors would be very helpful for this cohort with extremely low English)
 - communication with students during COVID (re lockdowns and classes reopening) was conducted via written English material – this was not effective as many students have poor written English skills.

Note that recent AMEP reforms may have addressed these concerns.

A2. Complex government funded home and aged care package services

- A lack of clear and simple information about accessing and navigating these services (including eligibility criteria) means that many clients are confused. Language and literacy barriers accentuate this already complex environment. Within the Chinese speaking community clients rely on information from family and friends who are also unfamiliar with the Commonwealth funded services and the Australian health and aged care systems. Sometimes families refuse services because they misunderstand or mistrust the system.
- There is a concern in the community that:
 - self-management of this funding can lead to a poor level of care, and the perceived lack of regulation in relation to home and aged care services leaves people feeling vulnerable
 - there is not enough access to culturally appropriate home and aged care services.

A3. Misinformation can lead to dissatisfaction with government services

- Community members have told us that commercial migration agents sometimes raise the expectations of visa applicants by providing information about a broad

range of government-funded health services and welfare payments available to Australian citizens and some visa holders, rather than focusing on the specific entitlements of the visa in question.

A4. Lack of practical support for all multicultural seniors groups

- Multicultural seniors groups provide a valuable health and wellbeing opportunity for our older residents; the sense of belonging that comes from being a member of a group is life changing. Incorporated seniors groups receive funding from State and Local Governments but they also require practical hands-on support to:
 - fulfil the legal requirements of Consumer Affairs Victoria to operate an incorporated group (low English and low digital literacy makes compliance very challenging)
 - prepare the venue for meetings (COVID-safe requirements have made this job even more challenging)
 - comply with COVID check-in and vaccination certificate requirements
 - apply for funding (the online application process is very challenging)
- There is a real risk that due to the challenges listed above, multicultural seniors groups may close their doors and this avenue for social connection, belonging, and access to health and wellbeing information and activities will be lost.

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

B1. Language barriers

- Low English is a major barrier to participation and access to services for our older migrants from China:
 - Many are ineligible for government funded language programs.
 - The AMEP was not designed for this new wave of migrants and may not meet the needs of this cohort.
 - Local NFP organisations serving the “Chinese Grandparents” cohort provide a range of volunteer-driven support services to address the language barrier (including written translations and access to interpreters, health and aged care information delivered by Mandarin-speaking professionals, and support to complete paperwork in English) but lack of funding and an overwhelming demand means these free services are unlikely to be sustainable.
- Low English is also a barrier for older migrants from Greece, Italy, Korea and Vietnam but these cohorts generally have the support of Australian-born children and grandchildren, and they are much more familiar with government services as these established migrant communities are well-settled in Australia.
- Language barriers in a health care setting is a challenge for all migrants from a non-English speaking background. This is a complex environment to navigate – translated information and access to interpreters is critical for all language groups.

B2. Digital exclusion

- Many of our older migrants from Mainland China are online, but use only the Wechat platform. This is a great way to connect with others within the Chinese speaking community but Wechat is not currently an effective platform for connecting with, and learning about, local services and the local community:
 - Most governments and service providers do not have a Wechat account, so official information about services cannot be found here.
 - The Chinese speaking community’s reliance on family and friends to provide accurate information, via Wechat, about services is problematic. Some of the information shared on Wechat about local services is incorrect and confusing.
 - To access accurate information about local services, digital literacy within the Chinese speaking community needs to extend beyond the Wechat platform, or, governments and service providers need to fully commit to using Wechat.
- Community leaders report that many older people within the Greek, Italian, Korean and Vietnamese speaking communities are not online. Digital literacy support is available via libraries and neighbourhood houses, and Council is rolling out its new *Digital Ladder* program to the committee members of local seniors groups from December 2021 – March 2022. However, committee members are already so overwhelmed with the responsibility of running the club and managing a COVID-safe return to venues, there’s a chance that some will not have the time and energy to embrace digital support.

- Applying for funding using an online platform is very challenging. Clubs would much prefer a hard copy option.
- Participation in community consultation and engagement during COVID was very limited as most opportunities were offered online.

B3. Other challenges raised by community leaders – affecting all cohorts

- Elder abuse
- Mental health issues
- Homelessness (affecting asylum seekers within the Iranian community)
- Social isolation due to language and cultural barriers
- Lack of access to culturally appropriate aged care and home care services

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

C1. Practical settlement support for older migrants and refugees

Whitehorse community leaders are concerned that older migrants from Mainland China are not receiving the support they need to settle well. They suggest settlement support for all Chinese migrants, regardless of visa type, because the cultural and language barriers are so significant.

C1.1 Fund community-based settlement services for older migrants that focus on:

- conversational English
- understanding Australian laws and culture
- navigating the local community
- social connection and a sense of belonging
- the health and wellbeing of the participant.

Deliver services:

- in a culturally familiar setting
- with other Mandarin-speaking participants
- using bilingual teachers / facilitators.

Consider funding relevant/identified community organisations and Neighbourhood Houses to deliver a range of settlement services (particularly services aimed at the seniors cohort with a focus on social connection rather than skills and employment). Embedding “welcoming” services within every neighbourhood would help to introduce people to their new community and to establish local social networks. The way that services are delivered can be just as important as the content being delivered.

C1.2 Fund local community organisations to support the *AMEP Connect* program so that the needs of the local community are understood and addressed.

C2. Practical support for all multicultural seniors

C2.1 Fund (or continue to fund) local programs that address known issues and opportunities:

- **digital literacy** via one on one technical support and encouragement in community languages
- **social connection** via informal gatherings, exercise classes, and phone support groups
- **navigational support** to help older migrants to explore and get to know their local community and local services
- **intergenerational relationships** that facilitate mutual support, information sharing, learning and appreciation

C3. Provide practical support for multicultural seniors groups

Seniors groups are struggling to keep up with the physical demands of running an incorporated group.

C3.1 Funded intergenerational programs could provide much-needed support to complete paperwork, apply for grants online, and set up the venue for meetings – with the added benefit of establishing mutually supportive relationships across the generations.

C3.2 Support large Chinese seniors groups (with growing membership) to access low cost venues that can accommodate up to 100 people. Large social gatherings are culturally familiar for the Chinese-Australian community. These large groups do a great job of addressing the health and wellbeing needs of our community; they need support from government to serve the community.

C4. Multilingual services

Community leaders request:

- more multilingual healthcare services
- more multilingual mental health services, with support provided in a community (rather than clinical) setting
- fund NFP organisations to deliver a range of culturally appropriate services in community languages
- the Iranian community would like to see Farsi language support within the health care sector, particularly for dementia patients:
 - translated written material covering many common health topics
 - easy access to interpreters in a health care setting
- access to culturally familiar community activities and events
- information from government agencies in community languages