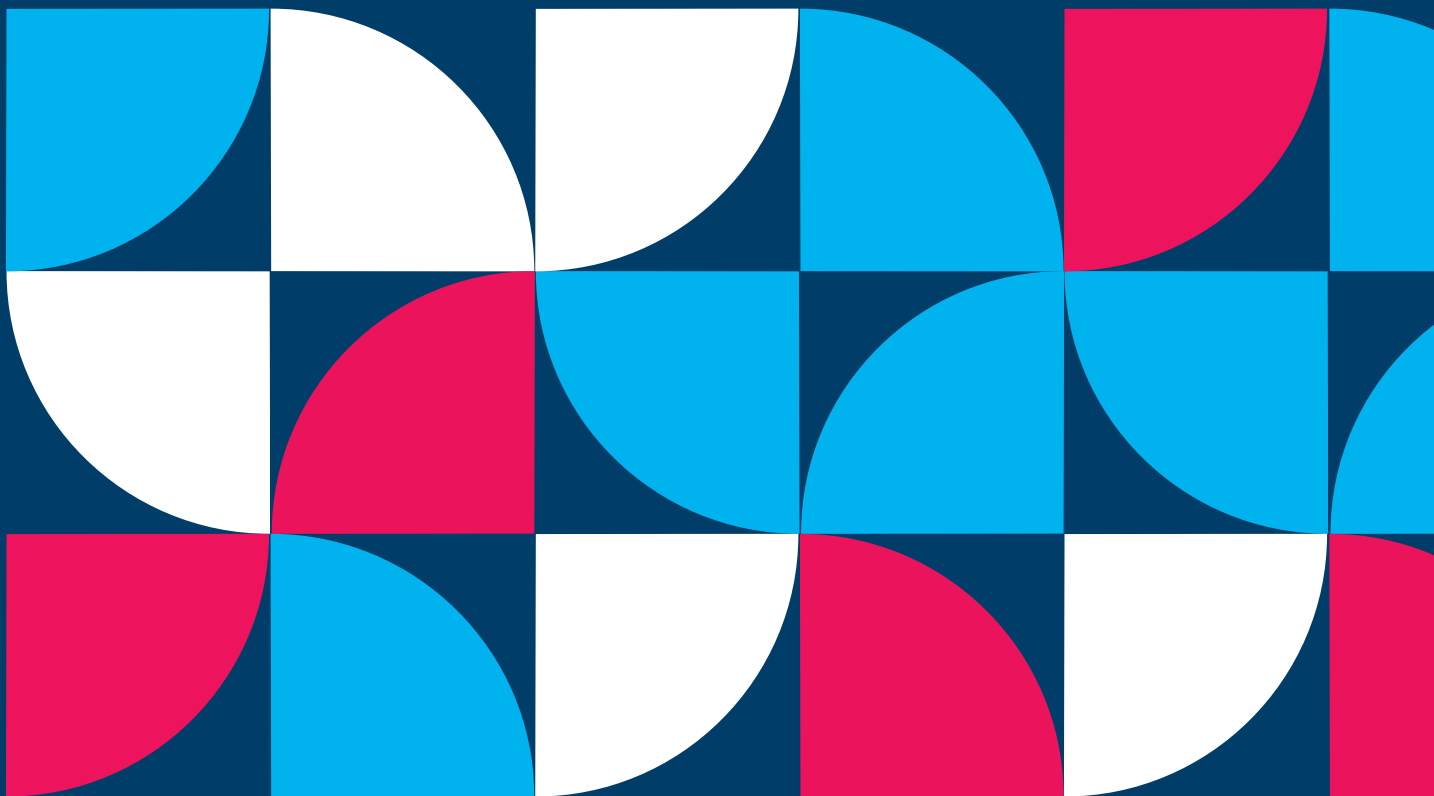




Pre-Budget Submission

2024-25

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria



About ECCV

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) is the peak body for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria. ECCV works closely with more than 220 member organisations including ethnic associations, multicultural service providers, and regional ethnic communities' councils.

ECCV has been advocating for human rights, freedom, respect, equality and dignity for migrant and refugee communities, and for a socially cohesive and inclusive Victorian community, since 1974.

ECCV has a strong record of informing industry, practice and influencing Federal, State and Local governments to promote culturally responsive approaches and equitable access to services, anti-racism and socially just policy.

Acknowledgements

ECCV would like to gratefully acknowledge our members, Networks, Policy Advisory Committees and stakeholders for participating in consultation sessions and sharing their insights and expertise. Thank you to everyone who contributed to the development of this submission.

A note on language

The term 'people from migrant and refugee backgrounds' is used in this document to refer to people and communities who have entered Australia through a variety of pathways, including through humanitarian, family, and skilled migration pathways. ECCV uses this term to refer to people with backgrounds and ancestry that is not part of the dominant Anglo-Celtic Australian population. This term is inclusive of people seeking asylum in Australia, people on temporary visas, undocumented migrants, and people born in Australia.

Suggested citation

Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (ECCV) (2023). Pre-Budget Submission 2024-25. Melbourne, Australia.



ECCV acknowledges the Traditional Owners of Country throughout Victoria and their continuing connection to land, water and community. We pay respect to their Elders past and present.

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Introduction

Victoria's diverse communities have demonstrated remarkable strength and resilience throughout the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Supported by organisations across the multicultural sector, with the support of government, they are now committed to rebuilding and recovering the lost ground in terms of economic well-being and social cohesion.

However, the relative return to normality following the pandemic years has been accompanied by immense strains from the rising cost of living. Many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are experiencing high levels of financial stress. These strains are felt across the community, but the voices of multicultural communities are often unheard in conversations about addressing the crisis. This means that Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are struggling to maintain the basic essentials of life, such as food, housing, utilities, and medical treatment, face additional barriers to accessing support.

People from migrant and refugee backgrounds facing cost-of-living pressures require targeted support. The benefits of a targeted approach for Victoria's migrant and refugee communities were made evident during the pandemic. This approach should involve bicultural workers to provide information and help those in need to access support, financial counselling, and to understand and assert their rights in the housing market.

The pandemic years have been accompanied by a rise in racism and vilification. With the imminent release of the State Government's Anti-Racism Strategy, ECCV strongly supports enhanced funding for local government and community anti-racism initiatives, including projects such as ECCV's *All One Together*, that facilitate diversity and inclusion in workplace and corporate settings. Strategies to confront racism must acknowledge the existence of racism between communities (intercultural racism), which require targeted strategies.

With Victorians from migrant and refugee backgrounds continuing to face numerous barriers in the jobs market, in this submission we reiterate our call for the development of a comprehensive statewide Multicultural Employment Strategy. And with increasing numbers of migrants settling in regional Victoria, this submission also emphasises the importance of investment in organisations that have the expertise and capability to facilitate successful settlement outcomes in regional areas.

This Pre-Budget Submission outlines targeted investments that the State and Federal Governments can make across a range of portfolios to help build the resilience of our multicultural communities and allow them to thrive for years to come. ECCV and the broader multicultural sector also emphasise the importance of longer-term funding for community organisations working across these areas, to enable sustainable programs and long-term community engagement, and provide certainty to service providers and end the cycle of constant funding applications.

Through the recommendations contained in this submission, ECCV looks forward to continuing our work with the Government and our partners in the multicultural and community sectors to build a stronger and more inclusive multicultural Victoria.

Summary of Recommendations*

1 Support communities struggling with rising costs-of-living to access essential services and affordable housing

- 1.1 \$2.5 million over two years for community organisations to employ bicultural outreach workers to provide information about available options for dealing with unaffordable bills.
- 1.2 \$140,000 in 2024-25 for ECCV and an appropriate research institute to carry out a scoping study to determine communities where help with cost-of-living pressures is most needed.
- 1.3 \$30 million for utility, food and emergency relief packages that can be accessed regardless of visa status.
- 1.4 \$3.5 million over two years to fund scholarships for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to train and work as financial counsellors.

Federal Government

- 1.5 Provide access to Medicare, income support, employment, mental health and other vital services to all people seeking asylum.
- 1.6 Deliver a cost-of-living package to help people on low incomes pay their energy bills, including mandatory energy performing standards for rental properties, reform of energy concessions, energy debt relief, stronger retail protections, and increase in income support payments.
- 1.7 Raise the rate of Jobseeker Payment and other income support payments to at least \$78 a day.
- 1.8 \$8 million for tenancy support services and renters' unions to partner with settlement services to deliver in-language sessions to new migrants and humanitarian arrivals.
- 1.9 \$1.4 million to support tenants from diverse backgrounds living in public housing towers slated for demolition during the transition period to alternative accommodation.
- 1.10 More public housing be built for vulnerable people, including those on low or no incomes from a migrant or refugee background.

2 Fund initiatives to address racism and create lasting systemic change

- 2.1 Priority funding for the next four years to implement the Statewide Anti-Racism Strategy, including expanded funding for local government and community anti-racism initiatives.
- 2.2 \$10 million in additional funding to implement the recommendations of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Anti-Vilification protections and Parliamentary Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria.

* Unless otherwise specified, recommendations in this submission are intended for the Victorian Government.

- 2.3 \$350,000 to continue and evaluate ECCV's *All One Together* anti-racism project, facilitating diversity and inclusion across workplaces and corporate settings.

3 Provide targeted funding for a Multicultural Employment Strategy to support jobseekers into sustainable employment

- 3.1 \$2 million in 2024-25 for ECCV to develop a comprehensive Multicultural Employment Strategy for migrant and refugee communities.
- 3.2 Review funding guidelines for Jobs Victoria Mentors to ensure that the most disadvantaged jobseekers, including those on temporary visas, can receive support.
- 3.3 \$5 million in 2024-25 to enable Skills and Jobs Centres to build their careers counselling services to support the additional caseloads referred from outgoing Jobs Victoria providers.
- 3.4 \$2 million in 2024-25 to develop and implement a multicultural communications strategy for the Victorian Sick Pay Guarantee.

4 Invest in organisations supporting multicultural communities in regional Victoria

- 4.1 \$5 million in core funding over four years for regional ethnic communities' councils and peak multicultural organisations to continue to identify and coordinate responses to priority issues.
- 4.2 \$2.5 million annual recurring funding for the Strategic Partnership Program and for Strategic Engagement Coordinators, to support positive settlement outcomes in regional Victoria.

5 Support multicultural communities to effectively prepare and respond to emergencies

Federal Government

- 5.1 \$10 million over four years to peak ethnic councils and multicultural organisations for projects that improve the cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness of the emergency services workforce, co-design culturally responsive communications, strengthen multicultural community engagement at the local level, and establish a strong research agenda.

6 Strengthen relationships between multicultural and First Nations communities

- 6.1 \$2 million over two years for First Nations and multicultural communities to co-design and implement strategies that strengthen relationships between First Nations People and multicultural communities.

7 Support older people from migrant and refugee communities to live in culturally appropriate and safe accommodation

- 7.1** \$100,000 to peak community organisations to co-design a plan for increasing the number of bicultural workers in the aged care sector.
- 7.2** \$70,000 for ECCV to partner with multicultural service providers to research and design home environments for seniors living in residential care.

Federal Government

- 7.3** \$3 million over three years to ensure that the Victorian Access and Support Program can continue to provide care and support during the national aged care reform process and that ECCV can continue to coordinate the A&S Network.

8 Enhance funding to raise awareness and respond to elder abuse in migrant and refugee communities

- 8.1** \$200,000 to continue and extend ECCV's Bilingual Community Educator program, expand it to new language groups, update resources, and increase the focus on financial abuse.
- 8.2** Increase funding for appropriate culturally responsive support services for older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds experiencing elder abuse.

9 Fund programs to boost digital literacy and reduce the digital divide

- 9.1** \$3 million for ECCV to trial a bilingual 'Community Connectors' program for seniors from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are unlikely to become digitally literate.
- 9.2** \$100,000 in 2024-25 for ECCV for a collaborative partnership with relevant sector and research bodies to improve the cultural appropriateness of programs that help seniors understand the benefits of technology and how digital skills can improve their health and wellbeing.

10 Promote gender equality and support migrant and refugee women to stay safe from family violence

- 10.1** \$520,000 over three years to build the capacity of the multicultural sector to respond to family violence, including in-language community information sessions across Victoria.
- 10.2** \$2.1 million over three years for targeted economic equity initiatives, including leadership, financial assistance and capacity-building programs.
- 10.3** Increased investment in culturally appropriate public housing for victim-survivors of family violence, regardless of visa status.

11 Improve inclusion, equity and advocacy for people with disability from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and enhance coordination with family violence support

- 11.1** \$9 million over four years to implement commitments under the State Disability Plan to improve inclusion and equity for people with disability from diverse backgrounds.
- 11.2** \$5 million in 2024-25 under the State Disability Plan to improve service coordination between disability and family violence services
- 11.3** \$1 million over two years for multicultural and ethno-specific organisations for a program to connect carers from migrant and refugee backgrounds with respite and support services.

Federal Government

- 11.4** Allocate funding from the NDIS 'Navigator' program to ethno-specific community organisations to employ bicultural outreach workers who would enable people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds to navigate the services they need.

12 Ensure that the state mental health system is inclusive and accessible for all Victorians

- 12.1** \$500,000 over two years for ECCV to build the capacity and cultural competency of community and mainstream mental health service providers to effectively respond to the mental health support needs of multicultural communities.

13 Support greater access to services for people experiencing alcohol and other drug harm

- 13.1** \$1.5 million in 2024-25 to establish interagency partnerships between multicultural and AOD services to support and develop more accessible and culturally safe services.
- 13.2** \$3.5 million over four years for a pilot program placing two bicultural liaison workers into AOD treatment services across four AOD catchment areas, and two capacity building project support officers to support the liaison workers.

14 Ensure multicultural communities are preparing for the impacts of Artificial Intelligence

- 14.1** \$4 million over four years for a peak multicultural council to partner with an organisation with AI expertise, to research the impacts of AI on multicultural communities and to develop and deliver an awareness raising campaign about the impacts of increasing adoption of AI.

15 Increase investment in multicultural arts and festivals

- 15.1** \$10 million in annual funding over two years for the Multicultural Festivals and Grants Program to better respond to current demand.

1 Support communities struggling with rising costs-of-living to access essential services and affordable housing

While the rising cost of living is affecting millions of Australians, many people from migrant and refugee backgrounds are experiencing high levels of financial stress. For some it is a struggle to maintain the basic essentials of life, such as food, housing, utilities, and medical treatment. Barriers to financial support include ineligibility due to visa status, lack of in-language information, and the difficulty of understanding and navigating service systems.

Access to essential services

Through our community consultations and education sessions, ECCV has observed that many members of multicultural communities are not aware of the help that is available to them when utilities become unaffordable, such as Utility Relief Grants and other concessions, and utility company hardship programs. There is also a lack of awareness about the option to ask for the ‘best plan’, comparison services such Energy Compare, the Victorian Default Offer, and consumer rights in general. Members of some multicultural communities lag behind the general population with regards to digital literacy. When they are struggling to pay for basic essential services, many don’t know where to go for help. They might be unclear about whether they should contact the utility company, Centrelink, or the state government. Bills can be intimidating, and they can be afraid to call their supplier to explain their problems and to negotiate a repayment plan, even if they are aware that this is an option.

ECCV welcomes the various initiatives in the last state budget to relieve cost-of-living pressures, including \$400 million for another round of the \$250 Power Saving Bonus (PSB), and incentive for households to use the Victorian Energy Compare website to search for the cheapest electricity deal. As a community outreach partner in the PSB, ECCV has provided in-language outreach and capacity building to help thousands of Victorians access the bonus, leveraging our close relationships with diverse communities.

While ECCV’s outreach work on the PSB showcased best practice in working closely with communities to provide support, much more needs to be done to ensure that vital information reaches people from all cultural backgrounds. This includes information in-language, but it also relates to identifying and utilising the best channels of communication and engagement, which may differ across cultural groups. Usually, the building of trust and relationships is key to successful engagement and support.

Recommendations

- 1.1 \$2.5 million over two years for community organisations to employ bicultural outreach workers to provide information and raise awareness about available options for dealing with unaffordable bills.
- 1.2 \$140,000 in 2024-25 for ECCV, in collaboration with an appropriate research institute, to carry out a scoping study to determine priority communities where the need for help with cost-of-living pressures is highest, and the optimal channels of engagement and information provision to those communities.
- 1.3 \$30 million for utility, food and emergency relief packages that can be accessed regardless of visa status.
- 1.4 \$3.5 million over two years to fund scholarships for people from migrant and refugee backgrounds to train and work as financial counsellors, with priority given to new and emerging communities.

Federal Government

- 1.5 Provide access to Medicare, income support, employment, mental health and other vital services to all people seeking asylum.
- 1.6 Deliver a cost-of-living package to help people on low incomes afford their energy bills, including: mandatory energy performing standards for rental properties, reform of energy concessions, energy debt relief, stronger retail protections, and substantial increase in income support payments.
- 1.7 Raise the rate of Jobseeker Payment and other income support payments to at least \$78 a day.

Access to affordable housing

People from migrant and refugee backgrounds in Victoria are overrepresented in the rental market but are underserved by tenancy legal support and advocacy organisations. As with utility companies, they may be less comfortable asserting their rights, and be more likely to endure substandard accommodation. This is exacerbated by the power imbalance between landlords and renters when the renter is from a non-Anglo background. In addition, 'rental racism' against migrants and refugees is increasing, making it difficult for many to even find a place to live.¹ While ECCV appreciates the substantial reforms that the Victorian Government has introduced to increase renter rights, without a proactive program migrants will continue to be severely disadvantaged.

¹ Maalsen, S., Wolifson, P., Rogers, D., Nelson, J. and Buckle, C. (2021). Understanding discrimination effects in private rental housing, AHURI Final Report No. 363, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute Limited, Melbourne, p. 38. <https://www.ahuri.edu.au/research/finalreports/363>

The current lack of housing supply in general and social housing in particular is well known. As an already vulnerable group, this can make people from diverse backgrounds particularly vulnerable to exploitation, precarious housing and homelessness. While ECCV welcomes the Victorian Government's Big Build initiative, we still believe that there is a specific need for more *public* housing since this comes with additional protections (compared to both private rental and community housing)², as well as tailored support for vulnerable and older CALD tenants to access this public housing.

Tenants from migrant and refugee backgrounds currently living in public housing towers that have been earmarked for demolition and rebuilding, will also need culturally tailored support in-language, especially as we hear that many are already feeling anxious and insecure about the future of what they saw as their home.

Recommendations

- 1.8** \$8 million to resource tenancy support services and renters' unions to partner with settlement services to deliver in-language sessions to new migrants and humanitarian arrivals as part of their orientation process. This should include renter rights and landlord responsibilities.
- 1.9** \$1.4 million for a program to support tenants from diverse backgrounds living in public housing towers slated for demolition during the transition period to alternative accommodation and back to permanent public housing.
- 1.10** More public housing be built for vulnerable people, including those on low or no incomes from a migrant or refugee background.

² Lewis, A. (2021), Per Capita Submission to the Ten Year Social and Affordable Housing Strategy for Victoria, pp. 15-17.

2 Fund initiatives to address racism and create lasting systemic change

ECCV is pleased that the Victorian Government's commitments to supporting multicultural communities in the 2023-2024 state budget included \$6 million dedicated to anti-vilification campaigns to counter discrimination and prejudice¹, and also \$9.8 million for multicultural support programs, including ECCV, to help the voices of our multicultural and multifaith communities be heard.

Ongoing initiatives to bolster social cohesiveness across Victoria are arguably more important than ever in the context of current hostilities between Israel and Hamas in the Middle East. As we know, many Victorians feel a close connection to the conflict through family members, friends and history. There is a danger that extreme racist groups may try to opportunistically create or exacerbate divisions here. In addition, inflammatory and sometimes racist commentary on social media and in public discourse leading up to the Referendum on an Aboriginal Voice to Parliament shows that there is a lot more work to do to address racism in Victoria and across the nation.

While ECCV applauds the funding of anti-vilification campaigns, we believe that a substantial additional commitment is needed to combat and prevent *systemic* racism. The Victorian Government has, to its credit, made a major investment to develop a Statewide Anti-Racism Strategy, which should pave the way for practical, long-term change to combat racism and discrimination in this state. It is vital that this Strategy be released soon, and that the required funding is provided to implement its recommended actions. As we have previously highlighted, multi-year funding is needed to sustain *lasting* outcomes for the population as a whole and at the local level as well.

Anti-racism is a core tenet of ECCV's work, and we have contributed to a range of policy and advocacy initiatives and led a range of projects to foster an inclusive, cohesive, safe and vibrant Victoria. One of ECCV's anti-racism projects focused on systemic change is *All One Together*. This project supports workplaces to advance both *diversity* and *inclusion* policies and practices, an approach recommended in research carried out with Victoria University.³ More than 25 organisations have become *All One Together* ambassadors, taking the pledge to transform their workplaces into spaces that are culturally safe and inclusive.

³ Mario Peucker and Thomas J. Fisher, Victoria University and Ethnic Communities' Council of Victoria (2021), *Evidence Review Anti-racism, diversity and inclusion in organisational settings*.
<https://www.vu.edu.au/sites/default/files/all-one-together-evidence-review.pdf>

Recommendations

- 2.1** Priority funding for the next four years to implement the Statewide Anti-Racism Strategy, including expanded funding for local government and community anti-racism initiatives.
- 2.2** \$10 million in additional funding to implement the recommendations of the Parliamentary Inquiry into Anti-Vilification protections and the Parliamentary Inquiry into Extremism in Victoria.
- 2.3** \$350,000 to continue and evaluate ECCV's *All One Together* anti-racism project, facilitating diversity and inclusion across workplaces and corporate settings.

3 Fund a Multicultural Employment Strategy to support jobseekers into sustainable employment

People from migrant and refugee backgrounds continue to face numerous barriers to accessing sustainable employment. Disadvantaged jobseekers in Victoria have for the last few years been better placed than those in other states, as those neglected by the federal employment services system have been eligible for support through Jobs Victoria. The main Jobs Victoria services (Advocates, Mentors and Careers Counsellors) delivered around round 183,360 services to jobseekers in 2022-23, and almost 14,000 disadvantaged jobseekers gained employment through Jobs Victoria during this time.¹

ECCV was therefore disappointed at the massive cuts to Jobs Victoria in the 2023-24 Budget, with the Advocates and Careers Counsellors programs being defunded, and the Mentors program continuing in a much-reduced form. These programs not only provided positive employment outcomes for members of disadvantaged groups, they also provided several community organisations with most of their core funding. The Government must track the effects of the end of these programs.

Jobs Victoria Mentors, which teaches crucial work readiness skills, will now be delivered in only five Local Government Areas (three metropolitan and two regional). These were determined theoretically by SEIFA index of disadvantage at the LGA level, but the result is that many of the most disadvantaged suburbs will not be served by Mentors because they are not in the most disadvantaged LGAs. It is also disappointing that, with the exception of humanitarian entrants, the program will no longer be available to migrants on temporary visas. ECCV hopes that, even if Victorian employment services will continue in this greatly reduced capacity, they can be more carefully targeted at the people most in need of their support.

The Federal Government has provided additional funding to TAFE Skills and Jobs Centers to employ additional career counsellors, and informed outgoing Jobs Victoria providers that they should refer their clients to them. The centres will however require more support to take on this additional caseload, and to ensure that future disadvantaged jobseekers can still access the type of tailored support that the Jobs Victoria programs provided. People from migrant and refugee backgrounds face specific barriers in accessing pathways into sustainable employment, including employer demands for local experience, lack of local networks, non-recognition of overseas qualifications, difficulties navigating the employment services system, and concerns by employers about the job readiness of people from migrant and refugee backgrounds.

ECCV reiterates our call from recent years for an overarching and comprehensive **Multicultural Employment Strategy (MES)** to govern these programs. This plan should include:

- Employment programs delivered by multicultural organisations.
- Support for multicultural organisations to create sustainable partnerships with industry.

- Support for community organisations to take on an increased numbers of student placements from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Targeted employment support and expansion of employment-based training.
- Provision of wage subsidies for employers who employ jobseekers from priority communities.
- Delivery of employment brokerage services by appropriate ethno-specific organisations.
- Creation of an online platform enabling access to industry-based resources, employers, events, discussion boards and employment/work-experience opportunities for jobseekers from migrant and refugee backgrounds.
- Dedicated funding for multicultural agencies based in regional Victoria to continue their engagement and capacity building work.

The MES should recognise self-employment as an attractive option for many jobseekers, particularly people from migrant and refugee backgrounds. It should expand the support provided by Jobs Victoria to include assistance and training programs for people wanting to start their own businesses and provide support to access the Australian Government’s New Enterprise Incentive Scheme.

ECCV has long been concerned about exploitative practices suffered by migrant workers on temporary visas and advocated for enhanced funding for organisations that promote workers’ rights, such as the Migrant Workers Centre. As part of its support for entrepreneurs, Jobs Victoria should engage these organisations to provide mandatory training about how business owners can ensure that they comply with their workplace obligations under the relevant law (which will increasingly carry significant criminal penalties).

ECCV applauds the introduction of the Victorian Sick Pay Guarantee to provide access to sick and carer’s pay to casual workers in select industries. The Department of Jobs, Skills, Industry and Regions has acknowledged that take-up rates of this scheme in migrant and refugee communities are lower than in the general population. The Department should work with the multicultural sector to co-design a communications strategy to raise awareness of the scheme and how to access it. To ensure safety and security for all casual workers, eligibility for the scheme should also be expanded to workers in all forms of casual employment.

Recommendations

- 3.1** \$2 million in 2024-25 for ECCV to develop a comprehensive Multicultural Employment Strategy for migrant and refugee communities in partnership with the Victorian Chamber of Commerce and Industry.
- 3.2** Review funding guidelines for Jobs Victoria Mentors to ensure that the most disadvantaged jobseekers, including those on temporary visas, can receive support.
- 3.3** \$5 million in 2024-25 to enable Skills and Jobs Centres to build their careers counselling services to support the additional caseloads referred from outgoing Jobs Victoria providers.
- 3.4** \$2 million in 2024-25 to develop and implement a multicultural communications strategy for the Victorian Sick Pay Guarantee.

4 Invest in organisations supporting multicultural communities in regional Victoria

Regional ethnic communities' councils and peak multicultural organisations provide invaluable advocacy, education and support services to the community. The direct resettlement of newly arrived refugees and migrants in regional areas, and the secondary movement of these populations from metropolitan centres, has placed increased demand on regional ethnic communities' councils. In 2021, 8.4% of the total population in regional Victoria reported speaking a language other than English at home, an increase from 7.5% reported in 2016.¹

Despite increasing demand as more and more migrants settle in regional areas, many regional ethnic communities' councils rely on rolling grant and funding opportunities to maintain operations. Recurrent core funding is needed to continue to provide supports and scale them to a growing multicultural population.

Without significant core funding, many of the operations of regional ethnic communities' councils and peak multicultural organisations have been funded through the Strategic Partnership Program (SPP) and Strategic Engagement Coordinators (SECs). SPP funding has allowed regional ethnic communities' councils to strengthen their reach and has therefore been integral in supporting the settlement of new migrants. Local services rely on this program to inform, collaborate and support their own engagement with multicultural communities.

Strategic Engagement Coordinators (SECs) bridge service gaps for newly arrived migrants and refugees by identifying new opportunities for community engagement and linking communities to service providers and government agencies. SECs played a vital role during emergencies including the COVID-19 pandemic and 2022 floods, serving as the primary liaison between key service providers and multicultural communities.

During the pandemic, SECs used their networks to set up Rapid Antigen Test distribution hubs, and engaged mainstream services and provided information to multicultural communities to facilitate vaccinations and educate communities on the importance of vaccine uptake. During the Shepparton floods, the local SEC collaborated with the Incident Control Centre at the SES and set up operations at the emergency relief centre, providing vital support to flood-affected multicultural communities.

SECs have also secured funding for and facilitated forums and classes for new migrants on topics such as employment (including writing resumes and cover letters, interview skills, developing a career plan, and reporting income), buying houses, starting businesses, driver mentoring, water safety, and introductions to Australian culture.

It is essential that the SPP and SECs are resourced in the long-term to provide certainty and stability in the provision of services.

Recommendations

- 4.1** \$5 million in core funding over four years for regional ethnic communities' councils and peak multicultural organisations to continue to identify and coordinate responses to priority issues, and to provide advocacy, support and leadership at the local level.

- 4.2** \$2.5 million annual recurring funding for the Strategic Partnership Program and for Strategic Engagement Coordinators, to support positive settlement outcomes for migrants and refugees settling in regional Victoria.

5 Support multicultural communities to effectively prepare and respond to emergencies

ECCV examined the experiences of multicultural communities during the 2022 floods, producing a joint report with the Neighbourhood Collective Australia and Regional Victorians of Colour.¹ The report found that multicultural communities, particularly those who are newly arrived and those on temporary visas, were at far greater risk of harm during the floods, had high levels of fear and anxiety, and gained information about the floods in very different ways compared to the mainstream community. It also found that the emergency response was not always culturally responsive.

Lack of cultural diversity in the emergency services workforce means that they are not fully equipped to understand and include the needs of multicultural communities. They should be supported to review and adapt their recruitment, induction and retention processes. This could include measures such as specifying an ability to speak community languages as a key selection criteria in position descriptions, and advertising positions via multicultural community networks.

Explicit measures to increase and monitor cultural safety including for volunteers, must also be developed. Data on workforce cultural diversity should be regularly collected and reviewed. Emergency agencies and services must be supported to improve their cultural responsiveness by undertaking cultural responsiveness training tailored to the emergency management sector.

ECCV and our partners have received \$1.5 million from the Victorian Government to support migrant and refugee communities with emergency preparedness, response, and recovery in regional Victoria. This critical work should be replicated nationwide.

Recommendation

Federal Government

- 5.1 \$10 million over four years to national and state peak ethnic councils and multicultural organisations for projects that improve the cultural diversity and cultural responsiveness of the emergency services workforce, co-design culturally responsive communications, strengthen multicultural community engagement at the local level, and establish a strong research agenda to examine and evaluate multicultural emergency management outcomes.

6 Strengthen relationships between multicultural and First Nations communities

There has long been an affinity between multicultural communities and Indigenous communities—this is an affinity that ECCV is committed to strengthening through our policy, advocacy and project work. The foundations of a strong and inclusive multicultural Victoria must include an acknowledgement and understanding amongst multicultural communities of the ongoing impacts of colonisation on First Nations People, and of the shared responsibility to work towards justice and reconciliation.

Multicultural strategy in Victoria should feature education and public awareness strategies to improve understanding of the unique position of First Nations People in Australian society, of their role as Custodians of this land for 60,000 years, and of the particular barriers to full social and economic inclusion that they continue to face.

Recommendation

For State and Federal Government

- 6.1 \$2 million over two years for First Nations and multicultural communities to co-design and implement strategies that strengthen relationships between First Nations People and multicultural communities and educate communities about our shared responsibilities to work towards justice and reconciliation.

7 Support older people from migrant and refugee communities with culturally appropriate in-home and residential care

ECCV welcomes the Victorian Government's continued investment in public sector residential aged care services, maintaining nurse-to-patient ratios and providing high quality care to older Victorians. Also welcome in the last state budget was funding to provide better aged care services for regional Victorians, with three new public facilities delivering dementia friendly facilities and supporting residents with complex care needs. Nevertheless, we need increased investment in residential care so that they are more home-like environments rather than clinical settings. This insight from ECCV's members in the aged care and support sector is consistent with the promotion by the Australian Royal Commission into Aged Care and Safety of a '*small household model*' wherein a '*home-like environment*' can be created for elderly residents:

Creating 'familiar households' facilitates the provision of person-centred care. We have heard that for residential aged care, there is significant benefit to a domestic setting instead of a traditional institutional model...⁴

Funding for the Commonwealth Home Support Program (CHSP) has recently been extended until 30 June 2027. ECCV believes that it is crucial that the Victorian Access and Support (A&S) program, which has been critical in assisting people with diverse needs to navigate available services and connect them to in-home aged care providers, receives concomitant funding to continue its role.

Since 2012 ECCV has convened and chaired a network of Victorian A&S providers, providing a platform to discuss issues related to A&S services, stay informed of sector updates, share strategies for strengthening A&S services, and engage in dialogue with the Victorian Department of Health and Federal Department of Health & Aged Care to help inform and improve the reform process for the aged care system. This Network must continue to support the A&S program.

Recommendations

- 7.1 \$100,000 to peak community organisations to co-design a plan for increasing the number of bicultural workers in the aged care sector.
- 7.2 \$70,000 for ECCV to partner with multicultural service providers to research and design home environments for seniors living in residential care, both English-speaking and from diverse language backgrounds, based on existing overseas models and including local consultations.

Federal Government

- 7.3 \$3 million over three years to ensure that the Victorian Access and Support Program can continue to provide care and support during the national aged care reform process, and that ECCV can continue to coordinate the A&S Network.

⁴ Royal Commission into Aged Care Quality and Safety (2021).

8 Enhance funding to raise awareness and respond to elder abuse in migrant and refugee communities

People from migrant and refugee backgrounds can experience multiple forms of disadvantage that place them at greater risk of elder abuse. Research shows the most common forms of elder abuse are psychological abuse, neglect, and financial abuse. In partnership with Seniors Rights Victoria, ECCV reached out to some of the most vulnerable older people in our communities to raise awareness and prevent elder abuse. Our culturally responsive programs have included co-design of in-language resources with targeted communities, and strong proactive community engagement.

ECCV trains Bilingual Community Educators (BCEs) to deliver community information sessions about elder abuse to seniors, community organisations, volunteers, and professionals working with older people. In addition to training, BCEs are funded for the sessions they deliver, follow-up support and capacity-building. One issue that has been identified is that once awareness is raised and community members reach out for support with elder abuse, there is not always the service capacity to respond.

ECCV welcomed the allocation of new funding to address elder abuse in the Victorian Government's 2023-24 budget, including continuation of the Senior Rights Victoria helpline and individual support services. Nevertheless, resourcing has failed to keep up with the demand, and this is certainly the case for addressing elder abuse in culturally diverse communities.

Recommendations

- 8.1** \$200,000 to continue and extend ECCV's Bilingual Community Educator program which raises awareness and prevents elder abuse in diverse communities in order to meet current demand, and expand it to new language groups, update resources, and increase the focus on financial abuse.
- 8.2** Increase funding for appropriate culturally responsive support services for older people from migrant and refugee backgrounds experiencing elder abuse.

9 Fund programs to boost digital literacy and reduce the digital divide

Many older people from diverse cultural and language backgrounds are not digitally literate, and are becoming increasingly disconnected from services they need, such as banking and MyGov. In general, they have a reduced ability to navigate the world and manage their lives. Compounding this, are low levels of English proficiency, and they become disconnected and disempowered from the world on a profound level. This has been referred to as ‘forced digital migration’ or a lack of ‘digital citizenship’.

According to our research and networks in the aged support sector, this is making many older people highly vulnerable to isolation, elder abuse, financial abuse, fraud, and online scams.

In 2018-19, ECCV was funded through the Australian Government’s *Be Connected* program to help seniors from migrant and refugee backgrounds to use the internet in a safe and easy way. ECCV partnered with the Good Things Foundation to reach out to seniors who speak English as second language and help them receive funding for their organisations. We also supported participating seniors’ clubs to work with bilingual mentors to train older people to use the *Be Connected* website.

Efforts to improve digital literacy through education are worthwhile and many have benefitted from such programs, but unfortunately, they are not enough on their own, as there are many seniors who will never become digitally literate for a range of reasons. Barriers include language (including not being literate in one’s own first language), and a decreasing capacity to master new skills with advancing age for many seniors, especially those experiencing dementia. In addition, many older people live on a minimal income and cannot afford a mobile phone or a phone plan. For this reason we support the provision to address this in the Victorian Government’s plan for seniors 2022-2026 i.e.:

Some people may never make the leap across the digital divide. We will ask government departments to develop options for alternatives to online access for services targeted to seniors. This will include key social services that currently only offer online access.⁵

This is certainly a welcome start, but seniors also need to be able to connect with non-government services and organisations too, much of which now requires a high level of digital connection and literacy.

ECCV’s multicultural networks have suggested an accessible ‘Community Connector’ who can connect people with the digital services and information they need in face-to-face sessions, and carry

⁵ Victorian Government (2022) *Ageing well in Victoria: An action plan for strengthening wellbeing for senior Victorians 2022-2026*. Melbourne: Department of Families, Fairness & Housing.

out online transactions and communications on their behalf. This Connector would be a trusted bilingual professional.

Recommendations

- 9.1** \$3 million for ECCV to trial a bilingual 'Community Connectors' program for seniors from migrant and refugee backgrounds who are unlikely to become digitally literate. The program would support seniors by connecting them with the online services and organisations they need, in face-to-face sessions. Connectors could work from existing community support organisations.

- 9.2** \$100,000 in 2024-25 for ECCV to run a collaborative partnership with relevant sector and research bodies to improve the cultural appropriateness and engagement of programs that help seniors understand the benefits of technology and how digital skills can improve their health and wellbeing.

10 Promote gender equality and support migrant and refugee women to stay safe from family violence

ECCV welcomes the Victorian Government's investment in women's health and wellbeing in its last budget, including funding to establish 20 new women's health clinics across Victoria, a dedicated Aboriginal women's health clinic, a mobile women's health clinic servicing rural and remote Victoria, and nine additional sexual and reproductive health hubs. In particular, we welcomed support packages for women seeking asylum who are fleeing family violence, as well as funding for Aboriginal-led sexual assault support services. We also applaud the continued practice of Gender Responsive Budgeting with the aim of embedding gender equity strategies across departments. However, gaps remain in the provision of culturally safe services, including perpetrator interventions.

Multicultural and ethno-specific providers play a critical role in providing culturally responsive care. They are often the first point of contact for migrant and refugee women seeking help but, unfortunately, they are not sufficiently resourced to respond appropriately to disclosures, especially as those disclosures increase in complexity. ECCV stakeholders report that many women prefer to wait months for specialised assistance, rather than access a mainstream family violence service. This is why we need to better embed culturally responsive practice across the family violence sector and improve referral and information pathways between multicultural organisations, specialist family violence services, and wrap-around housing, legal, financial and emotional supports.

In terms of prevention, it is well established that gender inequality is a major driver of family violence that needs to be addressed. This overlaps with racial discrimination and social exclusion for women from migrant and refugee backgrounds. Substantial funding is therefore needed for targeted re-training, in-language financial counselling, English language education, work readiness programs, financial assistance, and support with childcare.

Recommendations

- 10.1** \$520,000 over three years to build the capacity of the multicultural sector to respond to family violence, including in-language community information sessions across Victoria.
- 10.2** \$2.1 million over three years for targeted economic equity initiatives, including leadership, financial assistance and capacity-building programs.
- 10.3** Increased investment in culturally appropriate public housing for victim-survivors of family violence, regardless of visa status.

11 Improve inclusion, equity and advocacy for people with disability from refugee and migrant backgrounds, and enhance coordination with family violence support

People from migrant and refugee backgrounds with disability very often experience multiple, intersecting barriers to a good quality of life and achieving their aspirations. ECCV promotes their rights and needs through our advocacy and policy work, which includes collaboration, consultation and research to inform government policy, as well as programs to improve inclusion and equity.

ECCV coordinates a Statewide Disability Network and delivers self-advocacy training to empower people with disability from migrant and refugee communities. ECCV also publishes a monthly Multicultural Disability bulletin and manages an online Multicultural Disability Hub.⁶

Given the complexities of navigating the disability service system, even without the additional language and cultural barriers, ECCV was pleased to see various progressive programs funded in the last State budget, such as investment in: Disability Liaison Officers to assist people with disability to access health services and funding to enable timely hospital discharge; new NDIS navigators to help families access disability support services, substantial additional respite for unpaid carers, and a further year of funding for the Home and Community Care Program for younger people who are not eligible for the NDIS but need assistance with daily activities.

In addition, there was welcome funding to facilitate access to education institutions such as TAFE. Nevertheless, what was missing was substantial dedicated investment to support people with disability from diverse backgrounds, as well as a funded plan to up-skill and raise the awareness of service providers in mainstream services.

Certainly, more focus is needed on the issues, experiences and cultural preferences and needs of refugees and people from CALD backgrounds with disability. Professionals supporting them need more training to raise their own cultural awareness and understanding, including trauma-informed practice.

Unpaid carers from diverse backgrounds are in particular need of support, very often being unaware that such help exists. ECCV has worked closely with Carers Victoria delivering a successful project supporting these carers to connect with services, and we suggest this could be extended to the whole of Victoria.

⁶ See <https://eccv.org.au/multicultural-disability-hub/>.

The high level of abuse experienced by people with a disability, as highlighted by the Disability Royal Commission, also needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, while noting again that those from migrant and refugee backgrounds are more likely to be isolated and vulnerable to such abuse.

Royal Commission hearings have highlighted the need for more research and understanding of how people with disability respond to family violence. People with disability who have experienced family violence often bounce between disability and family violence services, with neither service being able to offer the workforce, skillset, or knowledge to provide the breadth of response that is required. In other circumstances, existing frameworks and models are applied and assumed to work, despite lacking the necessary intersectional competencies. For example, people with disability often experience abuse in care relationships.

Further research is needed to support a better understanding of the kind of responses and services that are required in these situations, but an immediate priority must be enhanced coordination between the disability and family violence sectors to support better access.

Recommendations

- 11.1** \$9 million over four years to implement commitments under the State Disability Plan to improve inclusion and equity for people with disability from diverse backgrounds.
- 11.2** \$5 million in 2024-25 under the State Disability Plan to improve service coordination between disability and family violence services.
- 11.3** \$1 million over two years for multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations for a dedicated program to connect carers from migrant and refugee backgrounds with respite and support services.

Federal Government

- 11.4** Allocate funding from the NDIS 'Navigator' program to ethno-specific community organisations to employ bicultural outreach workers who would enable people with disability from migrant and refugee backgrounds to navigate the services they need, including mental health supports as required.

12 Ensure that the state mental health system is inclusive and accessible for all Victorians

ECCV congratulates the Victorian Government on substantial investment that it is currently making in the state's mental health system to implement the recommendations of the Royal Commission. However, we are still concerned about whether this unprecedented funding is being invested in programs and bodies that will be meet the mental health needs of migrant and refugee communities.

With funding from the Victorian Government's Diverse Communities Mental Health & Wellbeing Grants Program, and with insights from the agencies, researchers, clinical experts, advocates and people with lived experience who for our Multicultural Mental Health Network (also funded through the Diverse Communities program), ECCV recently published *Mental Health in Multicultural Communities – Current Issues and Solutions*.¹

The paper examined current issues concerning mental health in migrant and refugee communities in the context of Victoria's mental health reforms and the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, how migrant and refugee communities engage with the mental health system, and suggested strategies to address system and service gaps.

A consistent theme in consultations was the need to create a culturally and psychologically safe environment for people seeking mental health support. Cultural safety and responsiveness must be recognised and resourced as a core competency in the care delivery environment and more explicitly integrated into the existing skillset of mental health practitioners. The capacity of the mental health workforce to deliver culturally safe and responsive care must be further improved through education, training, mentoring and coaching opportunities that encourage reflective practice on how to better integrate culturally safe mental health care. Embedding cultural safety and responsiveness in mental health service provision will require:

- Cultural competence training for mental health workers
- Increased community engagement to raise awareness of available support amongst community members
- Actively fostering partnerships between multicultural and ethno-specific community organisations and mainstream services.

Organisations working in multicultural and community mental health who have received funding noted that it was generally short-term (sometimes as part of a pilot program), making it difficult to achieve progress given long-term support is often required to address mental health issues. Short-term funding makes service planning difficult, reducing the agency of organisations to determine their own paths, and making recruitment a challenge.

Current funding structures based on grants and tendering foster competition rather than collaboration, running counter to the principles of sharing knowledge and building community capacities. ECCV also notes that the Productivity Commission has recommended that contracts for community services should be for seven years to be properly effective.

Effective mental health promotion and support requires longer-term funding to community organisations, to enable sustainable programs and community engagement, and to provide certainty to providers and end the cycle of constant applications and re-applications for funding.

Recommendation

12.1 \$500,000 over two years for ECCV to build the capacity and cultural competency of community and mainstream mental health service providers to effectively respond to the mental health support needs of multicultural communities utilising a culturally safe, responsive, and inclusive approach.

13 Support greater access to services for people experiencing alcohol and other drug harm

In February 2023, ECCV and the Victorian Alcohol and Drug Association (VAADA) published a joint paper examining alcohol and other drug (AOD) issues in multicultural communities, and the barriers faced by community members in accessing services.⁷ This paper highlighted how the AOD treatment system can be perceived as complex, difficult to access and may not have consistent levels of cultural safety necessary for optimal engagement with many diverse communities.

Specialist program support currently afforded to migrant and refugee communities is sparse and sporadic, often contingent on unfunded (or short-term funded) yet innovative partnerships between multicultural and AOD agencies. These existing programs should be capitalised upon.

The best outcomes for members of multicultural communities experiencing AOD harm are achieved when AOD services work in conjunction with agencies that already work with at-risk refugee and migrant communities, who in return help to build their cultural capability. Facilitating this coordinated service response may involve a range of structures, including partnerships, co-located services and staff placements. These various collaborations should be supported by a lead coordinating role by peak bodies. This role would support collaboration, facilitate enhanced culturally sensitive practice, and provide a liaison point between the Department of Health and the broader sectors.

The diversity and cultural capability of AOD workforces is also crucial to optimising treatment outcomes for people from multicultural backgrounds. Such workforces will have an appreciation of the cultural norms applicable to different cultural groups and can ensure that individuals presenting to services feel genuinely valued, welcomed and supported. Cultural safety can best be improved by the diversification of workforces at every level.

Bicultural workers can provide both cultural expertise and connections to communities. With appropriate funding, AOD organisations can employ bicultural liaison workers to build relationships with multicultural communities, and to identify their needs and work with them to develop community-led programs to develop AOD health literacy, reduce stigma and ultimately improve access to services. Bicultural workers would also play an important role in increasing the cultural capability of the AOD workforce.

Based on these considerations, ECCV and VAADA recommend the following:

Recommendations

- 13.1** \$1.5 million in 2024-25 to establish interagency partnerships between multicultural and AOD services to support and develop more accessible and culturally safe services. This should

⁷ <https://eccv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/ECCV-VAADA-Joint-Statement.pdf>

include support for multicultural organisations to lead ongoing health promotion campaigns to reduce the stigma of AOD use, and resourcing for the development of translated materials.

- 13.2** \$3.5 million over four years for a pilot program placing two bicultural liaison workers into AOD treatment services across four AOD catchment areas. This funding should also provide for two capacity-building project support officers to support the liaison workers, to increase multicultural community access to AOD services and build the capacity of AOD services to support the needs of local communities.

14 Ensure multicultural communities are preparing for the impacts of Artificial Intelligence

For many years, technology has changed the face of the employment market, making many traditional “blue collar” jobs redundant. The rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), particularly Large Language Models such as ChatGPT, threatens to increasingly do the same to many roles in the “knowledge economy”. Roles that until recently seemed purely the reserve of human endeavour, such as research, analysis, and writing, may soon be performed more efficiently by machines powered by AI. At the same time, adoption of AI is likely to create many opportunities and a variety of new vocations.

This will lead to large-scale changes to the Victorian and Australian economy. There will be an increasing need for workers to keep updating their skills as technological changes drive increasingly different demands by industry and employers for skills. A strong, flexible and accessible vocational education and training sector will consequently become more important than ever.

As artificial intelligence (AI) continues to advance, there is a growing concern about its potential impact on multicultural communities with existing barriers. While AI has the potential to bring about positive transformations across various sectors, there is a risk that certain communities may be left behind in the process.

Multicultural communities often face unique challenges such as language barriers, limited access to technology, and cultural nuances that may not be adequately addressed by AI systems. If not carefully implemented, AI technologies could exacerbate existing inequalities, perpetuating a digital divide and hindering the inclusion of these communities in the benefits of technological advancements.

It is crucial for policymakers, technologists, and stakeholders to work collaboratively to ensure that AI development takes into account the diverse needs of multicultural communities, actively mitigating the risk of leaving them behind in the rapidly evolving landscape of technological progress. This involves prioritising accessibility, cultural sensitivity, and equitable distribution of resources to bridge the gaps and ensure that the potential benefits of AI are shared by all members of society.

Multicultural communities must be supported to take advantage of the opportunities that AI will offer. The Victorian Government is contributing funding through its startup agency LaunchVic to Boab AI, for Australia’s first accelerator program to scale-up artificial intelligence companies. It is important that a proportionate share of this funding reaches migrant and refugee-owned startups.

As there has so far been little strategic planning for the effects that AI will have on society, and on the employment market in particular, scoping and research will be required to formulate an initial response.

Recommendation

- 14.1** \$4 million over 4 years for a peak multicultural council to partner with an organisation with AI expertise such as LaunchVic or Breakthrough Victoria, to research the impacts of AI on multicultural communities and to develop and deliver an awareness raising campaign about the impacts of increasing adoption of Artificial Intelligence.

15 Increase investment in multicultural arts and festivals

The arts have been undervalued and under recognised as a vehicle for improving community relations and helping people settle, engage with the wider community and maintain their identity. People from migrant and refugee backgrounds express their cultures, beliefs, attitudes and hopes through the arts and culture. It is important therefore that the arts and creative industries reflect the nation's cultural diversity. Migrant and refugee communities must be seen on our screens, in our literature, and across the arts, and represented in leadership roles in arts bodies.

Multicultural festivals and events are attended by locals and visitors and therefore also drive economic and business development. As well as the direct economic benefits of spending by attendees, festivals and events also generate economic activity through spending at other businesses around the community. This broader economic contribution should be recognised by government.

ECCV stakeholders have expressed concern that the Multicultural Festival and Events Program (MFE) is heavily over-subscribed and under-resourced to meet its stated objectives of promoting and fostering social cohesion. Every year, many multicultural and community organisations dedicate time, resources and energy to run festivals and events. Applying for the MFE can be a complex and time-consuming process for community organisations, many of which are under resourced and under-staffed. Many applications are either unsuccessful or result in only 5-10% of the requested funding being allocated.

The lack of viable funding creates additional barriers for the equal participation and engagement of culturally diverse artists and communities – particularly young people and new and emerging communities.

ECCV was pleased that the 2023-24 Budget contained a further \$12 million over four years for the MFE program. However, to effectively support capacity-building and engagement with multicultural festivals and events, the Government must increase the annual funding pool to \$10 million, introduce multi-year funding programs with less complex application processes, and build strategic partnerships with key multicultural bodies such as ECCV and Multicultural Arts Victoria (MAV) to ensure the long-term efficiency and viability of the MFE.

Recommendation

15.1 \$10 million in annual funding over two years for the Multicultural Festivals and Grants Program to better respond to current demand.



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