

Social participation and wellbeing of seniors in regional and rural Victoria

1. Introduction

Data¹ from the 2016 census showed that out of 301,824 seniors (individuals aged 65 and over) who reside in regional Victoria, 89,163 were born overseas and 15 per cent of Australian seniors living in regional Victoria speak a language other than English at home.

Social and cultural participation of seniors in regional Victoria is vital to ensure people are socially active, age healthily and to prevent their loneliness. Despite this, current Federal and State government policies and programs focus too little on the intersecting issues of positive ageing, regional circumstances, and cultural diversity.

The Aged Care Diversity Framework ('Diversity Framework') is today the overarching framework that sets out how the national aged care system "can meet the diverse needs of all Australians"². The Diversity Framework also makes reference to seniors in regional Australia and suggests strategies to ensure that "older people in rural, remote, regional and metropolitan Australia have access to aged care services and supports appropriate to their diverse characteristics and life experiences"³. At the local level, some local councils in regional Victoria have developed "Positive Ageing and Health and Wellbeing" plans that are intended to promote active ageing, inclusive service delivery, and cultural diversity, examples are the Mildura Rural City Council *Healthy Ageing Strategy 2016 – 2020*⁴ and the Greater Bendigo *Health and Wellbeing Plan 2017 – 2021*⁵.

2. Background

Living a good life means different things to different people. For seniors it might mean keeping healthy and active, being socially connected, and enjoying a meaningful life in retirement. The World Health

¹ Adapted data from the City of Greater Dandenong, 2019, customized tabulation from the findings of the 2016 ABS Census

² Department of Health, 2020, Aged Care Diversity Framework initiative, available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/initiatives-and-programs/aged-care-diversity-framework-initiative> (accessed on 4 February 2020)

³ Department of Health, 2017. *Aged Care Diversity Framework*. Aged Care Sector Committee Diversity Sub-group, p. 9, available at: <https://www.health.gov.au/resources/publications/aged-care-diversity-framework> (Accessed on 4 February 2020)

⁴ City of Greater Bendigo, 2017, *Greater Bendigo Health and Wellbeing Plan 2017 – 2021*, available at <https://www.bendigo.vic.gov.au/sites/default/files/2018-03/Greater-Bendigo-Health-and-Wellbeing-Plan-2017-2021.pdf> (Accessed on 31 January 2020)

⁵ Mildura Rural City Council, 2016, *Healthy Ageing Strategy 2017-2020*

Organisation (WHO) developed an *Active Ageing Policy Framework* which conceptualised active ageing as the “process of optimising opportunities for health, participation, and security in order to enhance quality of life as people age.”⁶ The framework distinguishes between individual determinants and cross-cutting determinants of active ageing (see figure below).



ECCV adapted figure from WHO, 2002, Determinants of Active Ageing, Active Ageing: A Policy Framework

Social isolation and older people’s experience of social exclusion are closely linked issues⁷. The ECCV *Discussion Paper on Ethnic Seniors’ Clubs and Groups*⁸ found that ethnic seniors’ clubs play a significant role in reducing the risk of seniors becoming socially isolated or experiencing loneliness. Ethnic seniors’ clubs and groups are an important avenue for social and cultural participation of culturally diverse seniors in both metropolitan and regional areas. Clubs are a hub for members to engage in social activities such as cards, bingo and dominoes, and enjoy culturally specific activities, such as cooking, crafting, music and

⁶ WHO, 2002, Active Ageing – A Policy Framework (p. 12), available at: https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/67215/WHO_NMH_NPH_02.8.pdf;jsessionid=6D20024667212B5ED959B52390E68BC4?sequence=1 (Accessed on 10 January 2020)

⁷ Anne Pate, 2016, COTA Victoria Working Paper, No. 1, Social Isolation its impact on the mental health and wellbeing of older Victorians, p. 5, available at https://www.cotavic.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2019/05/Working-Paper_Social-Isolation.pdf (Accessed on 31 January 2020)

⁸ ECCV, 2018, Ethnic Seniors’ Clubs and Groups – Planning for the future of seniors group in Victoria, available at: https://eccv.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/ECCV_Discussion_Paper_Ethnic_Seniors_Clubs_and_Groups_FEB2018.pdf

dance. Clubs also function as a space for shared physical activities, such as light exercise, yoga and tai chi, and maintenance of a support network within people's cultural and linguistic communities.

It is estimated that there are approximately 900⁹ registered ethnic and multicultural seniors' groups in Victoria. Despite their long-recognised value, ethnic seniors' club in Victoria have reported difficulties sustaining membership and volunteer numbers in communities where the core of club membership consists of arrivals from the post-WW II migration boom. There are other communities, however, in which the trend is towards growth and increasing membership. New groups and organisations are regularly founded to support members of emerging migrant communities from Victoria's African, Asian, Middle Eastern and Latin American populations. While newer organisations may identify less as 'clubs' and more as 'groups', they provide the same kind of culturally appropriate social and practical support to culturally diverse seniors as the traditional clubs set up by more established migrant communities. The lack of recurrent funding for ethnic seniors' clubs and groups is similarly a challenge to the sustainability of these grass roots organisations that support the healthy ageing of seniors in our community. In Victoria there are more than 900 registered ethnic seniors' groups.

3. ECCV regional consultations

ECCV consulted during the period of April to December 2019 with approximately 40 representatives from different multicultural organisations and seniors' groups that deliver activities and support services to culturally diverse seniors in regional Victoria as well as a research organisation based in regional Victoria. These included:

- Alay Kapwa (We Care) Association, a Filipino Australian Charity Organisation in Gippsland
- Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council
- Diversitat, Geelong
- Ethnic Council of Shepparton & District
- Federation of Greek Elderly Citizens Clubs of Melbourne and Victoria
- Gippsland Multicultural Community Services
- John Richards Centre for Rural Ageing Research, La Trobe University, Albury-Wodonga
- Shepparton Albanian Muslim Society.

Culturally diverse seniors' groups meet at a range of different venues, such as local ethnic/multicultural communities' councils, migrant resource centres, local council venues, senior citizens centres, faith group spaces, people's home, and commercial function rooms. In some cases, groups own a meeting space.

ECCV consultations found that social activities, such as cooking, sharing a meal together, and participation in cultural dances and music, are ways of creating or strengthening connections amongst culturally diverse seniors, their families, and the community as a whole. Overall, culturally diverse seniors' groups were considered to be a central part of the social life of culturally diverse senior Victorians living in regional areas. Culturally diverse seniors club are vital peer networks that help seniors who would otherwise be socially isolated stay connected. Seniors group representatives told ECCV:

⁹ Richard Wynne, Minister for Multicultural Affairs, 2019, Honouring Our Multicultural Senior Citizens, media release, 19 July 2019, available on: <https://www.premier.vic.gov.au/honouring-our-multicultural-senior-citizens/> (Accessed on 14 February 2020)

“It is really about socialising and combatting loneliness.”

“When people can’t leave their homes, they are isolated if they don’t know how to use Facebook. People don’t tell when they are lonely. What is the alternative when people are isolated? “

An example of small organisation that offer vital ethnic specific assistance in the Filipino community is the Alay Kapwa group in Gippsland. The group provides informal support to socially isolated female carers, and promotes social and cultural connectedness through activities such as celebration of Filipino Independence Day and Filipino *Festa*, birthday celebrations, food sharing and in language activities, seniors specific meetings, church group meetings, and dancing.

Seniors living in regional Victoria may experience higher risk of social isolation due to reduced access to transport options and services¹⁰. Helping people to access transport options in regional and rural Victoria is often facilitated by volunteers of seniors’ clubs. Culturally diverse seniors’ groups mentioned requiring individual financial contributions to provide transport for members to participate in planned activities, help people to get to medical appointments and visit isolated peers in residential care homes. Clubs have traditionally cross-subsidised transport but due to funding limitations they are no longer able to do so. This is exacerbated by changes to the Community Home Support Programme (CHSP) where a number of Local Governments have exited the provision/cross-subsiding of access services to seniors in their community as part of transition of the CHSP program to the Commonwealth and in turn large providers in the ‘market’. Consultation participants indicated frustration with the lack of support for a basic mechanism to reduce the risks of social isolation. Culturally diverse seniors’ group representatives said:

“We have done that for years to advocate on transport, but nothing has happened”

“A lot of seniors can’t drive.”

“We drive people to activities.”

Volunteers or *community champions* are the driving force *behind* seniors’ groups. People ask them for help when they seek urgent, immediate help, or assistance with accessing services. Community champions help run social support activities for club members and visit isolated seniors in residential aged care facilities. Senior citizen clubs, ethno-specific as well as mainstream seniors’ groups, were found

¹⁰ Commissioner for Senior Victorians, 2016, Ageing is everyone’s business, a report on isolation and loneliness among senior Victorians, p. 32, available at: <https://www.seniorsonline.vic.gov.au/-/media/seniors/files/commissioner-for-senior-victorians/ageing-is-everyones-businessweb.pdf?la=en&hash=E7A9C37DB2DEA4D1ACDA9EE2D52670C644B24635P>

to struggle to recruit new volunteers to sustain the clubs' social and support activities¹¹ on which members depend on to stay socially connected. ECCV was told that:

“The main issue is a lack of volunteers to run the clubs, it all comes down to one person volunteering”

Representatives from an Albanian-community based organisation in Shepparton told ECCV that they have dedicated significant time and resources to be able to mobilise community champions and recruit volunteers to help with the Shepparton Albanian Harvest Festival. The desire to preserve the Albanian culture across generations, and a common sense of connection, has motivated people to volunteer for the community:

“I grew up speaking Albanian in my house. Even being second generation.”

“We have created a perception that, even for the younger community, that they are part of the (Albanian-Australian) community.”

Best practice in social and cultural participation of seniors in regional Victoria

ECCV notes that participation in social and cultural activities and programs contributes to the health and wellbeing of culturally diverse seniors. To help achieve that, targeted, resourced support programs are required that enable the active ageing of culturally diverse seniors in regional Victoria. The Multicultural Tucker program run by the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council is an example for successfully promoting social participation amongst culturally diverse seniors.

Multicultural Tucker

A good practice example of culturally sensitive social participation activities in regional Victoria is the Ballarat Regional Multicultural Council's (BRMC) *Multicultural Tucker*¹² group. The BRMC facilitates regular social meetings of seniors from different cultural backgrounds. People eat together, socialise and enjoy multicultural entertainment. The BRMC's Multicultural Tucker has managed to create a welcoming space for seniors, fostered social connections between people of different cultures, and strengthened social connections through people's joint participation in craft work, bus trips, and in the planning activities for the group.

Culturally appropriate services in regional areas

ECCV identified a need for culturally appropriate services in regional areas to support the overall health and wellbeing of culturally diverse seniors. ECCV was told that culturally diverse seniors in regional and rural Victoria have varying levels of English language fluency and literacy. A few consultation participants

¹¹ MAV, 2013, New Futures for Senior Citizens Centers and Clubs: A Report for Local Government available, pp. 5, 38 at: <https://www.mav.asn.au/what-we-do/policy-advocacy/social-community/positive-ageing> (Accessed on 4 February 2020)

¹² BRMC, 2019, Services, available at: <https://www.brmc.org.au/services/>

indicated that communicating in English generally wasn't so much an issue for members of their community. However, representatives also pointed out that the fact that a person converses in English doesn't necessarily mean the person can deal with service providers on their own.

In Shepparton, culturally diverse older volunteers of Italian background help frailer members of their community to access services or drive peers to doctor appointments. Similar volunteer activities were undertaken by culturally diverse seniors in the North East of Victoria. As part of the previously funded *Cultural Advocates* project, volunteers from the North East Multicultural Association (NEMA) visited culturally diverse seniors and provided cultural specific advice and emotional support¹³.

Face to face information and assistance to navigate services, including assertive outreach, in metropolitan and regional areas are essential for people to age healthily, and helps prevent premature access to high care. It is important that the aged care system offers diverse access in regional areas. For culturally diverse seniors, this includes access to trusted, community-based assessment services, interpreting and translating services, and bilingual care and staff who speak the client's language.

The geographical and demographic reality of rural and regional areas means that it is unlikely that seniors, especially from culturally diverse backgrounds, will be able to exercise the same level of choice as those living in metropolitan areas. To ensure an effective and targeted delivery of service for these groups, mainstream providers in regional Victoria need to be well aware of the subtle cultural and linguistic nuances and respond to their preferences and needs.

Consultation participants told ECCV that:

"It needs a greater understanding about the culture of people."

"A lot of the Italian women don't speak English."

"People who I know as English speakers, I hear them speaking in their lingo all night at the (Italian) social club."

"For the Polish group, they meet in the first week of every month. They have met for the last 40 years. They all went through forced migration. The group gives them a sense of belonging, and shared experience, that's deeper than culture. They have shrunk but it is still crucial for them that they meet."

4. ECCV Recommendations

ECCV consultations on culturally diverse seniors' issues in regional Victoria highlighted the vital role of culturally diverse and multicultural social activities that seniors engage in, often through the help of dedicated community volunteers. Considering the discontinuation of the Victorian Government *Participation for CALD Seniors* grants program¹⁴ in February 2019, alternative, targeted public programs

¹³ Dr Rachel Winterton, 2015, John Richards Initiative, Research into aged care in rural communities, Influences on services and support decisions among ageing rural ethnic populations, prepared for North East Multicultural Association (NEMA).

¹⁴ Department of Health and Human Services, 2020, *Participation for CALD Seniors Grants program*, available at: <https://www2.health.vic.gov.au/ageing-and-aged-care/wellbeing-and-participation/seniors-participation/participation-for-cald-seniors-grants-program> (Accessed on 31 January 2020)

are needed to provide continued support to culturally diverse seniors, volunteers and their groups across regional Victoria.

ECCV recommends that:

- The Victorian Government provides funding certainty for social activities, multicultural celebrations, and intergenerational activities of culturally diverse seniors groups to foster the social participation, connection and healthy ageing of culturally diverse seniors in regional Victoria. Specifically, ECCV recommends that the Victorian Multicultural Commission grants, provided in 2019-20 as part of the government election commitment to ethnic seniors clubs in 2018, be extended.
- The Victorian Government provides funding to peak multicultural organisations to provide community-based and *hub-style* social support activities to foster social connections and prevent social isolation of culturally diverse seniors including cross-cultural-engagement and social support of culturally diverse seniors in regional Victoria.
- Local, State and Commonwealth Governments consider options to provide better transport options for culturally diverse seniors groups in rural and regional areas to prevent social isolation.

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Annex:

| Top 15 birthplaces of older residents of regional Victoria and top 15 spoken languages of older residents of regional Victoria¹⁵ | | | | | |
|--|---|----------------------------------|------------|------------------------|--|
| Top | Country of Birth | Number of people aged 65+ | Top | Language spoken | Total number of people aged 65+ |
| 1 | Australia | 221,661 | 1 | English | 256,741 |
| 2 | England | 18,434 | 2 | Italian | 4,893 |
| 3 | Italy | 5,387 | 3 | German | 1,684 |
| 4 | Netherlands | 5,065 | 4 | Croatian | 1,249 |
| 5 | Germany | 4,247 | 5 | Dutch | 1,245 |
| 6 | Scotland | 3,275 | 6 | Greek | 1,198 |
| 7 | New Zealand | 2,439 | 7 | Maltese | 500 |
| 8 | Croatia | 1,380 | 8 | Polish | 483 |
| 9 | Malta | 1,145 | 9 | Macedonian | 469 |
| 10 | Greece | 1,134 | 10 | Spanish | 384 |
| 11 | Ireland | 830 | 11 | Hungarian | 373 |
| 12 | Northern Ireland | 723 | 12 | Serbian | 366 |
| 13 | Austria | 635 | 13 | French | 265 |
| 14 | USA | 633 | 14 | Mandarin | 250 |
| 15 | South Eastern Europe, not further defined | 629 | 15 | Ukrainian | 220 |

¹⁵ Adapted data from the City of Greater Dandenong, 2019, customized tabulation from the findings of the 2016 ABS Census