



Submission to 2025 Victorian Government's Multicultural Review

May 2025



Statement of Recognition

Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the lands and waters throughout Australia. We pay our respect to Elders, past and present, acknowledging their continuing relationship to land and the ongoing living cultures of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples across Australia.

About Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand

The Sisters of Good Shepherd was established in France over 400 years ago to respond to the needs of women and girls. The first program was a refuge that offered new possibilities for women and girls who were trapped in situations of poverty and exploitation who wanted to change their lives. Saint Mary Euphrasia Pelletier carried forward this mission, expanding internationally. We are now the largest, longest running organisation supporting women and girls, located in 73 countries, and with consultative status on women and girls at the UN. Good Shepherd has worked in Australia and New Zealand since 1863.

We provide programs and services that support women, girls, and their families to be safe, well, strong and connected. Our clients are at the centre of what we do. We are focused on responding to their emerging needs and on providing innovating, locally tailored responses. Our services are complemented by research, advocacy, and policy development that address the underlying structural causes of injustice and inequality to pave a way for a better tomorrow.

**Inquiries:**

This submission was endorsed by Stella Avramopoulos, CEO Good Shepherd Australia New Zealand.

We welcome the opportunity to elaborate on the points raised in this submission and encourage you to contact us for further discussion.

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Good Shepherd responses to review questions

Q1. In terms of Victorian Government multicultural policies, organisations and systems, what do you feel is working well for yourself, your community or group?

Increase targeted government investment to address structural barriers

Government programs such as the Women on Temporary Visas funding stream and Uniforms and Internet Relief Grants have provided vital support for multicultural clients. They play a key role in addressing intersecting barriers such as visa insecurity, digital exclusion, and cost-of-living pressures. Good Shepherd staff highlighted that such targeted supports allow practitioners to tailor responses, reduce hardship, and improve engagement with services.

Culturally safe programs increase economic independence and social inclusion

Good Shepherd's Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) specific initiatives demonstrate the impact and importance of culturally safe, strengths-based approaches: LaunchMe for Multicultural Women, a place-based small business coaching and community connection program; and UBUNTU, a collective enterprise innovation project delivered in partnership with Afri-AusCare. Our soon to open emergency accommodation initiative, Bridget House, offers a culturally responsive alternative to the unsafe and inadequate hotel stay model for women experiencing FDV.

These programs have not only improved participants financial wellbeing, they have also strengthened community connectedness. For example, the community cooking initiative instigated by the current *UBUNTU* participants evolved to a farm-to-table business model incorporating community kitchen garden, a café selling their prepacked meals or snacks, and with plans for a cookbook. Similarly, participants in *LaunchMe for Multicultural Women* have been supported to grow their own businesses but impacts reach beyond individual program groups. Through an alumni network that fosters ongoing support and opportunities, women are now collaborating, hiring each other, referring clients, and staying connected.

Our practitioners emphasise how our approaches explicitly acknowledge and work to address the structural barriers faced by multicultural women, including



language difficulties, limited social networks and lack of opportunities for personal income. These programs are deeply embedded within community and are co-designed with community members to ensure they are relevant, respectful, and effective. Delivery models prioritise active listening, cultural understanding, and trust-building, recognising that meaningful engagement begins with valuing lived experience.

Micro-enterprise initiatives provide an alternative pathway to building financial literacy and skills for a dignified income. These programs also generating broader impacts by leveraging the power of multicultural community collaboration.

A model for scalable, systemic change

The success of Good Shepherd's programs lies in being place-based and flexible with expertise to bridge gaps in the broader service system. Our programs have adapted to community needs and are building long-term, reciprocal relationships. This has resulted in higher levels of engagement, increased confidence among participants, and a stronger sense of belonging and social connection, all of which are critical enablers of economic and personal wellbeing. While initiated by Good Shepherd, these programs are closely aligned with state multicultural policy priorities and demonstrate strong potential for replication and scaling across other settings. We recommend funding reform that enables sustained and strategic investment in place-based, community-driven social service programs. This should include mechanisms to better utilise existing resources and ensure alignment across services and jurisdictions.

Q2. How can the Victorian Government improve its multicultural policies, organisations and systems, to better promote community harmony and reject division in the context of local and global events?

Increase representation of culturally diverse communities in leadership through targeted recruitment and development programs

To foster genuine community harmony, the Victorian Government must prioritise authentic representation and visibility of culturally diverse communities in leadership roles. Research consistently shows that diverse leadership not only enhances decision-making but also improves trust and engagement with minority communities.[1] Our practitioner experience confirms that without visible leaders reflecting community diversity, people of colour bear disproportionate



emotional labour educating others and bridging cultural gaps. Increasing culturally representative leaders across government and corporate sectors will model inclusivity and help dismantle systemic barriers.

Invest in anti-racism strategies and culturally responsive services

It is critical to move beyond “tokenistic multiculturalism” that largely focuses on cultural festivals and symbolic gestures. While these events have value, they often fail to address underlying structural inequities such as systemic racism and exclusion. Effective multicultural policies must embed anti-racism strategies, equitable employment pathways, and culturally responsive service design.

Ensuring equitable access to essential supports for vulnerable groups, including those with uncertain visa status

Addressing inequities in access to essential services, especially for vulnerable groups such as victim-survivors of family violence with uncertain visa status, is a pressing priority. Structural barriers often force these women to navigate complex systems without adequate support, exacerbating harm and marginalisation. [2] Policies must ensure safe and equitable access regardless of citizenship status, preventing the misuse of immigration systems as tools of abuse, as highlighted in our practitioner discussions.

Q3. How can the Victorian Government improve its multicultural policies, organisations and systems, to better ensure access to government services for people in multicultural communities? (max. 300 words)

Improving interpreter standards and translation quality

As noted by Good Shepherd practitioners, communication challenges exacerbate barriers to accessing government services. These include inadequate interpreter services and a lack of translated materials in plain, accessible language. Reliance on informal translation methods, such as family members or apps, risks missing critical issues like coercive control. This highlights the urgent need for professional, well-trained interpreters who can manage sensitive conversations.

To address these challenges, the Victorian Government must invest in improving interpreter quality through ongoing training, compliance monitoring, and ensuring interpreters receive appropriate support to navigate the complexities of trauma-informed communication. Additionally, the availability of translated resources



should be expanded and designed with cultural and literacy considerations in mind to promote equity in access. [3]

Expand culturally appropriate, long-term service delivery

Short-term programs, while helpful, are not enough to meet the complex and long-term needs of multicultural families experiencing domestic violence. Good Shepherd practitioners stress the importance of sustained, culturally informed support to respond to diverse family and extended familial connection dynamics and intergenerational trauma. Funding reform should prioritise long-term, holistic services, ensuring a shift from short-term cycles to models that reflect the realities of multicultural families including enabling enough time to engage in a culturally appropriate way that promotes service continuity.

Q4. How can the Victorian Government improve its multicultural policies, organisations and systems, to better address and prevent racism and discrimination?

Actively challenge racialised narratives in media and policy discourse

The government must take a clear and public stance against racialised narratives in media and political discourse. As our practitioners highlighted, silence in the face of harmful stereotypes, such as those perpetuated through the “African gangs” narrative, has allowed racism to be normalised. Federal leadership is needed to reframe these narratives by providing broader context and direction, enabling states and territories to respond appropriately. Governments should counter such narratives through strong public messaging and media accountability frameworks, reinforcing that “not all young people are a threat”. Media scholarship has shown how these racialised narratives sustain moral panics and racial hierarchies. [4]

Embed structural anti-racism in education, employment, and public institutions

To effectively address and prevent racism and discrimination, the Victorian Government must move beyond reactive, surface-level responses and commit to proactive, systemic reforms rooted in equity and inclusion. Employment pathways for skilled migrants and refugees must be reformed. Good Shepherd practitioners expressed frustration over the underemployment of their clients who are highly qualified due to the non-recognition of overseas qualifications. Addressing this



requires transparent, timely qualification recognition processes and targeted employment programs that value migrant experience.

Building trust through representation and inclusive service design

Systems must reflect the communities they serve. Good Shepherd recommends increasing multilingual services, inclusive forms, and the hiring of bicultural staff in frontline roles. Symbolic inclusion, “seeing someone who looks like you”, was seen as crucial for fostering trust, safety, and belonging in public systems. To deepen this impact, it is essential to identify opportunities to restructure service models away from Anglo-Western individualistic approaches towards collective, cooperative, and communal models that better align with the cultural values and lived experiences of diverse communities.

Q5. What initiatives or programs do you believe would work best to promote cultural understanding, interfaith dialogue, respect and collaboration within the community to ensure everyone feels included and valued?

Expand access to English education

Language barriers remain one of the most critical challenges facing migrant and refugee communities. As highlighted in our staff consultations, access to English-language education is both essential and deeply inequitable. English proficiency underpins independence, employment, and access to services, yet those on bridging visas are routinely excluded from free programs. This exclusion not only entrenches disadvantage but creates cascading impacts on wellbeing, economic participation, and social connection. To address this, government investment in universal access to English classes regardless of visa status is vital. Community groups consistently stress that such programs should be locally embedded, flexible, and culturally sensitive to promote uptake and retention.

Fund grassroots intercultural initiatives

A recurring theme from our consultations was that community-led, local initiatives are far more effective in building trust and cohesion than symbolic or one-off multicultural events. Faith-based organisations, local sports clubs, and cultural associations are often the first point of contact for newly arrived individuals. Interfaith and intercultural events when co-designed and co-delivered by communities themselves serve as powerful platforms to deepen understanding, build respect, and challenge stereotypes.



Creating meaningful volunteering pathways builds stronger connections and fosters belonging. Good Shepherd's volunteer placements in Good Money stores offer practical experience and build confidence. These roles help people facing barriers to employment or social inclusion stay engaged and connected to their community.

Ensure equitable funding and collaborative partnerships to empower diverse communities and foster inclusion

Currently, larger organisations often receive disproportionate funding despite limited reach into culturally and linguistically diverse communities. Equitable resourcing and partnership models between mainstream and grassroots organisations will enhance delivery and trust. funding reform that prioritises equitable, long-term support for community-based organisations.

Support culturally responsive programs for migrant and refugee youth

Another critical gap lies in the support for migrant and refugee-background youth, many of whom were disproportionately impacted by COVID-19 and continue to face disruptions to education and mental health support. Our practitioners report that current service models are heavily adult-centric. Culturally appropriate education and wellbeing initiatives such as after school tutoring, trauma-informed mental health services, and youth leadership programs must be scaled up to nurture belonging and resilience in the next generation.

Invest in capacity building for community groups

Any effort to foster inclusion must include investment in capacity building for community groups. Training in areas such as child protection and legal rights can help prevent family violence and reduce unnecessary involvement of child protection services by supporting families to understand their rights and responsibilities.



Q6. How can the Victorian Government through its agencies better support and empower multicultural and multifaith communities to contribute to decision-making processes, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs addressed?

Embed genuine co-design practices with multicultural and multifaith communities in all government decision-making processes

To support and empower multicultural and multifaith communities, the Victorian Government must shift from symbolic consultation to genuine, community-led co-design. Some well-intentioned, current practices often appear tokenistic (for example, installing a prayer room without consulting about basic needs like a prayer mat or washing facilities). As one practitioner stated, “They had a prayer room, but didn’t ask what was needed for it to be useful”. This highlights a disconnect between surface-level inclusion and meaningful engagement. Embedding co-design frameworks that involve communities from the earliest stages of planning ensures that services are relevant, respectful, and effective. [5]

Broaden representation beyond formal community leaders to include women, youth, and newly arrived groups

Representation must also extend beyond traditional gatekeepers. Too often, governments rely on established community leaders typically older men, who may not reflect the full diversity of their communities. As one staff member noted, “How are we talking to the women?”. This leaves women, youth, LGB communities, and new arrivals without a seat at the table. Inclusive engagement requires deliberate outreach and the resourcing of grassroots voices who bring lived experience but may lack formal platforms. These groups are essential to decision-making that is truly representative and equitable.

Establish transparent feedback mechanisms to ensure accountability and close the consultation loop

Communities are experiencing growing fatigue from repeated consultations that lead to little visible change. “People get sick of being consulted and they never hear back,” one practitioner observed. Without transparent feedback loops, trust is eroded, and the willingness to engage diminishes. Government agencies must implement mechanisms to show communities how their input shaped outcomes—whether in policy changes, service designs, or funding decisions. Feedback must be accessible, multilingual, and clearly linked to community



contributions. To rebuild trust and foster genuine participation, it is also critical to change models of dialogue and engagement to reflect how diverse communities interact, learn, and connect, ensuring that engagement practices are culturally responsive and community-led.

Q7. Can you suggest any improvements to the Victorian Government's approach to supporting multicultural communities?

Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC) should act as an independent accountability body

To build a truly inclusive Victoria, the government must move beyond symbolic multiculturalism and invest in accountable, equity-driven systems. Good Shepherd practitioners identified urgent gaps in oversight, community engagement, and the authority of the VMC that demand systemic reform.

Good Shepherd staff highlighted that the current VMC lacks the authority and power to enforce meaningful change, stating, “We need a body that doesn’t just give advice and tick boxes.” Independence would allow the VMC to publicly report on progress, evaluate gaps, and advocate for reform without political interference.

Strengthen oversight of multicultural programs and engage

Government-funded multicultural programs must be subject to rigorous, community-informed quality assurance processes. Despite increased funding, practitioners observed that some initiatives risk reinforcing stereotypes due to weak oversight: “There’s often money available, but not enough accountability about what’s done with it.” Without evaluation and community co-design, training programs can be ineffective or worse, harmful. Embedding evaluation frameworks with clear cultural safety standards, lived experience input, and measurable outcomes is essential to ensure that funded programs genuinely serve multicultural communities. To achieve this, service system models must also reflect a communal, collective, and cooperative approach that aligns with the values and social structures of the communities they aim to support.

Invest in schools as trusted community hubs

Schools must be resourced as proactive, inclusive hubs for multicultural engagement. Practitioners noted that many multicultural families already view schools as trusted spaces, yet systemic constraints such as limited staff capacity



and cultural competency restrict their potential: “Schools are safe places ... but only if the staff are equipped to engage families meaningfully.” By investing in training, funding community liaison roles, and fostering school–community partnerships, the government can activate schools as essential sites for social inclusion, early intervention, and cross–cultural dialogue.

Q8. Do you have any other feedback from your recent engagement with the Victorian Government on issues impacting you or your community?

Strengthen the VMC’s statutory role and powers

The Victorian Multicultural Commission (VMC), as an independent statutory body under the Multicultural Victoria Act 2011, is intended to advocate for Victoria’s multicultural communities. However, consultation with Good Shepherd practitioners and senior leadership highlight persistent concerns around discrimination, language access, service access. These concerns underscore growing dissatisfaction with the VMC’s current advocacy role and its perceived lack of systemic impact.

Embed structural reform and community accountability

Restoring public trust and achieving meaningful change requires a review and expansion of the Victorian Multicultural Commission’s (VMC) mandate. This should involve embedding transparent reporting mechanisms, enhancing community engagement processes, and ensuring the Commission provides strategic advice that supports whole-of-government reform. In this context, it is also important to consider: what is the role of local government? Local councils are often the first point of contact for communities and play a critical role in implementing inclusive policies, facilitating grassroots engagement, and ensuring that multicultural strategies are responsive to local needs and realities. To reinforce accountability and ensure policy implementation is community-informed, a Ministerial Advisory Group or sub-committee of Cabinet should be established, with formal mechanisms for reporting progress to Cabinet. In parallel, the Victorian Government should advocate for a national framework and coordinated plan, led by an inter-jurisdictional committee positioned within the Prime Minister’s portfolio, to strengthen alignment across jurisdictions and drive systemic reform at the federal level.



Address systemic and intersecting barriers

CALD communities face overlapping challenges such as visa insecurity, digital exclusion, and economic precarity. For example, migrants on bridging visas are often excluded from English language programs, undermining access to employment, services, and social connection. Government investment in universal, place-based, culturally safe programs is essential. These issues reflect deeper systemic exclusion and cannot be addressed through cultural events alone.

Centre co-design and advocacy

Tokenistic consultation must be replaced with genuine co-design processes that involve community stakeholders from the outset. The VMC can lead this work, but only if it is resourced and empowered to act independently. The Commission should monitor multicultural strategies across sectors, report on government performance, and provide strong, independent policy advice grounded in community realities.

Structural reform for equitable access regardless of visa status

Structural reform is needed to address the exclusion of people on temporary and insecure visas from essential services. While comprehensive national data is limited, internal data from Good Shepherd indicates that a relatively higher percentage of CLAD women presenting at our refuges are on temporary visas. Visa insecurity often overlaps with barriers like digital exclusion and financial hardship, limiting access to legal and financial support. Victim-survivors of family violence are especially vulnerable, navigating complex systems with little protection. Good Shepherd recommends reforming immigration and social policy to ensure fair access to essential services, including financial and legal support for visa and immigration issues. Prioritise the safety and wellbeing of victim-survivors of family violence by removing visa-based exclusions that restrict access to support, protection, and participation.



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**We aspire for all
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