

Ministerial Advisory Council on Multiculturalism

Consultation with Community Service Providers – Outcomes Report

Date: Friday, 30 May 2025

Location: 220 London Circuit, Ground Floor, Rooms 0.18–0.19

1. Purpose of the Forum

The consultation forum convened multicultural community service providers across Canberra to share insights into complex challenges that cannot be addressed in isolation. It served as an opportunity for the Ministerial Advisory Council on Multiculturalism (MACM) to:

- Strengthen relationships with key service organisations
- Facilitate cross-sector dialogue
- Gather evidence-based advice on emerging policy priorities

Seventeen attendees from twelve organisations - including ACT Policing, Legal Aid ACT, MARSS, DSS, and others - participated in small group discussions facilitated by MACM members. The forum explored three core themes: social cohesion, support for migrants and refugees, and domestic and family violence.

2. Discussion Theme 1: Social Cohesion

Summary of Discussions

Participants highlighted that the concept of social cohesion remains difficult to define, with stakeholders holding differing views on its meaning. Descriptions ranged from democratic participation and cultural respect, to trust in institutions and freedom from discrimination. Several attendees stressed that cohesion is not synonymous with assimilation:

“Social cohesion exists in the balance between cultural expression, common values, and the responsibility to adapt.”

Stakeholders noted challenges such as limited cross-cultural interaction, intergenerational tension, and “frozen culture” dynamics that inhibit integration. Concerns were raised around gaps in representation across legal, health, and education sectors, and a lack of accessible information for both communities and service providers.

There was a call for mainstream Australia to engage more deeply with multiculturalism and for social cohesion policies to be developed at the systemic level - not left to communities to manage alone.

Participant feedback to address barriers:

- Establish a consistent, community-informed definition of social cohesion, with measurable goals, that does not only target specific cultural or religious groups or tensions.
- Expand funding for Multicultural Liaison Officers (MLOs) across sectors.

- Introduce school-based education on First Nations and multicultural histories.
- Fund intercultural programs that foster cross-group understanding.
- Support public-facing campaigns that promote inclusive values and belonging.
- Recognise and resource the role of informal religious spaces as connector and positive facilitators of community.
- Prioritise holistic approaches that integrate inclusion, trust-building, and participation.

3. Discussion Theme 2: Support for Migrants and Refugees

Summary of Discussion

Service providers emphasised that migrants and refugees often face complex, overlapping barriers in accessing essential services. These challenges are not solely cultural or linguistic, but systemic - rooted in a lack of tailored support, trust, and structural inclusion.

Participants noted a widespread lack of trust in government systems by the multicultural communities they service, which can deter individuals from seeking assistance - particularly around sensitive issues such as domestic violence, housing, or mental health. Many migrants and refugees report feeling unsafe or judged when engaging with authorities, including health workers and police, often shaped by past experiences or fear of repercussions.

“People are seen as numbers and statistics, not as individuals who sought refuge or chose to call Australia home.”

A key issue raised was the absence of culturally competent, accessible entry points for support. Service providers noted significant gaps in guidance for newly arrived migrants and humanitarian entrants - particularly in navigating systems such as MyGov, Centrelink, or housing services. This lack of early-stage orientation contributes to prolonged vulnerability and disengagement.

Further, service providers expressed concern that intersectional differences within migrant and refugee communities are not adequately recognised. Assumptions of homogeneity can lead to missed needs - for example, for international students, LGBTIQ+ refugees, or newly arrived women without networks. The one-size-fits-all model was seen as insufficient and, in some cases, alienating.

Participants also pointed to gaps in employment access, training pathways, and credential recognition as persistent barriers to integration and financial stability.

Participant feedback to address barriers:

- Establish a centralised, multilingual resource hub offering guidance on essential services (e.g. housing, healthcare, employment, MyGov, ATO).
- Improve trust-building measures across frontline services through culturally safe practices, outreach, and staff training.
- Fund more culturally responsive mental health and wellbeing services, including counselling in multiple languages and trauma-informed care.
- Expand investment in training and employment pathways, including credential recognition and work placement opportunities through social enterprises.

- Recognise and respond to intersectional needs within migrant and refugee communities, particularly for vulnerable or overlooked sub-groups (e.g. international students, women at risk, LGBTIQ+ individuals).
- Increase visibility of services through community events, public campaigns, and better event search tools, ensuring services are not only available but known.
- Promote narratives of migrant contribution and resilience through mainstream media to build empathy and public support.

4. Discussion Theme 3: Domestic and Family Violence (DFV)

Summary of Discussion

Participants identified domestic and family violence as a persistent and complex issue within multicultural communities - shaped by cultural stigma, fear of judgement, lack of awareness, and insufficient support structures. Shame and community pressure were frequently cited as reasons why individuals, particularly women, may not report violence or seek help.

Service providers noted that victims often face cultural expectations to remain silent, especially where family honour or caregiving responsibilities are prioritised. In many cases, survivors are unaware of the full range of legal protections and support services available, or are unable to access them due to language, isolation, or lack of culturally safe avenues.

“The family environment isn’t always a safe space—and many don’t know where else to turn.”

There is also confusion about which organisations are responsible for different aspects of DFV response, leading to fragmented or missed support. The current short-term funding models for DFV services were flagged as a challenge, limiting the continuity and depth of care. Participants further emphasised that existing materials and programs are often not sufficiently adapted to multicultural realities - either in content, format, or delivery.

Encouragingly, several attendees noted the emergence of community-led initiatives to prevent and respond to DFV. However, these groups often lack the training or resourcing needed to operate safely and effectively.

Participant feedback to address barriers:

- Expand community education campaigns that raise awareness of DFV in all its forms, including emotional abuse, coercive control, and everyday violence.
- Develop and distribute multilingual, culturally appropriate support materials, co-designed with communities and inclusive of those experiencing mental health challenges.
- Provide training for community leaders and service providers to identify, call out, and respond to DFV in culturally safe ways.
- Clarify organisational roles and referral pathways to avoid gaps in service provision.
- Ensure stable funding for culturally competent DFV services, including housing, counselling, and legal assistance.
- Invest in community-based safety planning programs that consider dependents and diverse family structures.

- Support preventative education in schools and communities that addresses respectful relationships, human rights, and safety - across all age groups.
- Consider practical measures such as transport assistance or housing options for victims, designed with sensitivity to cultural and religious needs.

5. Cross-Cutting Insights and Evidence: Consultation Summary

The consultation highlighted recurring priorities across all thematic areas. While the challenges are diverse, the following themes emerged consistently:

1. Strengthen Service Accessibility and Trust

- Improve visibility and early-stage guidance for newly arrived migrants and refugees through multilingual, centralised resource hubs.
- Embed cultural safety and trauma-informed practice across all service sectors—including health, legal, education, and housing.
- Build trust through frontline outreach, community liaisons, and lived experience-informed delivery models.

2. Invest in Community-Centred, Culturally Responsive Practice

- Fund long-term, community-based DFV prevention and response programs tailored to the realities of multicultural families.
- Support community leaders with training and resources to address sensitive issues such as domestic violence in culturally appropriate ways.
- Recognise the diversity within multicultural communities and move away from one-size-fits-all policy and service design.

3. Prioritise Inclusive Public Education and Narrative Shift

- Expand multicultural education and First Nations history in school curricula.
- Promote public campaigns and media coverage that humanise and celebrate migrant and refugee communities, not just highlight problems.
- Support respectful relationship and rights-based education across communities and age groups.

4. Coordinate Whole-of-Government Response

- Address multiculturalism, integration, DFV, and social cohesion in a joined-up, systemic way—across government portfolios.
- Clarify organisational responsibilities and referral pathways to avoid duplication or service gaps.
- Increase and stabilise funding for Multicultural Liaison Officers and culturally competent programs across sectors.

5. Enable Structural Equity and Long-Term Inclusion

- Improve employment access through credential recognition, targeted training, and work experience pathways—especially for refugees, women, and under-represented subgroups.
- Ensure housing and safety options for at-risk individuals are culturally appropriate and accessible.
- Create mechanisms to include migrant and refugee voices in policy design, service evaluation, and systemic reform.