



## NATIONAL SETTLEMENT POLICY NETWORK TELECONFERENCE

# Local government and settlement:

## REPORT

### TELECONFERENCE

The National Settlement Policy Network (SPN) is a joint initiative of the [Refugee Council of Australia \(RCOA\)](#) and the [Settlement Council of Australia \(SCOA\)](#) to enable our members (organisational and individual) to participate in planning joint advocacy on settlement issues. RCOA and SCOA co-host quarterly National Settlement Policy Network teleconferences that focus on specific themes. The teleconferences provide an opportunity for members to hear from guest speakers with expertise in particular areas of settlement policy, raise issues of concern and share ideas for ways forward.

The SPN teleconference which was held on the 18<sup>th</sup> of February 2014 was on the issue of local government and settlement. Participants dialled in from hubs in ACT, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Northern Territory, Victoria, Tasmania and Western Australia.

Speakers included:

- Paul Power, CEO, Refugee Council of Australia;
- Rolf Fenner, Senior Policy Advisor, Australian Local Government Association;
- Con Pagonis, Multicultural Policy Advisor, Municipal Association of Victoria; and
- Cr Gaetano Greco, Mayor of Darebin Council.

### BACKGROUND

Local Government (LG) being the government operating closest to the people is uniquely placed to play an important role in settlement. Although traditionally settlement planning has been led from a federal government level, LG has played an increasing role in positive settlement outcomes for refugees and migrants. LGs engage in actions to promote multiculturalism, social inclusion and ensure equitable access to their programs and services for all community members. Many are undertaking activities to welcome new migrant and refugee arrivals to their community and the wider Australian community, such as through becoming Refugee Welcome Zones. LGs are increasingly engaging with the settlement sector to foster positive settlement outcomes. However, there is no consistent approach from LGs across Australia. Strengthening links between the settlement sector, LG and all levels of government was the focus of discussion.

### PRESENTATIONS

#### **Paul Power – CEO, Refugee Council of Australia (RCOA)**

- Refugee Welcome Zones is an initiative started by the RCOA in 2002.

- Councils are asked to pass a resolution to commit in spirit to welcoming refugees. This is a voluntary non-binding commitment requiring no expenditure which is its strength and weakness.
- To date 89 LGs have joined the initiative.
- The resolution requires champions in LG as it can be forgotten when councillors change.
- Since the initiative's inception a few LGs have signed a resolution only to later reject it when leadership changes as it is seen as being too politicised an issue for LGs.
- RCOA has looked at what they really want the zones to achieve and positive ways to encourage councils to put their commitment in spirit into action. The action areas of focus are on supporting individuals living in the community and ways to create "community spirit" around the resolution.
- In the UK the City of Sanctuary Movement is a similar initiative which takes it beyond LG and encourages businesses and community organisations to commit to welcoming refugees.
- RCOA encourages councils to share what they are doing to meet their commitment with other LGs.
- RCOA has been documenting how LGs are implementing their resolution and found mixed results. Also, some councils may not have refugees or migrants in their community but would like them to settle there.
- Councils' welcoming activities include: consulting the refugee and migrant communities, new policies, small funding grants, gatherings, events, service directories, translating services, youth programs, library activities such as living libraries, in language materials, awards, local cultural precincts and local employment support programs.
- RCOA will be looking at how to get more councils to share their welcome activities and post it on RCOA's website and email bulletin.

**Rolf Fenner – Senior Policy Advisory, Australian Local Government Association (ALGA)**

- ALGA is the national peak body for LG and is based in Canberra. Its members are state LG Associations. It aims to represent the broader national issues LGs face which are very diverse across the country.
- LGs are connected by the idea they represent their community via the democratic process.
- Councils are a key partner and player in settlement issues. But they are faced with challenges as their communities have long list of issues they want their LG to work on.
- LGs have limited resources available to address the diversity of issues they face.
- There is cost shifting amongst all levels of government with federal and or state governments initiating programs and provide initial funding but costs are later shifted to councils.
- The ALGA board met to discuss its challenges with the federal government's Commission of Audit.
- State and LGs deal with settlement issues but don't make immigration policy or receive resources to assist in addressing settlement issues.
- There is a major taxation review underway in Australia which may further impact LG resources.
- The ALGA Board will meet to set their annual strategic priorities.
- ALGA President Felicity-Ann Lewis is keen to work in the settlement space.

- There is no longer a Select Ministerial Council for Settlement Issues. The Commonwealth is open to holding a senior staff group to look at settlement under the National Settlement Framework.
- Councils are an ally in the settlement space but has multiple issues and challenges it faces.
- LG is represented nationally sitting on the Council of Australian Governments. But it is not legislated in the federal constitution and is legislated under the states and territories' legislative frameworks.

### **Con Pagonis – Multicultural Policy Advisor, Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV)**

- Con Pagonis' work with MAV focuses on multicultural policy. It is not a role replicated across country in other LG peak bodies.
- LGs are highly varied across Australia. There are 565 municipal authorities across Australia and 79 in Victoria. Each state has its own state peak LG association.
- LGs don't have strong top down capacity like state or federal governments to create a consistent approach across the country. LGs role in settling new migrants and refugees varies nationally.
- In the past councils have relied on partnerships with federal and state government to address settlement issues. However, these partnerships have dramatically diminished and better collaboration is needed.
- The federal Department of Immigration has previously provided strong intergovernmental leadership on settlement issues. There were state and local settlement planning committees to engage LGs; the Victorian Settlement Planning Committee was disbanded several years ago and local settlement planning committees have been left to their own resources since then.
- The Victorian state government previously collaborated with MAV and LG was a priority in cultural diversity planning with standing committee, biannual conferences and professional development activities. But three years ago this stopped.
- The MAV Board has since established a multicultural committee which advises on policy. It has moved into a LG multicultural policy leadership space previously occupied by state government through the VMC. MAV provides professional development opportunities on multicultural issues. In 2014 it commences biannual sectoral multicultural conferences.
- MAV coordinates multicultural diversity planning across the Victorian LGs. There is a network of cultural diversity planners. It may include council officers with roles dedicated to cultural diversity planning or officers which add multicultural issues to other work roles. MAV, in partnership with the Victorian Local Government Multicultural Issues Network (VLGMIN), provides informal peer support to this network which meets bimonthly.
- MAV and the VLGMIN hold an annual Victorian LG multicultural forum focused on CALD participation in LG. This year MAV has partnered with arts managers in councils to focus on multicultural arts.
- The MAV Board's multicultural committee advises on a range of issues including cultural diversity, the Racism It Stops with Me campaign and Multicultural forum.
- Asylum Seekers living in community is an issue on MAV's radar. There is a cost shifting by Commonwealth Government to LG to provide assistance to these

individuals. MAV is lobbying to engage with federal government on this issue and move towards more forward planning.

### **Cr Gaetano Greco, Mayor of Darebin Council**

- Darebin Council has a long history of engaging with multiculturalism. Darebin established a centre to assist Temporary Protection Visa (TVP) holders. The centre undertook activities such as providing assistance finding accommodation and accompanying TVP holders to Centrelink.
- Darebin is a Refugee Welcome Zone.
- Darebin's interest in social inclusion and issues stems from LG's role in ensuring the well being of its residents, regardless of where they are from or their visa status.
- Federal government does not provide enough settlement support and LG must provide assistance.
- Darebin's settlement activities includes:
  - Darebin's Refugee Welcome Zone resolution allocated \$30,000 to set up a Darebin asylum seekers support program.
  - An Intercultural Centre organises cultural events, seeks to create an understanding across many communities and is a drop in space for asylum seekers to gather.
  - Asylum seekers were linked with Neighbourhood Houses which offer different courses or activities and allocated free spaces for asylum seekers for courses.
  - Consulted the community on how can council assist asylum seekers.
  - Allocated spaces for asylum seekers in health Services ensuring access to GPs.
  - Organised a Mens Shed where men could developed relationships with men. It included a bicycle recycling program.
  - Libraries provided asylum seekers membership activities.
  - Allocated places in children services for asylum seekers.
  - Ensured kindergarden places were allocated to asylum seekers.
  - Local gyms and pools offered free memberships.
  - The YMCA offered free membership.
- LGs have limitations in the settlement process but also real potential to help.
- Darebin works very closely with other organisations. The Darebin Ethnic Communities Council partnered with the Council to developed a Darebin Community Passport. It is given to asylum seekers. Organisations who are prepared to provide services to asylum seekers are listed on it.
- ALGA National Conference is a great opportunity to promote and enlist more councils to get involved in settlement.
- LG Mayors could be asked to champion assisting Asylum Seekers in the community.

## **DISCUSSION**

Participants discussed the following questions:

- How can LG better engage with the settlement sector?
- How can settlement agencies collaborate with LG?
- What role do agencies see for LG?

### What is RCOA doing to connect LGs on Refugee Welcome Zones?

RCOA is looking at creating a webpage on its website that LGs can access to connect and communicate about their activities to create a more welcoming community.

### How can settlement agencies involve their LGs in Refugee Welcome Zones?

RCOA has not yet developed a resource on this. RCOA's website contains a Bright Ideas section which can be used to highlight different council's activities. The Refugee Welcome Zone report contains information on different council's activities.

RCOA recommended motivating councils via competition such as the awards at annual ALGA conference or including in the Migration and Settlement Awards a LG category.

Migrant Resource Centre of SA undertook a volunteer work experience pilot project for new and emerging communities. It was made available by local councils and is progressing.

The report from this teleconference can be a resource to settlement agencies.

Settlement agencies can look into work experience programs looking at LG liability insurance, volunteer pathways and business enterprises in local community.

Hume and Mooreland Councils when developing their strategic plans invited agencies to contribute. Settlement agencies can actively invite different council departments to team meetings to better understand what councillors can provide and keep it on their agenda (ie-translating needs).

The WA Office of Multicultural Interests created a guide book for councils to achieve their access and equity outcomes. There is no consistency across councils about how to achieve access and equity and social inclusion outcomes. A step forward would be to create a national recognised handbook resource for councils which showcases successes with case studies. This could be done in partnership between SCOA, RCOA, ALGA and MAV. Funding sources should be investigated for the project. Stirling Council has developed a guide on access and equity. This could be looked at to see how it is being implemented.

Councils could mentor each other on their settlement activities.

### Discussion comments received via email:

The Overseas Qualified Engineers Project (OQEP), auspiced by STARTTS and Fairfield MRC's Fairfield Emerging Communities Action Partnership Steering Group, looked at LG settlement support:

- Some LG departments seemed particularly interested in engaging persons of humanitarian background in work experience programs.
- The central problem facing LG engineer work experience programs is the length of time offered as unpaid work experience (4 weeks) is limited by legislation. This is inadequate for persons facing a range of barriers (lack of contacts in the industry or social supports, workplace culture and knowledge gaps, skills untested in the Australian context, others barriers experienced by persons of refugee background such as mental health issues from torture and trauma).
- LG may have the capacity to respond to the need for skilled work experience programs for suitably qualified professionals of refugee backgrounds.

- Organisations such as the Institute of Professional Engineers, which has good links to LG, may be an avenue to implement the OQEP.
- It may be that other refugee settlement ideas can be introduced into the LG agenda through means other than a peak body. (eg Refugee recreational issues through local sporting bodies or the Recreation Committee)

## **UPDATE FROM RCOA AND SCOA**

RCOA has published its submission to the federal government on the 2014-15 Humanitarian Program (see below for URL).

SCOA is working closely with ALGA on settlement issues and has formed a formal partnership. Planning for SCOA's next National Settlement Conference is underway. SCOA's annual consultations will take place throughout March. The National Migration and Settlement Awards are coming up and profile good settlement practice.

## **NEXT STEPS**

SCOA to connect with the Migration Council to suggest a Local Government category in the next Migration and Settlement Awards.

SCOA, RCOA, ALGA and MAV to discuss investigating development of a national resource for councils on how to achieve their access and equity outcomes.

Investigate Stirling Council's access and equity guide implementation outcomes.

## **RESOURCES**

WA Office of Multicultural Interests (2010), *Multicultural Planning Framework*, [http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/resources/publications/localgovernment/planning\\_framework\\_guide.pdf](http://www.omi.wa.gov.au/resources/publications/localgovernment/planning_framework_guide.pdf)

RCOA (2013), *Refugee Welcome Zones*, available at: [http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/q/131219\\_RWZ.pdf](http://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/q/131219_RWZ.pdf)

RCOA (2014), *Refugee Council of Australia's submission to the 2014-15 Humanitarian Programme*, accessed at: <https://www.refugeecouncil.org.au/r/isub.php>

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