Welcoming Australia

Stories of Welcome

Ideas for building a culture of welcome

Volume 7

Volume 7. May 2026

Demographic information: The demographic statistics provided for each local government area featured in this volume are taken from the 2021 Australian Census.

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All photos have been provided by councils, organisations and individuals featured in this volume unless otherwise stated.

Welcoming Australia acknowledges and pays respect to the traditional custodians and ancestors of this country, and the continuation of their cultural, spiritual and ceremonial practices.

We respectfully acknowledge the past and present Traditional Owners of the land, the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and respect their culture and identity, which has been a continuum with the land and sea for generations.

We have a role to play in achieving a just Australia in which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples' rights as First Peoples are recognised and respected.

Welcoming Australia also seeks to engage local Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people as leaders in welcoming activities.

Welcoming Australia.

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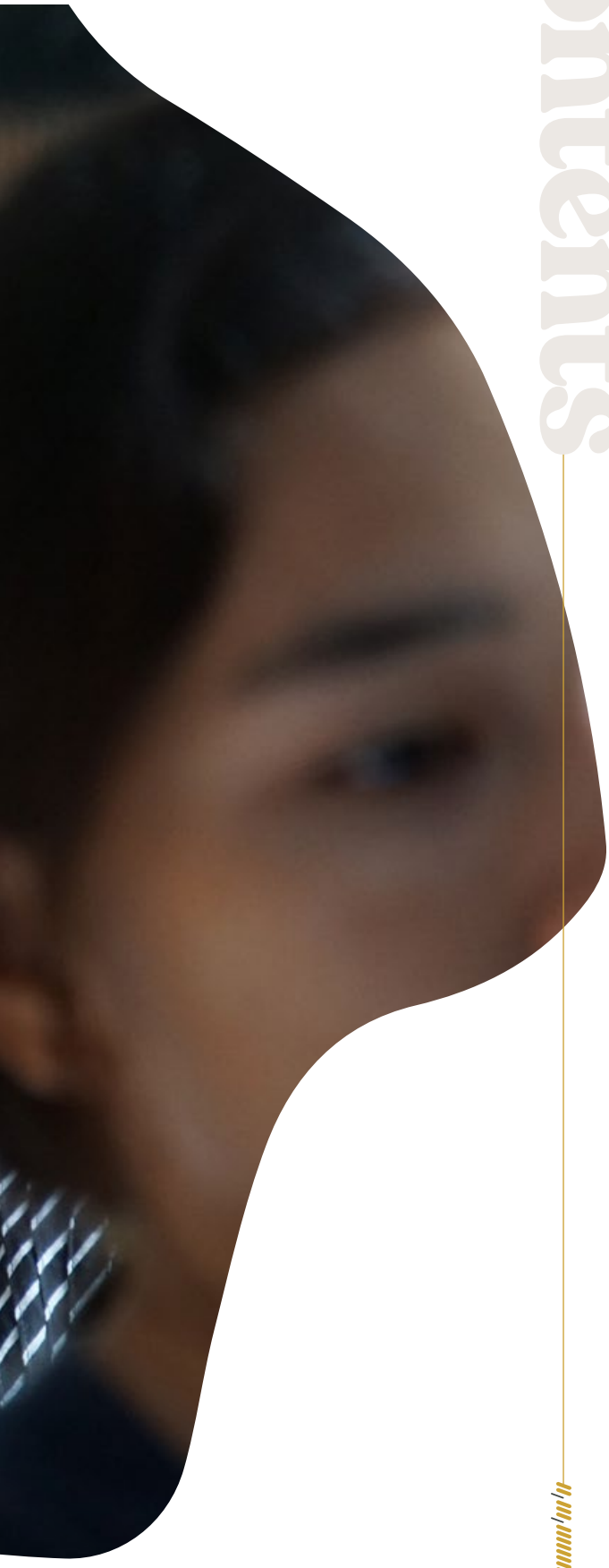

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Where everyone belongs

When belonging is contested for some, we draw lines of division that make us less than who we can be.

We imagine that false binaries of race, faith, class, status, geography or ability define some as more worthy than others for our attention, affection and inclusion. The simple truth is that no-one is more worthy than anyone else, but when we embrace difference, we truly are better together.

The inherent dignity of all human beings has never been more vital to uphold across Australian communities, local councils, sports and recreation clubs, universities and workplaces. The work showcased in *Stories of Welcome Volume 7* represents a significant evolution in our understanding of this mission.

In our earlier volumes, the narrative often focused on creating 'space' within existing structures – programs that invited people to join, connect, or serve as ambassadors. While those initiatives remain vital, this year's stories reveal a deeper, more systemic transformation. We are seeing a move away from 'standalone programs' towards institutional connections and deeper work.

This volume highlights organisations that have realised they must change their own shape to fit the community, rather than expecting the community to bend to fit them. Whether it is the cultural sensitivity of the Toowoomba Gravestones project, the inclusive reimagining of the Campus Canteen, or Sydney's identity-affirming Say My Name initiative, the message is clear: true belonging occurs when our systems are redesigned with community and people at the centre.

While 85% of Australians agree that multiculturalism is good for the country, we know that social inclusion remains a challenge for many. The stories from Bendigo to the Phoenix Basketball courts prove that when we move beyond 'welcome' as a gesture and towards 'belonging' as a structural reality, we build more resilient communities.

These case studies are no longer just examples of good work; they are blueprints for a future in which our cities, clubs, universities and workplaces are inherently inclusive by design. I am deeply grateful to our members for their courage to innovate and their willingness to listen and learn.

Belonging starts with us, but it is sustained by the systems we build together. I hope these stories inspire you to look at your own communities not just for who can be included, but for how we can change to ensure everyone truly belongs.

Aleem Ali
CEO, Welcoming Australia

> “ ... true belonging occurs when our systems are redesigned with community and people at the centre.”
>
> Aleem Ali, CEO
> Welcoming Australia

Credit: Nathan Dumlao / Unsplash

Welcoming Cities

Welcoming Clubs

Welcoming Cities

Welcoming Cities is a national network of local governments committed to an Australia where everyone can belong and participate in social, cultural, economic and civic life. Welcoming Cities recognises that, of all tiers of government, local councils are best placed to understand the complexity and diversity of their communities. Members of Welcoming Cities have unprecedented access to a community of like-minded local governments and community stakeholders through knowledge sharing, celebrating success, the Welcoming Cities Standard and accreditation process, and partnership development.

Welcoming Clubs

Welcoming Clubs embraces the power of sport and recreation as a vehicle for inclusion, opportunity and belonging. The initiative collaborates with sports organisations, councils, facilities and clubs to promote diversity and inclusion so that our sports and clubs reflect the communities they aim to serve and support.

Welcoming Clubs achieves this by delivering programs, events and activities that increase access to physical activity and sport for community members who face intersectional barriers to participation. This is supported by sector capacity building through organisational mentoring and the provision of training and education to national and state sporting organisations, clubs, all levels of government and council facilities.

Welcoming Universities

Welcoming Workplaces

Welcoming Universities

Welcoming Universities is a national network supporting Australian higher education institutions in cultivating a culture of welcome, inclusion and belonging. While universities often possess strong equity policies, many have historically struggled to ensure genuine safety for all. This initiative bridges that gap by connecting evidence-based research with institutional practice.

The initiative provides strategic knowledge brokerage, multi-sector partnership development, and professional support. By establishing the Welcoming Universities Standard and an accreditation pathway, it recognises and celebrates institutions that are leading innovation in embracing belonging for all. These efforts ensure inclusion is embedded within the campus and community, helping universities evolve into providers of choice for all students.

Welcoming Workplaces

Welcoming Workplaces is a network of Australian employers who recognise that workplaces thrive when they are welcoming and embrace diversity. Advancing inclusive and community-minded workplaces increases productivity, retention, reputation, compliance and employee wellbeing. Welcoming Workplaces provides employers with the knowledge, resources, networks, partnerships and frameworks to enhance employer readiness for engaging, recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce.

Three councils received Welcoming Cities accreditation in 2025.

Both the City of Greater Bendigo in Victoria and the City of Salisbury in South Australia were awarded at the Excelling level, and Gladstone Regional Council in Queensland was awarded at the Established level.

Systems change for an inclusive city

The City of Greater Bendigo, Vic

Approximate population 126,000
9.7% overseas born
2.3% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

The City of Greater Bendigo was the first regional council in Australia to receive Welcoming Cities accreditation at the excelling level. This latest milestone strengthens the City's reputation as a national leader in inclusion and sets a benchmark for the City to continue its work to embed inclusive services, ensuring Greater Bendigo is a welcoming city for all.

One example of embedded practice is the council's adaptation of existing systems to recognise the community's evolving diversity. These changes were reflected in the council's procurement policies, funding systems and parking rules.

Paw Kee arrived in Bendigo in 2009. At just 15, she had fled persecution as a Karen refugee with her mother and five siblings. By 32, she had built a new life in Bendigo through opportunity, entrepreneurship, and an unexpected pathway into business ownership.

Her journey began while studying English at Bendigo TAFE. She noticed that her peers, many from similar cultural backgrounds, had limited access to food that reminded them of home. So, she started cooking simple Karen meals and selling them for $5, posting weekly menus on Facebook. Word spread quickly. Her home kitchen soon became a bustling micro-enterprise, sometimes producing up to 100 orders a day. Customers came not only for the flavours, but for the sense of connection and cultural pride her food offered.

As awareness of her cooking grew, community groups began asking her to cater for local events, including some funded by the City of Greater Bendigo. While these opportunities opened doors, they also highlighted systemic gaps. Though her food was in high demand, navigating the paperwork, food safety processes and

procurement requirements felt overwhelming. Many people in her community had given up trying to start businesses because the system simply felt too difficult.

Paw Kee describes this period in her journey. 'The paperwork and red tape are a lot. I didn't finish Year 12 and I didn't have qualifications. I wasn't sure what was possible. But I kept going because people believed in me. Their feedback gave me confidence.'

Behind the scenes, the City was also learning. Staff across different teams were starting to recognise that well-intentioned systems such as grants, procurement, and food safety were unintentionally harder to navigate for culturally diverse residents. These systems had been built around assumptions of English fluency, administrative confidence, and familiarity with Australian processes. And as long as those assumptions went unchallenged, people like Paw Kee remained excluded from economic opportunity.

It was a small but powerful shift in thinking that began changing everything: What if the problem wasn't the community? What if the system needed to adapt?

The first transformation occurred in the Grants Unit. After conducting an Equity Impact Assessment, the team discovered that most grant applications came from the same groups year after year. These groups were mostly familiar and well-established sporting clubs and organisations. Culturally diverse groups hardly ever applied, not for lack of interest or capability, but for lack of easy access.

The Grants Team responded by embedding structural changes, introducing bilingual grant information sessions so communities could engage in their own language, simplifying applications through Easy English formats, and intentionally diversifying assessment panels with the addition of two culturally diverse members.

These changes signalled an organisational shift: participation should not depend on English proficiency or existing familiarity with government systems.

Opposite top left: Staff, councillors and community celebrate accreditation

Opposite top right: Paw Kee at Karen Lady House

One year, the Karen Association received funding for an event and they hired Paw Kee to cater. Her food was unforgettable. Word spread through council that here was a local talent whose business had potential. Staff wanted to support her.

But another barrier surfaced – procurement. The City's supplier requirements favoured English-dominant, highly bureaucratically literate businesses. Small culturally diverse caterers, like Paw Kee, were shut out.

Instead of letting that be the end of the story, the City asked a new question: 'How can we make this easier?'

Policies were rewritten. Administrative expectations were scaled appropriately. Procurement pathways were opened so small, culturally diverse businesses could become suppliers. Suddenly, catering for City events became possible for the first time.

This opened the door for the next stage of the journey. The Environmental Health team stepped in, offering one-on-one support to help her meet food safety requirements. They didn't simply direct her to a website, they walked alongside her. The Economic Development team then helped her navigate business registration, planning requirements, financial preparation, and what it would take to shift from a home-based operation to a commercial enterprise. Paw Kee's sister, Paw Bleh, provided extra translation support when needed.

In 2024, Paw Kee opened the first Karen restaurant in Bendigo. Today, she employs locals, pays rates, contributes to the economy, and regularly caters for City events. She says proudly, 'I never thought I would be a business owner. I want to show the next generation of Karen youth that you can do anything with perseverance, and with the right support.'

Her success is not accidental. It reflects what is possible when a City intentionally removes structural barriers, redesigns systems for inclusivity, and treats culturally diverse entrepreneurs as valued contributors to economic life.

For further details of the City of Greater Bendigo's system changes, see page 30.

Building disaster resilience through culture, food and connection

Gladstone Regional Council, Qld

Approximate population 64,000
13% overseas born
6.2% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

A key strength highlighted in Gladstone Regional Council's accreditation was its culturally grounded disaster resilience work, which brings First Nations, migrant and receiving communities together to build trust, share knowledge and strengthen preparedness before crises occur.

In Gladstone, disaster resilience is understood not only as an educational requirement, but as a community-building practice grounded in culture, trust and relationships. Recognising that preparedness and recovery depend on the strength of community connections before a crisis occurs, Gladstone Regional Council has invested in culturally grounded initiatives that bring people together around shared experiences.

Two flagship events, the World Fusion Dinner and First Nations Community Dinner, demonstrate how inclusive, community-led engagement can strengthen resilience across culturally and linguistically diverse and First Nations communities.

The World Fusion Dinner, held in June 2024, was designed to ensure that disaster preparedness information reaches diverse communities in accessible, trusted and meaningful ways. Multicultural events play a crucial role in resilience by fostering social cohesion and mutual understanding, which are vital when communities need to work together during emergencies.

The informal setting supported language skills practice, encouraged questions and allowed participants to engage with disaster preparedness information without intimidation.

Left: The First Nations Community Dinner

Content was tailored to different cultural contexts and supported by tools such as RegionWatch, an online platform with up-to-date weather warnings and alerts. Presenting disaster preparedness education within a celebratory, culturally diverse event made learning more engaging rather than overwhelming for participants.

Complementing this event, the council also developed a First Nations Community Dinner to centre First Nations knowledge, culture and leadership in disaster resilience. Created through consultation with local First Nations communities, the dinner reflected their priorities.

Councillor Leanne Patrick said that consultation was essential from the outset.

'We collaborated with our Traditional Owner groups – the Bailai, the Gurang, the Gooreng Gooreng and the Taribelang Bunda people – to ensure we were doing the right thing for the community,' she said.

'There is no sense doing something in a community that we, as a council, only think they are interested in.'

The event brought together community members, leaders and disaster resilience practitioners to build relationships and share practical knowledge. Cultural celebration sat alongside preparedness, reinforcing the connection between resilience, identity, land and cultural knowledge systems. Existing partnerships were strengthened through discussions of cultural burning, led by a First Nations fire officer sharing local expertise.

The dinner created a strong social impact, attracting both First Nations community members and others interested in learning about First Nations culture. Participants were introduced to local plants and traditional knowledge, learning their cultural significance and practical applications. A damper take-home pack extended the learning beyond the event itself, supporting ongoing connection and reflection.

Both dinners were shaped through collaboration with community leaders to ensure relevance, build on existing strengths and identify the most effective ways to support preparedness. Communication was adapted to ensure clarity and accessibility, enabling all participants to engage meaningfully with the information shared.

Reflecting on the approach, Cr Patrick highlighted the importance of relevance and accessibility in preparedness. 'We understood what was relevant to our audience and what they might not already know,' she said.

'Hopefully we can give people in our community the tools and resources to look after themselves in the future, because we know resources are extremely limited during a disaster event.'

Together, the World Fusion Dinner and the First Nations Community Dinner demonstrated that disaster resilience is strongest when it is inclusive, culturally grounded and built on genuine relationships, long before a disaster strikes.

The events also gave the council a valuable opportunity to learn from the community. Insights shared by CALD participants helped shape how disaster preparedness information is communicated more broadly. In response, the disaster resilience team has refined its messaging to be clearer and more accessible, incorporating plain English, visual aids and icons, and short videos as alternatives to written information. These changes reflect a two-way approach to engagement, in which community knowledge strengthens local government practice and supports more inclusive and effective preparedness for everyone.

Salisbury Intercultural Community Alliance

Two alliances, one shared vision

City of Salisbury, SA

Approximate population 146,000
34% overseas born
2.4% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

A standout strength identified through the City of Salisbury's accreditation is the way inclusion is embedded within the council's governance and organisational culture. This is brought to life through two complementary advisory bodies – the Salisbury Intercultural Strategic Alliance (SISA) and the Salisbury Intercultural Community Alliance (SICA) – which together connect leadership, service systems and community voices to shape decision-making and drive meaningful outcomes.

In Salisbury, inclusion is not just an idea. It is embedded in how the council works.

Home to one of South Australia's most culturally diverse populations, Salisbury has long understood the value of creating meaningful interaction across cultures – fostering dialogue, shared understanding and collective belonging. This commitment is embedded in the City's *Intercultural Strategic Plan 2017–2027*, which aligns with the *City Plan 2040* and positions interculturalism as central to Salisbury's civic identity.

Councillor Johnny Chewparsad explains that the advisory bodies were both 'set up to create a clear way for council to engage with multicultural communities. As our city grows and becomes more diverse, it is very important to listen to community voices.'

Together, these alliances are reshaping how local government partners with service providers and the community.

The Strategic Alliance (SISA) brings together senior leaders from settlement services, peak bodies, and state and federal government agencies. It provides high-level oversight, policy advocacy and cross-sector collaboration. Together, these attributes strengthen how organisations share information and plan for a growing and diverse community.

The Community Alliance (SICA) complements this work at the grassroots level. Comprising 15 community representatives and an Elected Member, it reflects Salisbury's generational, cultural and lived diversity. It provides direct insight into emerging needs and co-designs practical initiatives that strengthen inclusion.

Cr Chewparsad describes the importance of having two separate alliances. He says it 'allows council to benefit from strategic expertise as well as grassroots community insights. Together they give us a much more complete picture of what's happening and how to respond.'

Both alliances meet bi-monthly within a coordinated governance framework and report directly to the council through the Intercultural Strategy and Partnerships Sub-Committee – ensuring lived experience informs strategic decision-making.

'These committees are not just meetings,' Cr Chewparsad adds. 'They create a platform for real collaboration and problem-solving.'

The alliance model has delivered tangible outcomes across employment, housing, sport, youth engagement and civic participation.

Highlights include:

- The first Intercultural Jobs and Business Expo, featuring translators, on-the-spot interviews and tailored employment support
- An 8-week Intercultural Swimming Program for women, addressing safety and access barriers, which was fully booked
- Research partnerships with the University of South Australia and the University of Adelaide to improve equitable access to sports vouchers and green space
- Advocacy to improve migration data collection and strengthen affordable housing responses
- Insurance solutions enabling newly arrived young people to participate in sport
- Workforce alignment initiatives connecting skilled migration pathways to local industry needs.

Through this work, the council has also invested in its own capability by delivering unconscious bias training , Easy English communication training, and cultural intelligence development to staff.

'Through these committees, we hear firsthand about the experiences, challenges and opportunities within multicultural communities,' says Cr Chewparsad. 'This helps us shape council's policies and programs so they truly respond to community needs.'

At its heart, the success of SISA and SICA is relational. By harnessing the council's role as a facilitator and broker, Salisbury has created a trusted platform for collaboration – strengthening relationships across organisations that might otherwise operate in silos.

Through advocacy and partnership, Salisbury has also influenced state and federal infrastructure investment to better match northern Adelaide's population growth, contributing to long-term sustainability.

Interculturalism recognises that identity is complex. It is shaped not only by country of origin, but by age, gender, disability, faith and lived experience. Salisbury's alliance model creates structured space for these diverse identities to meet, exchange, and influence council priorities and service delivery.

'These alliances ensure multicultural communities have a genuine voice in shaping council decisions and initiatives,' says Cr Chewparsad. 'Diversity is one of Salisbury's greatest strengths.'

By embedding community feedback into everyday decision-making, the City of Salisbury demonstrates that inclusion is strongest when it is co-designed, cross-sector and community-led.

'By working together, we bring our communities together and build an inclusive, connected and welcoming city.'

Resting in Respect – Toowoomba's cemeteries embrace cultural diversity

Toowoomba Regional Council, Qld

Approximate population: 184,000
14% overseas born
5% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

Across 25 cemeteries, with nearly 90,000 people laid to rest, Toowoomba Regional Council is leading the way in adapting burial services to meet the diverse cultural and religious needs of its growing community. By responding to different needs, cemeteries have become subtle but powerful symbols of cultural inclusion.

'Cemeteries are actually for the living,' reflects Kerena McDonald, Toowoomba's Cemetery Services Coordinator. 'The living come there to mourn, to remember, and to feel close to their loved ones again. That's why I'm so passionate about cemeteries – they are huge history books that are just there forever.'

As Australia's cultural landscape changes, so too have burial practices in Toowoomba, and cemeteries in the Toowoomba LGA now feature dedicated sections for Muslim, Jewish, Yazidi and Chinese communities, and other faith and ethnic groups – each adapted with careful attention to cultural traditions.

For Muslim burials, the council modified traditional grave orientations, ensuring they align with Islamic requirements. 'The traditional orientation of graves is facing east, but for the Muslim interment, we've moved that to face north–south,' Kerena explains.

Recognising specific practices like the preference for family-led backfilling, the team went a step further by engineering custom grave safety equipment that enables safe participation. 'When you've got a cultural reason and a safety issue, you have to find a mechanism to fix that. So, we created specialty equipment that allows for safe backfill without the risk of falling into the site.'

One of the most significant examples of cultural responsiveness is the dedicated Yazidi community section at Nobby Cemetery – the result of years of quiet collaboration between the council and the local Yazidi community.

'The Yazidi community wanted to be on a hill, and away from other burial areas, for a number of reasons,' Kerena says. 'They chose Nobby, which is some distance away from central Toowoomba which surprised us at first, but it met their needs perfectly and that's what matters.'

The Yazidi ceremonies are deeply communal and inclusive. Council staff are not just present but invited to sit, share food and converse with mourners. 'It becomes a whole part of the ceremony, to ensure they're having the best possible experience during a difficult time,' Karena says.

For Kerena and the team, inclusion doesn't stop at what's been done – it's about preparing for the communities of tomorrow. 'We've been approached by other communities requesting their own sections,' she shares. 'What we need to do is work more on pre-planning, so we're developing a strategic plan to make sure we provide the best quality of support for all communities.'

That support extends beyond cultural groups. Families with historic ties to now-closed cemeteries also seek to reconnect with their ancestors. 'We're more than happy to work with anyone. It's not just certain people. We're open to everybody and understanding their wants and desires.'

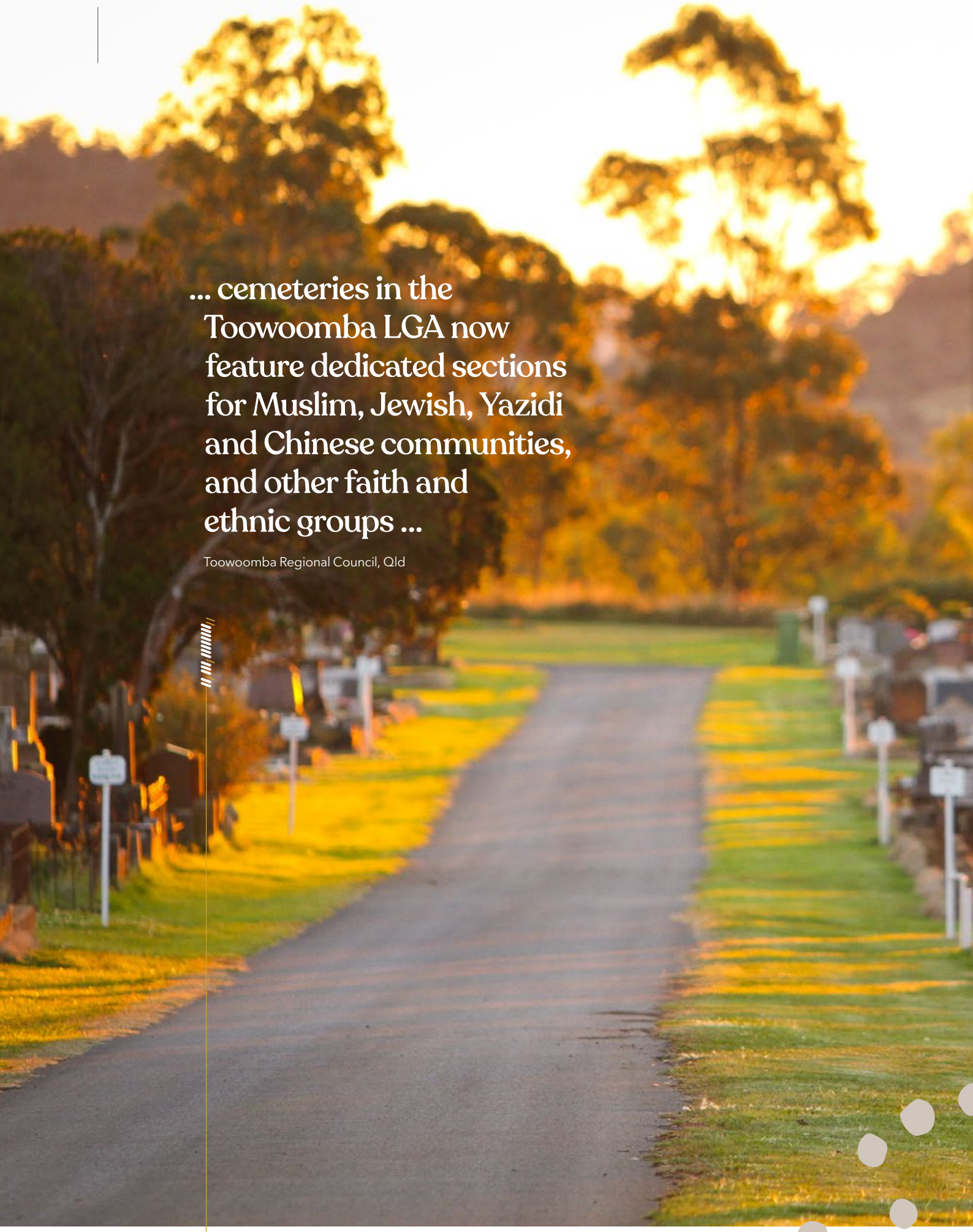
Their work hasn't gone unnoticed. Regional councils often look to Toowoomba's approach as a model for balancing inclusion with the practicalities of cemetery management.

'We're lucky – we have sufficient land. Unlike many other councils where space is an issue, we can adapt,' Kerena says. 'Other councils are looking to us – waiting to see what we do next. It's nice to be leading this space.'

'This is meaningful inclusion,' says Renee Blackburn, Principal, Community Venues and Facilities for Toowoomba Regional Council. 'Cemeteries aren't sexy – no-one wants to talk about them until there's a problem. But they're critical. It's a journey, and we're committed to evolving as our community does.'

"One of the most significant examples of cultural responsiveness is the dedicated Yazidi community section at Nobby Cemetery – the result of years of quiet collaboration between the council and the local Yazidi community."

Kerena McDonald
Toowoomba's Cemetery Services Coordinator



... cemeteries in the Toowoomba LGA now feature dedicated sections for Muslim, Jewish, Yazidi and Chinese communities, and other faith and ethnic groups ...

Toowoomba Regional Council, Qld

CHURCH OF ENGLAND SECTION
2
In loving Memory of

Celebrating identity – the journey of the Say My Name project

The City of Sydney, NSW

Approximate population 237,000
49% overseas born
1.4% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

The City of Sydney, in collaboration with the University of Technology Sydney's Multicultural Women's Network, has embarked on an inspiring journey with the Say My Name project. This initiative was born out of a shared commitment to combat everyday racism through practical, human-centred action. It built upon the UTS's research-led 'Say Our Names' campaign and aligns seamlessly with the City of Sydney's purpose and values.

Names hold profound connections to identity, culture and belonging. Yet, for many individuals from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds, having their names mispronounced, shortened or avoided is a regular occurrence. These seemingly minor moments can accumulate, gradually eroding a person's sense of dignity and inclusion.

For the City of Sydney, the significance of this project lay in transforming complex anti-racism concepts into tangible actions. As project lead, Dr Elaine Laforteza notes, 'The project highlights the cultural significance of name pronunciation and invites reflection on the colonial conditions that make some names more readily understood and spoken than others.'

Clover Moore, Lord Mayor of City of Sydney, says, 'Our names are an important part of our identity – they carry culture, memory, ancestry and dignity. To say someone's name correctly is to see them, respect them and welcome them.' She explains that 'mispronunciation, alteration or avoidance of names – especially in a city as proudly multicultural as Sydney – can have deep and lasting impacts. These acts, often unconscious, can marginalise, exclude and harm. But they are also areas where

we can choose to do better.' She adds that 'the City of Sydney is proud to support initiatives that foster equity and social cohesion. Whether it's through this project, our anti-racism allyship network, our community leadership training for international students, or inclusive workshops and events across the city, we're committed to making Sydney a welcoming, connected place for all.'

The initiative showcases how councils can lead by example, not only by fostering community dialogue through public events like a documentary screening and panel discussion held in 2025, but also by embedding inclusive practices among a workforce of over 2,000 employees.

This partnership bridges academic research, lived experiences and everyday workplace behaviour, underscoring the belief that respect and belonging begin with acknowledging each other.

Addressing such a personal topic while ensuring that the conversation remained accessible and constructive was a key challenge. Discussing names often surfaces experiences of racism, exclusion and intergenerational trauma, necessitating a careful and trauma-informed approach.

This challenge was met through strong collaboration with UTS academics and facilitators, including Dr Elaine Laforteza and Dr Zozan Balci. Their expertise in research and facilitation created a respectful and reflective space at the event. Additionally, the inclusion of diverse panellists from the arts, First Nations and corporate sectors grounded the discussion in real-world experiences, allowing participants to connect emotionally and intellectually.

The impact of the Say My Name project was immediate and profound. Feedback from the documentary screening and panel discussion revealed that 99% of attendees reflected on the importance of name acknowledgement and correct pronunciation, while 98% felt more empowered to practise respecting people's names correctly.

Participants shared deeply personal reflections about reclaiming parts of themselves they had previously minimised, from restoring the correct pronunciation of their names to openly celebrating their cultural histories, languages and traditions. For many, the project validated experiences they had long normalised, reframing name pronunciation as a collective responsibility rather than an individual burden.

Crucially, the impact extended beyond the event itself. Attendees described ongoing conversations with colleagues, family members and even strangers, using what they had learned to foster connection and respect in everyday interactions. Within the City of Sydney, employees reported that the campaign helped normalise asking, learning and practising names, contributing to a workplace culture where people feel seen and valued.

Maintaining momentum beyond a one-off public event, the City of Sydney also produced an internal Say My Name campaign featuring employees. This included workplace posters, digital communications, an employee video, and everyday prompts like computer lock screens. The internal campaign featured colleagues sharing the importance of pronunciation and the meanings behind names, as well as how to use Microsoft Teams to record your correct name pronunciation on your profile card.

Work health and safety support officer Yahya El-Arab (pronounced YAHH-yaa), who was part of the employee campaign says, 'It's not always about getting it perfect the first time, but it's understanding how important it is to try.'

The campaign aligns with one of the City of Sydney's core values – better together. It helps to showcase how the organisation celebrates its diversity, finding ways for everyone to belong. These efforts normalise conversations about name pronunciation and underscore that inclusion is an ongoing practice, not just a single event.

By affirming that you don't have to be perfect but that genuinely trying matters, the project supports individuals in embracing their full selves. In doing so, it enacts what nationally recognised scholar, researcher and leader Dr Kathomi Gatwiri describes as racial dignity: affirming each person's humanity, right to belong, and right to be named on their own terms. This initiative has truly become a beacon of hope and acceptance, guiding the way towards a more inclusive future.

A stall at the expo

Improving health and celebrating diversity in Cockburn

City of Cockburn, WA

Approximate population: 141,000
34% overseas born
1.9% Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander

The City of Cockburn is helping bridge gaps between multicultural communities and local services by creating welcoming spaces where residents can access health information, build connections and celebrate cultural diversity. Initiatives such as the Welcoming Week Multicultural Expo demonstrate how partnerships between council, community groups and service providers can strengthen inclusion, improve health literacy and foster a stronger sense of belonging.

Local governments play an important role in fostering connections between multicultural communities and community services. For many migrants, language and cultural barriers, unfamiliarity with Australian systems, and limited awareness of available supports can prevent them from accessing the help they need.

Recognising these challenges, the City of Cockburn has taken an active role in bridging gaps between communities and services, creating meaningful opportunities for two-way learning, improved health literacy, and celebration of cultural diversity.

Located in Perth's southwestern metropolitan area, the City of Cockburn is a diverse and rapidly growing community, with one in three residents born overseas and 20% speaking a language other than English at home.

Liz Vuchocho, Cultural Diversity Officer at the City of Cockburn, works closely with local multicultural communities to strengthen relationships, respond to community needs and aspirations, and build practical connections between residents and services.

'Cockburn is an interesting place,' she says. 'We have market garden stories with a long established Croation community, a big Chinese speaking population, and a lot of smaller, newly established communities like the Brazilian community. There are a lot of differences in needs – but they all bring different things to the table.'

One of the initiatives the council implemented was Welcoming Week 2025 Multicultural Expo. Held in September 2025 at the Atwell Community Centre, the Expo was delivered by the City of Cockburn in partnership with neighbouring local governments, service providers, community groups, and other local members of the South Metro Multicultural Network. This network helps to facilitate collaboration and build the capacity of organisations to respond effectively to the needs of culturally and linguistically diverse communities. The Expo aimed to:

- Promote the health and wellbeing of multicultural women
- Showcase services that support inclusion, safety and belonging
- Provide a platform for connection, cultural sharing and celebration
- Raise awareness of health access, wellbeing and community resources
- Facilitate intercultural exchange with a focus on the local Chinese community.

With a strong focus on preventative health, the Expo created pathways for women to learn about cervical screening, diabetes, skin cancer, and other key health topics. Drawing on her own background, Liz highlighted the importance of accessible health information for communities where a focus on preventative health care is less common.

'In my community at the moment there's a lot of breast cancer incidences. I've come across at least four people at stage 4. It's important knowing that (screening is) something you can do as a preventative measure.'

Members of the Chinese community echoed the importance of accessible, culturally relevant information. Cockburn Chinese Community Association volunteer Eva Qiu Li explains, 'In the City of Cockburn we have a lot of Chinese people, many of whom don't speak English. It is quite different here compared to the Chinese system. Many people don't know about services like urgent care or about preventative health for things like diabetes or mental health.'

By creating a relaxed, approachable space, the Expo helped women connect with services they might otherwise struggle to navigate. 'A lot of the community don't know some of these services exist, so it helps having a face that you come and meet, in a community centre rather than an office,' Eva says.

As a first-time event, the Expo also offered valuable learnings, including the importance of venue suitability, balancing activities with information, and attracting participants from across three local government areas. These insights will help strengthen future events.

A key feature of the Expo was the strong partnership with the Cockburn Chinese Community Association, who played an active role in promoting the event. On the day, community volunteers supported cultural demonstrations, with dumpling-making proving especially popular.

Volunteers valued the opportunity to engage directly with community members, describing the experience as both educational and affirming. Eva reflected, 'I feel it is so beneficial they listened and asked questions.'

For service providers, the involvement of the Chinese community strengthened understanding of local demographics and highlighted cultural vibrancy and strengths. 'I think an outcome for the services was them knowing about the Chinese community – how big it is, how active they are, how tasty their dumplings are!' Liz noted.

For the community itself, participation fostered a strong sense of pride and belonging. Eva emphasises, 'The City provides us with opportunities to showcase our culture, makes us proud of ourselves, and makes the broader community aware of Chinese culture and Chinese food.'

The City of Cockburn looks forward to building on the success and learnings from this inaugural event to strengthen connections, improve access to health information, and celebrate the richness of the city's cultural diversity. As Liz explains, 'These events build a sense of connection to the city, a feeling of being supported and welcomed. In these times we live in, this is really important.'

More than sport – the Active Women Project breaks down barriers

Delivered by Welcoming Clubs in Victoria, the Active Women Project removes barriers that often prevent culturally diverse women from participating in sport by creating flexible, culturally safe and community-led activities.

For many women from culturally diverse backgrounds, access to sport and physical activity is filled with barriers such as cost, access to childcare, cultural safety, confidence, health and time. The Active Women Project, delivered by Welcoming Clubs, was designed with this reality at its centre. Funded through the Australian Government Play Our Way grants program, the initiative supports women aged 30–55 (not exclusively) who have often been excluded from traditional sport pathways, creating place-based, community-led programs that prioritise safety, flexibility and belonging.

For participants like Ajete Kanacevic, the program is not just about movement. It is about being seen, listened to, and welcomed in a sporting space. After her daughter found details online, Ajete first joined the program in Hume City Council's Greenvale. What appealed to her was the program's structure. She explains, 'They were doing different sports every week – 10 weeks, 10 different sports.' The variety mattered. Ajete describes pickleball as a turning point. 'It's a great inclusive sport. I wouldn't be able to play tennis, but pickleball's good because the court is small.' For her, inclusion is often about scale and flexibility, meaning she is drawn to sports that adapt to people, rather than expecting people to adapt to sport.

Over time, Ajete moved from participant to volunteer, supporting others in the sessions. She describes working alongside a woman with deteriorating mobility, adapting exercises so everyone can take part. 'You make it so everyone can do it. If they can't do the heavy thing, they do something lighter.' Rather than seeing difference as a limitation, Ajete frames it as an opportunity for collective care. 'It's really rewarding just seeing people trying.'

Far left: Hamdi and Ajete
Left: Ajete shoots hoops

This inclusive approach shapes Ajete's own experience of belonging. 'Everyone's included no matter what you're good at, what you're not good at', she explains. After years out of the workforce caring for her children, the program also restored her confidence. 'It makes me feel welcome and comfortable, even though I haven't worked for ages.'

Without the program, Ajete is clear about what would be missing. 'I wouldn't have a chance for exercise,' she says. 'This gives me time for myself and with other people.' Inclusion, for her, is practical, relational, and built through consistency. Through the program, she also received some Individual Capacity Building funding, which she explains was essential to her involvement. 'This covered my police check, first aid certificate and basketball coaching course with Broadmeadows Basketball Association. Without this funding, I would've had to pay on my own. It has enabled me to get back into the workforce.'

Her role in this program opened an opportunity to work at the Australian Open tennis as the Disability and Inclusion Team Leader. Having been an attendee for many years, she had seen firsthand the limited access to inclusive food and prayer spaces. She explains that 2026 brought slow but visible change. She says, 'I noticed they had halal food, but the writing was very small, so unless you go right up to the menu and check it, you wouldn't know.' She also says that access to prayer rooms was much better than in previous years because you didn't need a special access card.

Ajete hopes to see such a large organisation continue to adapt and remove barriers. Her perspective reinforces that inclusion does not happen through intention alone. It happens when barriers are removed, staff listen, and trust is built over time.

Hamdi Mohamed is the Local Area Coordinator of the Active Women Project. She explains how the program is more than just sport. 'Because we've been doing this program for so long, it's become more of a community for the ladies, a place where they come to connect with other ladies. Particularly if they're new mothers or even if they're having their second or third kid, they've got a common ground, and a place they can come and connect.'

She says, 'One of the ladies gave birth four or five months ago and she was back quite soon after, just to have a chat. She wasn't at a point where her body was ready to participate in the sports, but she was still here, she was still communicating and talking to all the ladies because of that sense of community that we were able to build.'

Hamdi also explains how guest speakers attend sessions, such as a specialist who explained gut health to the group. 'Specifically, within Ramadan, because all of the ladies here are Muslim, for them to focus on their gut health has given them more of a holistic view of their general health.'

Running also in Brimbank and Dandenong councils, and with new and existing community partners, the Active Women Project shows that when barriers are addressed intentionally, sport becomes a gateway to connection, confidence, skills and belonging. In communities where exclusion has long been normalised, that shift is not small. It is transformative.

Rather than seeing difference as a limitation, Ajete frames it as an opportunity for collective care...

Building belonging through football in Townsville, Qld

The Transition Pathway to Organised Sport pilot program in Townsville shows how collaboration, culturally responsive support and clear pathways can help build a welcoming culture and create meaningful opportunities through sport.

In October 2025, nine young people aged 11–17 boarded a bus outside Aitkenvale State School in Townsville, bound for the fields of Wulguru United Football Club. At the wheel was Etienne Cadeau, a support worker with Townsville Multicultural Support Group (TMSG) and a talented footballer known to each of the young men.

The group of nine were the inaugural participants in a 'Transition Pathway to Organised Sport' pilot program, an initiative of Welcoming Clubs, designed by its previous Queensland Coordinator, Dr Stephen O'Grady. Over eight weeks, the program provided more than training sessions. It offered mentoring, familiarity with club environments, and the confidence to see organised sport as a place where they belonged.

The program's origins trace back to early 2025, when O'Grady approached Dr Johanna Kodoatie-Cahill at TMSG with a proposal. Together, they shaped a model designed to strengthen social cohesion through structured sport participation, while building capacity at the individual, community and local club levels.

The pilot ran two cohorts: young people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds through football, and women from migrant and multicultural backgrounds through pickleball. It demonstrates what becomes possible when settlement services, local government and community sport align around a shared goal.

Local football coach Ian Bonato, himself a former under-20 Socceroos player and AIS scholarship recipient, joined the collaboration and brought immediate commitment. Together, Johanna, Ian and Stephen consulted intensively over several months before launching the pilot in November with confidence in the model's structure.

The nine football participants were young men from the Central African Republic and DR Congo, representing four Townsville schools. Their coach, Ian, was unequivocal about their effort. He says, 'The players worked exceptionally hard, attending all sessions on time with amazing attitudes and a strong willingness to learn. Their commitment has been outstanding.'

Meanwhile, the program's Social Sport Open Day marked the culmination of the pickleball cohort, with 20 women from different cultural communities discovering the game under the guidance of Michelle Jones of Townsville Pickleball.

Johanna reflects on both streams. 'This initiative is about more than soccer. It's about building connections, fostering inclusion, and creating equal opportunities.' She adds that as pickleball is a fun activity without barriers, she is 'looking forward to promoting pickleball even more this year.'

One participant stood out even among a committed and talented group. At 12 years old, Qudra Kabirizi showed what Ian described as 'raw talent and determination that deserves to be nurtured.' Ian subsequently announced the inaugural 2026 Football Performance Pathways Scholarship – the 'Pathway of Promise' – awarded to Qudra. The one-year scholarship for individual training is designed to prepare him for transition into the Football Queensland Academy.

The Transition Pathway to Organised Sport pilot shows what can happen when trusted relationships are supported by practical help and strong community partnerships. It brings the idea of welcome to life – creating a sense of belonging and opening the door to sport.

Staff member Venkata Chaitanya Pavuluri
Photo by Barreno Studio

More than a meal – the University of Melbourne's Campus Canteen provides a sense of belonging

University of Melbourne, Vic

At the University of Melbourne, the Campus Canteen provides affordable meals and a welcoming space where students experiencing financial pressure can eat well, connect with others and feel they belong on campus.

Welcome is sometimes found in the simplest of places: a warm meal, a familiar face behind the counter, or a moment of relief in the middle of a busy day. The University of Melbourne's Campus Canteen was created in response to a growing reality for many students. Rising living costs were affecting not only access to healthy food, but also whether students could stay on campus between classes and whether they felt they truly belonged at university. Food insecurity was not a marginal issue; it was shaping students' daily experiences in quiet but significant ways.

The idea behind Campus Canteen was both practical and compassionate. The university recognised that some students were constantly stressed by having to choose between meals and other essentials. The aim was to create an accessible, welcoming space where students could afford to eat well, without judgement or stigma. More than providing food, Campus Canteen was about restoring a sense of belonging and sending a clear message: students are supported, valued, and not alone.

Nataly Castellanos, Coordinator, Food Programs at the university explains that 'The Campus Canteen was established to create an accessible, welcoming space where all students could afford to eat well. We recognised that the financial pressures were affecting not just their ability to eat, but their sense of belonging on campus. Our goal was to create a service that would ensure students had access to affordable nutritious meals, and to provide a space where students could feel supported and connected to their university community.'

Every meal served at Campus Canteen is subsidised by the university, making nutritious breakfasts,

lunches and dinners genuinely affordable. 'By keeping our pricing accessible, we're ensuring that students can afford at least one good meal during their day on campus without having to sacrifice other essentials,' Nataly says. That reliability matters. When food is no longer a constant worry, students can focus on learning and taking part in campus life.

From the beginning, the initiative was designed with students at its centre. Early research into student needs shaped the initial menu, pricing and opening hours, and the service has continued to evolve through usage data and ongoing feedback, both at the Parkville and Southbank campuses. 'We've prioritised dietary inclusivity from the start, offering vegetarian, vegan and allergen-aware options because we want every student to feel welcome and catered for.' The canteen adapts to how students actually use the space, responding to peak times and refining its offer as the community grows.

'Food is so fundamental to wellbeing and social connection, and when students don't have to worry about affording a meal, they can engage more fully in every aspect of campus life,' Nataly says. 'For students experiencing financial hardship, the canteen provides tangible support that sends a clear message that you belong here, and we want you to thrive.'

Over time, Campus Canteen has become a vital social anchor. 'The canteen has become more than just a place to get food; it's become a touchpoint in students' day where they feel seen and welcomed,' Nataly says. 'Students gather while collecting meals, chatting in line, meeting up with course mates, and making plans. We see the same faces regularly, and there's a real sense of familiarity and comfort that's developed. The fact that we employ current students creates a peer-to-peer environment where students are serving students, so there's an understanding and camaraderie that comes from that shared experience. It's a space where students don't feel judged for needing affordable food; instead, they feel part of a community that supports each other.'

The stories emerging from Campus Canteen speak to its impact. Students describe how knowing they can eat affordably on campus has eased a constant anxiety. International students talk about finding a welcoming space where they don't feel singled out. Friendships form through shared routines, brief conversations, familiar smiles. In its first year alone, Campus Canteen served 12,481 unique students, a clear indication of how many people needed and rely on this space.

The impact extends to student staff as well. For many, working at Campus Canteen is more than a job. It becomes a source of confidence, connection and belonging, particularly for international students navigating life in Australia. These roles offer meaningful employment and the opportunity to contribute to a community built on care and mutual support.

Moumita Pal, who is studying a Master of Urban Planning and working at the canteen, explains how it enriches her life. She says, 'Working at the Campus Canteen has given me an identity and the confidence to connect with not only the student community but also feel at home in a new country, which is never easy for an international student!'

Campus Canteen also reflects a commitment to sustainability alongside affordability. Initiatives such as the upcoming Bring Your Own Container campaign invite students to reduce waste while feeling part of positive environmental change. The focus on nutritious, ethically considerate food reinforces the idea that caring for students and caring for the planet can go hand in hand.

Like any new service, the first year has brought challenges, like understanding demand, managing peak periods, and coordinating student staffing around academic commitments. Each challenge has offered valuable lessons, strengthening the program and sharpening its responsiveness to student needs.

Looking ahead, Campus Canteen hopes to deepen its role as a community space. There are aspirations for cooking workshops, cultural food celebrations, and student-led initiatives that use food to bring people together. The vision is simple and powerful – that every student at the University of Melbourne knows there is a place on campus where they are welcomed, nourished and supported.

UniSC Pasifika Mentorship Program – confidence, aspiration and a sense of who we are

University of the Sunshine Coast, Qld

At University of the Sunshine Coast, the Pasifika Mentorship Program supports Māori and Pasifika Year 12 students to see university as a pathway where their cultural identity is valued, not left behind. By combining culturally grounded mentoring, practical guidance about university pathways and strong role models, the program builds confidence, aspiration and a sense of belonging in higher education.

The program was created in response to a clear cultural mismatch between traditional university structures and the lived realities of Pasifika students. As Manager of Widening Participation at the university, Peter Lavercombe explains, 'The program emerged from recognising that traditional university structures weren't designed with Pacific cultural values in mind. Rather than asking Pasifika students to adapt to university culture, we asked: what if we built a program grounded in Pacific frameworks from the start?'

That question became the foundation of the program, which was designed so students could imagine futures in higher education, not despite their cultural identity, but because of it.

Many Māori and Pasifika young people face multiple barriers to university participation. These include lower aspiration rates, isolation in mainstream education settings, limited exposure to Pacific role models in higher education, and financial pressures that make tertiary study feel out of reach. As Peter notes, 'They often feel they must choose between cultural identity and academic success.'

The mentorship program responds by creating culturally safe, affirming spaces where students build confidence and capability while strengthening their connection to culture. Alongside this, the program provides practical, accessible guidance about university pathways, applications and costs, all delivered in ways that resonate with Pacific ways of learning and relating.

Left: Attendees at the Pasifika showcase

The program runs over 14 weeks, with eight sessions hosted at UniSC's Moreton Bay campus. Its structure is guided by the Samoan tatau motif of the va'a (canoe), symbolising a collective educational journey. Students move through four phases: Fa'afeiloaiga (orientation), Mana (building identity), Fa'agogo (storytelling), and Malaga (project development). Each session blends small-group mentoring, workshops on pathways and financial literacy, campus experiences, guest speakers, cultural activities and a final showcase. Food is shared at every session, 'honouring Pacific hospitality traditions,' Peter explains, reinforcing the importance of relationship, generosity and collective learning.

At the heart of the program are its mentors, current UniSC students who identify as Pasifika and have firsthand experience navigating university. Selected for their cultural knowledge and lived experience, they show that success at university does not require cultural compromise. As Peter explains, 'These near-peer mentors provide relatable role models who demonstrate tertiary education is possible while maintaining cultural identity.'

Mentors receive training in cultural responsiveness and Talanoa facilitation. By sharing their own stories, struggles and successes, they model leadership that is both academic and cultural.

Cultural safety and belonging are embedded into every aspect of the program. 'Cultural safety means students never leave their cultural identity at the door,' Peter says. Each session begins with cultural protocols, including an Acknowledgment of Country and welcoming songs in Pacific languages. Interaction between all participants honours the sacred relational space between people, while Talanoa methodology allows knowledge to be co-created through dialogue and storytelling. Belonging is experienced through shared meals, song, laughter, and the discovery that students are not alone.

The impact on students is significant. One participant loved science but struggled to see herself in STEM fields. By connecting with a Pasifika mentor studying engineering, she realised she could bring her whole self into any discipline. By the final showcase, she presented environmental science applications in Pacific communities, telling her family 'I used to think university wasn't for people like us. Now I know it is – and I can bring who I am.'

Program data reflects this shift. At the beginning, 61.9% of students believed university was possible for them; by the end, that figure had risen to 82.4%.

Mentors themselves describe the experience as transformative. Many say it was their first opportunity to step into a cultural leadership role at university. One mentor reflected, 'I came to uni feeling like I had to separate my Pacific self from my student self. Working with these kids reminded me why my culture matters.' Mentors also built strong peer networks across faculties, strengthening their own sense of belonging on campus.

Cultural celebration is not an add-on but the foundation of the program. Each session incorporates Pacific languages, music, storytelling, art and symbolism. Families are welcomed at launch and showcase events, and community organisations participate as guest speakers. By the end of the program, 85% of students reported feeling more connected to their Pacific heritage.

For Peter, the meaning of welcome is clear. 'You don't have to change who you are to belong here.' In the mentorship program, welcome is a lived experience, one where culture is not a barrier to education, but the ground on which aspiration, confidence and success are built.

Careers at the Museum Graduation Ceremony

Careers at the Museum – how Ubuntu Project's partnership powered a transformative career pathway at Museums Victoria

The pilot of a Paid Placement Program at Museums Victoria, Careers at the Museum, was a transformative journey that opened career pathways and redefined participants' sense of belonging.

The three-week program was designed and facilitated in partnership with Ubuntu Project, a trusted community organisation based in Melbourne's west. Ubuntu Project's Employment Coordinator, Abubaker Okud, walked participants through every stage. 'It was an amazing program overall,' he said, reflecting on the growth and enthusiasm he witnessed in the cohort. Though the team had just two weeks to recruit participants – a constraint caused by the need to hold the program after Ramadan and before the end of the financial year – their community connections ensured they could mobilise quickly and effectively.

Nor Shanino, CEO of Ubuntu Project, explained why that trust was so critical. 'A lot of young people came in and might have had imposter syndrome,' he says. 'The program has changed their whole perception of who they are. Confidence is at another level.' Nor pointed to two young participants who spoke at the graduation ceremony as examples of the significant growth that occurred in just three weeks.

This profound transformation, Nor believes, is only possible when programs are delivered in the right way, with the right people. 'I know these young people trust us, so we don't expose them to just any organisation. We don't want to put them at risk,' he says. That protective mindset, grounded in genuine relationships, is a hallmark of Ubuntu Project's work and a vital ingredient in the program's success.

The museum, for its part, invested in creating a supportive and meaningful experience. Participants were placed in teams and assigned supervisors, some of whom designed mock projects to give participants space to experiment and test ideas without fear of failure. Supervisors received training to help them understand the lived experiences of young people from diverse backgrounds. The intention was not only to prepare participants for

the workplace but to ensure the workplace was prepared for them.

The program's co-design methodology, with Ubuntu Project at the helm of community engagement and facilitation, demonstrates the importance of culturally safe pathways to employment. 'You can't just put a program into place and expect it to work,' Nor says. 'You need real relationships. You need trust.' Without Ubuntu Project's grassroots connections and credibility in the community, the pilot would not have been possible.

Ultimately, the Placement Program was more than just a short-term employment initiative. It was a model of inclusive practice built on mutual respect, collaboration and cultural humility. It provided young people with more than just references and networking opportunities – it gave them a sense of agency and a glimpse of what's possible when they are truly welcomed into professional spaces.

Stories from participants

Two participants in the program, Abdikarim Mohamed and Rahma Hassanein, had different motivations for joining and ultimately took away very different but equally valuable experiences.

Rahma was focused on developing a long-term career path, with a strong interest in archaeology and ancient history. Abdikarim, on the other hand, was drawn in by curiosity, particularly in marketing and media. During the placement, Rahma spent most of her time in the collections store, while Abdikarim was based in retail and had the opportunity to shadow the museum's camera crew.

'I learnt a lot of practical skills from being in the collection store – like, really small things such as what to do if you need to move an item, or how to handle the item. It was really valuable,' Rahma reflected.

Abdikarim had a standout moment during a visit to Museums Victoria's storage and preservation site. 'I went down a rabbit hole after the visit to the (storage site),' he says. 'Seeing my culture in the museum – Somalia – seeing the weaponry, the shoes, and seeing all the other ethnicities from Africa, like Abyssinia... I was researching how cultures are linked. It was really cool.'

Rahma also developed a new appreciation for exhibition and production design. 'We met a lot of people who were working on the new exhibitions coming through – the work they do, especially in the research departments, how closely they have to work with other departments – that overlap was nice to learn about,' she says. 'I was surprised about the different stages of exhibition design – a lot of people have the same kinds of jobs, but there's one little thing different, so they have a different title or a different job description.'

For both participants, networking was a key takeaway. Abdikarim hopes to connect further by taking some of the museum staff out for coffee and seeking their advice on new opportunities. Rahma is looking to volunteer in a different area of the museum.

One of Rahma's highlights was an unexpected day in a collection lab. 'One of the days, they managed to squeeze me and one of the other participants into the marine invertebrate's collection, and we worked at the lab for a whole day. It was my favourite thing ever,' she says. 'We worked with a man who used to work at the museum and now volunteers. It's ridiculous how much knowledge he has. He was tinkering away at a microscope when we first got there – he's interested in segmented shrimps, and he was telling us all about that – and then we got to work with the microscopes to sort different kinds of animals. It was so cool.'

Abdikarim especially valued his time in retail and media. 'I really enjoyed myself – I was told it might be boring, and I hadn't been to the museum since primary school, but it was exciting,' he says.

For Rahma, the placement's flexibility was a standout feature. 'I loved the fact that the program had a "choose your own adventure" feel about it,' she says. 'Like, if you're not interested in something, you don't have to commit to learning about it. I really appreciated that because when you're in an internship program, you're sometimes following people around and doing what you're told to do. So I think this was unique because it was more about exposure – it was so much more accommodating.'

The Placement Program offered agency, voice and vision to young people stepping into professional spaces, some for the first time. As Rahma and Abdikarim's stories show, when opportunity is grounded in trust and flexibility, it can spark confidence, curiosity and a lasting sense of belonging.

The Welcoming Cities Awards for Change
Local Government

The City of Greater Bendigo, Vic

The Welcoming Cities Awards for Change recognise the progress that strengthens social cohesion with newly arrived and receiving communities to ensure everyone has a chance to participate, belong and thrive. In recognition of its impact, the City of Greater Bendigo won the 2026 Welcoming Cities Award for Change in the local government category.

The council recognised that while its internal systems were designed with good intentions, many processes had evolved over time to unintentionally favour people who were fluent in English, familiar with Western administrative systems, and confident engaging with government. This meant that some community members – particularly those from culturally diverse backgrounds – encountered barriers that prevented them from participating fully or benefiting equally from council services. What emerged was a clear need for systems change: a deliberate shift from processes built around assumed familiarity to ones purposely designed for equity.

Bel Schenk from Welcoming Cities spoke to Equity Officer Pinar Maher about the impact the changes have had.

Bel Schenk: Congratulations on winning the award! To start, what were the small moments that made you realise council systems weren't working for everyone?

Pinar Maher: Equity Impact Assessments were a real game changer for us. Many councils across Victoria will be familiar with them, and we've really taken that framework and embedded it into our work. The assessments force you to ask the right questions early on – about who is impacted and how systems could be made fairer and more inclusive.

For example, if a form is only available in English, that might be easy for some people but a real barrier for others. By speaking directly with the people most impacted, we started identifying issues before they became bigger problems.

We also noticed gaps through everyday interactions. People would call because they couldn't understand a form, or they'd come in with handwritten applications because the online system didn't support their language or digital skills. We realised that some community groups were applying year after year, while others didn't even know the opportunity existed.

Even the language we used – terms like auspice, acquittal, or auspicing body – created barriers. People were confused or embarrassed to ask what those words meant. That was a red flag that our systems were designed with only one type of resident in mind.

When we tested our materials, we found that some of our documents were written for people who have completed Year 10 or more, making them less accessible for a significant proportion of residents in Greater Bendigo. That disconnect made the inequity very clear.

BS: Who tended to win grants before these changes, and who was missing?

PM: Typically, it was well-established community groups with strong English literacy, existing networks, and experience navigating government systems. Some even had staff specifically to write grant applications.

What we weren't seeing were emerging communities, newly arrived groups, small grassroots organisations, or people with great ideas but without the confidence or technical skills to apply. Their absence wasn't due to lack of interest – the system just wasn't designed with them in mind. If you don't know about a grant, or the process feels overwhelming, you're unlikely to apply.

BS: What did the process feel like for someone from a newly arrived community or someone with English as a second language?

PM: Through community engagement and

information sessions, people told us the process felt intimidating, confusing and extremely bureaucratic. Forms were long, full of unfamiliar terminology, and assumed a level of English, digital literacy and grant-writing experience.

The language also felt punitive. For example, warnings that failure to complete an acquittal would prevent future applications. Instead of feeling welcomed, people felt overwhelmed and excluded, like they were being tested on rules they'd never been taught.

BS: You didn't just change the process, you changed who makes the decisions. What difference did that make?

PM: It fundamentally shifted the room. Having culturally diverse community members on the grants panel meant decisions were grounded in lived experience, not assumptions.

For example, we once had several Indian community groups apply separately for funding. Without cultural insight, it might have looked like duplication. But by asking the right questions, we learned these were distinct communities with different traditions and celebrations.

Panel members could also challenge Western assumptions – asking whether activities were culturally appropriate, or whether we were judging applications through a narrow lens. Previously, panels were often made up of people with time and familiarity with council processes – typically older, retired men.

Opening the panel sent a strong message that the process was for everyone. We actively reached out, supported people to participate, and focused on capacity building. That intentionality made a real difference.

BS: You've managed to make parking interesting! How did parking fines become a lesson in inclusion?

PM: We started receiving a lot of distressed calls from people who had received fines they didn't understand. They'd misread signage or didn't know how the system worked. By speaking directly with community members, we realised the issue wasn't non-compliance – it was misunderstanding.

Newly arrived residents often come from places with different road rules or parking systems. Fines weren't educating anyone; they were just creating stress. Some people even stopped coming into the city altogether to avoid parking machines, which then became an economic and social issue.

This wasn't just affecting migrant and refugee communities – older adults were also struggling. When we made the system clearer and easier to use, the outcome was better for everyone.

BS: What impact did multilingual parking sessions and videos have?

PM: It had a twofold impact. For staff, it built empathy. They could see that what looked like rule-breaking was usually a lack of information. That shifted the culture from enforcement to support.

We now have officers who can answer questions on the spot and share multilingual flyers with links to videos. These resources are distributed widely and taken to community events. It strengthened relationships between the council and multicultural communities, built confidence, and improved understanding of the rules – which ultimately improved compliance as well.

BS: Finally, what advice would you give councils that think inclusion is just about programs rather than systems?

PM: Programs are important, but they're often temporary. Real inclusion comes from changing everyday systems like forms, processes and communications.

Start by listening to lived experience. Try using your own systems, or ask someone unfamiliar with them to do so. You'll quickly see where the barriers are. Sometimes very small changes can have big impacts.

Build staff capability and bring people along on the journey. Don't assume – co-design doesn't have to be complicated. Simply asking, 'Does this make sense to you?' can dramatically improve outcomes.

Equity Impact Assessments might feel like extra work, but they prompt the right questions at the beginning, rather than trying to fix problems later. When systems work better for people who face the most barriers, they end up working better for everyone.

Highly Commended

Walgett Shire Council, Supporting participation through the Community Engagement Strategy, NSW

Hume City Council, Women's Only Swimming Program, Vic

The Welcoming Cities Awards for Change
Organisation

Hume Central Dallas Phoenix Basketball Club, Vic

Hume Central Dallas Phoenix Basketball Club is the winner of the 2026 Welcoming Cities Awards for Change in the organisation category. The club was created in response to a clear gap in community sport participation in Broadmeadows, Dallas and surrounding suburbs – culturally vibrant but socially disadvantaged communities in Melbourne's north. While basketball was highly popular among local young people, very few families from these neighbourhoods were participating in organised club sport. Barriers such as cost, transport, cultural safety concerns and the 'hidden rules' of Australian sport meant many families viewed sport as inaccessible or 'not for people like us.' Phoenix changed this.

Bel Schenk spoke to Club President Sharin Milner.

Bel Schenk: Let's begin with the origin of the club. How did it all start?

Sharin Milner: The Phoenix Basketball Club started from a question every community sporting club should ask itself. And that's, do we reflect our community? And if not, who's not here and why? There was significant under-representation of families living on the doorstep of Broadmeadows Basketball Stadium, which is where the junior competition is based. These are families living in Broadmeadows and Dallas. These are also two of the top three most economically disadvantaged areas of Melbourne. So, when we realised they were under-represented, there was a pretty good hypothesis around why, but we still went out and asked 200 parents in the local area, spoke to school principals, spoke to local service providers.

Once we had information around the barriers, we submitted an application for a Vic Health grant that funded a youth committee. This committee was made of local youth, who then really set about designing a club that met the needs and aspirations of the local community through the lens of young people themselves who would be playing in the club.

BS: Before the club existed, what did joining a sports club look like for many families, and why did it feel out of reach?

SM: There are so many hidden rules around joining major sports, particularly. It's often about whether a family member previously played in that club, or played that sport, knowing who to go to and how to access the club versus a cold call or email or message to volunteer-run clubs that often goes un-replied. But more than anything, it really is barriers around the cost of sport, just meaning it's out of reach for so many families at the moment.

BS: You talk about the 'hidden rules' of Australian sport? What are they?

SM: Things like being technologically savvy because the registration systems are often very complicated. And proficiency in English. There are old, colonised structures around assumptions that you turn up to training every week, and you turn up early, and you don't bring whatever's happening outside your life into a sporting arena. So, all these things make people feel unsafe if they're not familiar with that environment. It can deter them or turn them away before they even get through the door. And then once they're through the door and into the system itself, there are just so many rigid rules that are very antiquated in the modern context of Australian communities.

And I just feel like they are really enabling a system to self-sustain, but in doing so, miss out on so much richness and benefit that comes from people who have been historically excluded from sport but are in our communities.

BS: The Phoenix story started with young people helping to design the club. What surprised you about what they said they needed?

SM: I think we often significantly underestimate young people, but to the point where they're so not used to having autonomy and control over decision-making. So, part of it was giving them the

right environment to feel safe to share ideas and understanding that this wasn't a setup. They actually did have power in this to create a club unique to their needs.

When we're trying to do youth-led design, there's an element that requires a lot of effort in building trust and skills of young people to actually feel empowered enough to be at the table.

But then, there were just so many cool things! They came up with a really great uniform design, which didn't surprise me because they're always going to come up with something better than the traditional community person who's, you know, 40 or 50+ years. They wanted Arabic writing on it somewhere. We were like, 'Shouldn't it say, You are welcome here' because we're trying to address all these things we'd heard around the barriers. And they're like, 'No, it should just say Phoenix.' And then also including an Acknowledgement of Country on the jersey was a really nice touch as well.

BS: If someone walked into the club today, what would they notice that feels different from a typical basketball club?

SM: It depends who's walking in. If it's someone who has grown up in community sport in Australia, they're often thinking 'well, this is a lot' because to overcome cost barriers, we have a lot of kids on court at the same time. We have a lot of parents with young babies or very young toddlers so they're running around the court. It's not a drop and run type scenario, which has become quite common with community sport.

But I think for people new to sport, and this is something that's often commented on, is just how welcomed they are. Basketball stadiums are really intimidating spaces – they've got really high ceilings, they're often not that well lit. They're just vast, so it feels lonely. And I have watched so many people turn around. So once Phoenix started, we're really adamant that any new person coming gets greeted by someone from the committee from the minute they're leaving their house. So it's like, here's a screenshot of where you park. Here's a screenshot of where you come in, here's what it looks like when you come in. We don't assume that people just know their way around and are going to be comfortable.

BS: That's fantastic. And I want to talk a little bit about the parents, especially the mothers. How did they go from spectators, to participants, to decision-makers?

SM: When we'd see mums come in and they're all sitting quite a distance apart. And as we were talking to them, we started noticing they're actually really curious about the sport. So, then we realised that it's actually hard to engage in your child's sport if you don't understand the rules yourself. And then it didn't take too long to join the dots with the same barriers that young people experience in trying to access sport. One of the mums at the club approached me and said, 'Do you think you can organise a mums' basketball match?' And we put it in the group chats and I think that first session we had 37 mums turn up. Those first few weeks were just so amazing to see all these women running around and enjoying the same endorphins that we get when we're moving, but also connecting and getting that social aspect. Later we put a call out for the committee and we had mostly women put their hand up. And so now our committee is mostly mums from the club.

BS: And what's the activity on the group chat like? Is it broader than basketball?

SM: Yeah, I think there's a few like that have just splintered off now into their own little chats, which is great. There's definitely so much more, because our club is full of so many different cultures. There's so much more cross-cultural friendships that have developed, which is so nice to see.

BS: When you look around the court now, what do you think or what do you feel?

SM: When I'm in it, it's really hard because there are so many immediate things that I'm dealing with, which can feel a little overwhelming and exhausting. But as soon as I zoom out, it's like, 'Oh my goodness, can we believe we've got 22 teams in less than two years and 87% of these kids had never played organised sport?' But everyone who is on the outside looking in consistently remarks. People I bump into or who have just come into Broadmeadows basketball for the first time – they're like, 'I've heard about Phoenix.' So, there is something there, there's an energy.

Highly Commended

The Couch International Student Centre, Vic

Ghan United Soccer Club, SA

The Welcoming Cities Award
Individual

Madly Bodin, Waverley Council, NSW

Madly Bodin is the winner of the Welcoming Cities Award for individuals. Madly leads the development and implementation of diversity and inclusion initiatives at Waverley Council. She is passionate about community engagement, partnership development and change management. Her career spans diversity recruitment and finance in Paris, project development in Alice Springs, and impact investing and transformation projects in the social services sector in Sydney. Madly's anti-racism work currently focuses on exploring how cognitive science, along with intrinsic and extrinsic motivations, contribute to racism.

Turkan Aksoy from Welcoming Cities spoke with Madly Bodin.

Turkan Aksoy: What does welcoming mean to you? What has been your journey in welcoming work, and what have you seen change over that time?

Madly Bodin: Growing up in France, many of my classmates were from African countries. This shaped my early understanding of belonging, language, and power relations. In Year 11, I was a student representative on the school council. In that role, I was expected to act as a student advocate on various matters, including disciplinary issues.

One day, I was unexpectedly pulled out of class to attend a disciplinary meeting involving one of my classmates, his mother, and senior teaching staff. I had a good rapport with this student. I knew he had missed some school, but he was a gentle and friendly person, so I was surprised to learn he had done something serious enough to require this meeting. I was given no prior information and didn't have the opportunity to speak with him beforehand.

When I entered the room mid-meeting, I noticed the student was acting as the interpreter for his mother. Staff mentioned that he had slapped another student, but no context was shared about what led to the incident. With the limited information I had, I did my best to advocate for him by noting his good reputation among peers and expressing a desire to understand what may have led to this uncharacteristic behaviour. After I spoke, I was asked to immediately leave the room.

I later learned that the student had been expelled. As he was over 16 with an irregular attendance record, it was unlikely he would be accepted into another school.

That experience stayed with me. I see welcoming work as walking alongside people through life's hardest transitions, creating the conditions for them to regain their voice and opportunities.

As a society, we have moved from a public discourse of assimilation to one of integration. However, that progress has been challenged in recent years, particularly during Covid and through increasingly divisive rhetoric.

TA: You were recognised as the 2026 winner of the National Welcoming Cities Award in the individual category. Congratulations! What does this recognition mean to you?

MB: I really value the work of Welcoming Australia through Welcoming Cities. I'm honoured to be associated with a body of work that supports welcoming in so many different ways.

TA: The Awards celebrate exemplary practices and innovation in fostering welcoming and inclusive communities. How has your current practice as a council officer contributed to inclusion in Waverley?

MB: My approach has been described by an external stakeholder as 'putting the veggies in the spaghetti bolognese' – and while that surprised me at first, it's actually exactly what I'm trying to do. I see myself as an influencer, doing work that is both visible and invisible.

A lot of the change we're trying to bring can be seen by some as unnecessary, especially in environments where diversity and inclusion are acknowledged as important in principle, but not always prioritised when it comes to decisions or budgets. So my focus

has been on embedding diversity and inclusion into everyday practices and regular programming, rather than relying on one-off initiatives. It's about creating incremental change that lasts.

Intersectionality is central to how I work. I try to understand diversity in all its dimensions and what resonates most with different people. Ultimately, without empathy, we're not driven to create change or go beyond our defined roles. Storytelling is also a big part of my approach. While we have strong data showing inequality and barriers, I find that connecting through stories is what really builds understanding and empathy.

In terms of innovation, I've also tried to bring unexpected approaches into my role. For example, through the Perfect Strangers program, I developed a matching tool using Excel to pair participants. I wanted the process to be hands-off and guided by clear parameters, rather than personal judgement. I'm now working towards developing a business case to turn that prototype into a web-based platform that could be used more broadly by other organisations.

TA: How do you ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate, belong and thrive in Waverley through your work?

MB: One of the key things I focus on is closing the feedback loop. When people share their thoughts or ideas, I make a point of responding, acknowledging their input, and letting them know what actions have been taken. From my own experience, if feedback isn't acknowledged or acted on, it's easy to disengage. So, I'm very intentional about making sure people feel heard and that their contributions matter.

I also think carefully about where to invest energy – focusing on actions that can genuinely move things forward.

For example, after a recent community event, I noticed that a participant seemed a bit overwhelmed by the discussion. I followed up with her afterwards to thank her for attending, offered a phone call, and invited further thoughts. She responded with a detailed email full of encouragement and ideas. I made sure to reply thoughtfully, acknowledging her input and outlining how her ideas could be considered. For me, these small but consistent actions are critical. They help build trust, encourage participation, and create the conditions for people to feel they belong and can contribute meaningfully.

TA: What elements of your own story have shaped this approach?

MB: We are all unique. If we don't make everyone feel like they belong, we miss out on valuable contributions. There are many ways we can unintentionally exclude others, so inclusion must always be deliberate. It can never be just about having different people in the room. When we take proactive steps to include everyone, we are more likely to respond to the needs of the whole community, not just the most vocal.

In 2010, I left Paris and moved to Alice Springs. I was the only person at work from a non-English speaking background, and the first few months were not easy. Shortly after starting, a colleague who was involved with the local community radio invited me to visit the station. She encouraged me to take on a new hosting slot. While it was something I had never considered, I took the opportunity and loved it. My show, Excuse My French, became a way to connect with the community in a relaxed and meaningful way.

TA: What do you think makes a workplace more inclusive?

MB: From my perspective, I try to do three things whenever possible: One is to ask people what they think. Two is to respond to their feedback by identifying what can and cannot be done, and why. Three is to share progress before asking for further input. If people feel that we are moving in the right direction, they are more likely to feel included and to keep participating.

TA: What is a tradition, value or lesson from your heritage that has influenced your life or work?

MB: French communication style can be very direct, as people are not afraid to share their opinions. While I have learned to be more considerate in how I communicate, I may still come across as quite direct at times.

I am currently running the Culture Waves youth program focused on social cohesion, and some of my personal experiences have shaped the development of the program and its workshops.

The Welcoming Australia Medal

The Welcoming Australia Medal recognises individuals who have played a significant (and often unassuming) role in developing Welcoming Australia as a movement and organisation. Since 2018 it has been awarded to key individuals who have been instrumental in making Welcoming Australia what it is today and whose legacy deserves to be honoured.

In 2026, the Welcoming Australia Medal is awarded to Sarah Scarce and Nader Ibrahim.

Sarah Scarce is the Director of The Aqua English Project. Co-founded with her mother as a drowning prevention program for refugees, migrants and new arrivals to Australia, the program takes a broad approach to aquatics education, with a focus on social inclusion and empowerment.

More than 44,000 people from more than 44 different cultures and backgrounds have learned to swim through the program. Aqua English also won the Welcoming Cities Award – Organisation in 2022. Sarah is actively working to break down barriers facing refugees, new arrivals and migrants, to promote safety in aquatic environments, and to extend opportunities for social inclusion and cultural participation that many Australians take for granted.

Bel Schenk from Welcoming Cities spoke to Sarah.

Q Bel Schenk: When we spoke back in 2022, you talked about swimming as being central to feeling part of Australian life, but not accessible for many new arrivals. Has your thinking shifted or deepened since that time?

Sarah Scarce: Probably it's deepened. There's a stark realisation in the area I'm in, which is Southeast Queensland, that we're experiencing rapid population growth, certainly spurred on by Brisbane 2032. But there's no projection for building new facilities to the degree that we need. I'm already struggling for space in these facilities, with new communities continuing to arrive. More than ever, it feels obvious that this is something we have to address. I need to be able to broker space in those pools, and if I can't secure access at times that suit community, then I have to come up with a Plan B to create a safe third space, using aquatics as a way to say welcome and foster belonging.

Q BS: You've gone from leading a program that won the Welcoming Cities Award for Change in the organisation category to now being recognised individually. How has your role evolved and what has that looked like for you personally?

SS: When I started Aqua English with Mum, I had just turned 20 – now I'm 40 – so Aqua English is older than my children. I naively thought that when I finished university, I would have completed the purpose of Aqua English and that everyone would understand what was in my head and want to bring more people into public swimming pools. I've since learned that everything in Australia is evolutionary, not revolutionary. One of our strategies has been to maintain a constant presence, because as soon as I take my foot off the pedal, we get forgotten about. My role as a founder is not to stay forever, but to recognise that the project needs to be run by community, for community.

At the same time, there's a significant multicultural employment gap in aquatics. While we've trained teachers, lifeguards and assistants, the next step is leadership. What does the future look like without me, and what needs to be in place for the next 20 years? We've been appointing directors, and while we don't yet have a CEO, I've always envisioned that role being filled by someone who has come through the program. Ultimately, I'm working towards making myself redundant.

BS: In the early days of Aqua English, you were responding to a real safety issue. What do you see now as the broader impact of the work beyond water safety?

SS: Water safety is always the cornerstone – everything starts there. But now we're seeing the broader landscape. Less than 10% of the aquatic workforce comes from multicultural communities, and it's likely closer to 4% in our region. There's also a gap beyond learn-to-swim, as many of the pools we work in don't have pathways into clubs or competitive swimming. Beyond that, the ripple effects are significant. Recently, a woman returned to the pool to share that she had passed her swimming test to become an air hostess with Jetstar. Swimming connects to employment, confidence and independence – it's far bigger than safety now.

BS: You co-wrote the Inclusion Guidelines for Public Aquatic Facilities with us. We couldn't have done it without your guidance and connections to the people who were and, importantly, were not using the pool. Have you seen any change since facilities began implementing the guidelines across Australia?

SS: Yes. Logan is our longitudinal example. It takes about 10 years to see real social and financial return, and we're now around the eight-year mark. The consistent presence we've maintained has made a huge difference. We're seeing women from Afghanistan working across these centres, from front desk roles through to duty manager positions. We've gone from almost no representation to a visible and empowered workforce. Women in their 50s are now saying they want jobs like the ones they see others doing. That's what the guidelines look like in practice – moving from fear and exclusion to confidence, employment and aspiration.

BS: Over the years, are you now asking for different things compared to when you began?

SS: The struggle for space is still very real – it hasn't changed in 20 years. The needs haven't changed either, with people still arriving from landlocked countries and trying to find their place and sense of belonging. What is slowly shifting is the recognition that language is an asset. We're starting to see pools acknowledge that having multiple languages is just as valuable as technical qualifications like CPR or certifications, but it's been a long process to get there.

BS: You describe aquatic centres as Australia's town square. What responsibility do these spaces have in shaping welcoming communities?

SS: It's enormous. Pools have traditionally served a narrow demographic, largely middle-class Anglo Australians, and their business models have reflected that. But populations are changing, and there's now a responsibility to recognise and respond to that shift. There's a tension between 20th-century business models and 21st-century inclusion, and they don't always align easily. If pools don't adapt, the pressure becomes most visible on busy, hot days when everyone wants access. There's also an increasing divide between those who can afford access and those who can't. If a family can't afford basic things like hot water at home, they're not going to pay for swimming lessons, and that gap continues to widen. Recognising local context and adapting accordingly is critical.

BS: You're a strong advocate for recognising lived experience and remunerating people fairly. Why is that critical to doing this work well?

SS: Lived experience brings a level of empathy that can't be replicated. While I have empathy, I don't have the lived experience of being a refugee. The people we train who have learned to swim as adults bring something entirely different. They understand fear, they communicate in language, and they teach with cultural awareness. They also come without the assumptions of traditional aquatic culture, which allows for fresh perspectives. When you tap into that, it creates something far more inclusive, effective and powerful.

BS: Can you tell us a bit about your new venture? Turning a school pool into an accessible community facility.

SS: We're looking at transforming a public-school pool into a community hub. School pools are often underused assets – they're cold, underfunded and overlooked. The idea is to heat, enclose and activate these spaces so they serve both the school and the broader community. In return for long-term access, students would receive free swimming lessons throughout their schooling.

We're piloting this in Inala, centred around Inala State School. Directly opposite is Inala Special School, next door is Glenala State High School, and just behind is the Australian International Islamic College. Together with several nearby schools, this represents a cohort of around 6,000 students – many of whom currently don't access swimming due to cost and transport barriers.

We're also exploring a wraparound model, including café and barista training, lifeguard and bicultural aquatic assistant pathways, and opportunities for health services to operate on site. The goal is to create a genuine community hub – a safe third space – where the primary beneficiaries are the students, followed by the broader community, particularly those who are currently missing out on access.

BS: What does winning the Welcoming Australia Medal mean to you?

SS: I was very humbled to receive the email, especially as I didn't realise I had been nominated. This work is not individual – it's a collective effort supported by a strong team and partners. It's prompted me to reflect on the last 20 years, as well as the next 20, particularly what Aqua English might look like without me. More than anything, I feel a deep sense of gratitude for the people who have supported and enabled this work.

> "Swimming connects to employment, confidence and independence – it's far bigger than safety now."
>
> Sarah Scarce
> Director of The Aqua English Project

The Welcoming Australia Medal
Nader Ibrahim

Nader Ibrahim is a co-founder of One Culture and a passionate community leader whose work has brought young people from diverse backgrounds together in meaningful and lasting ways. Originally from Egypt, where he completed a Bachelor of Journalism, Nader migrated to Australia in 2009 as an international student and later completed a Diploma in Community Services. Since then, he has built strong connections within South Australia's Egyptian and Muslim communities and become a trusted and active presence across many community initiatives.

With more than five years' experience in the community services sector, Nader has worked across youth services, mental health, and supporting young people under guardianship. In his role with Life Without Barriers, he coordinated immigration programs that delivered events, workshops and on-the-ground support to help people feel connected and included.

Nader is perhaps best known for co-developing **Football Life**, one of Adelaide's most successful grassroots youth programs. Bringing together more than 200 young people from diverse cultural backgrounds, the program used football as a powerful tool for connection, belonging and inclusion. Its impact was widely recognised when it received the City of Adelaide's Champion of Inclusion Award in 2017.

Kate Leaney from Welcoming Australia spoke to Nader.

Q Kate Leaney: 17 years ago, you came to Australia as an international student. What helped you feel a sense of belonging then, or what was a barrier to you feeling like you belonged?

Nader Ibrahim: I had it easier than a lot of other people because my brother was here before me. He basically told me, 'Don't worry about anything, everything is sorted for you.' I had all the advantages working in my favour. What really gave me that sense of belonging straight away was football. I remember I arrived on a Wednesday morning – by Thursday evening, I was in training, at the same club that my brother played at. On Sunday, we had a game; I played, scored a goal, we won the game, and everybody was obviously very happy. They were calling me Mo's brother – they didn't even know my name yet!

So that was really good. Straight away, I feel like there is a club for me, there is a house for me, there is something to look forward to; it was a really easy and good start for me.

Has there been something on the flip side? Yes. And again, it was in football. I had a trial at another club – I could hear people asking, 'Who's this?' One person said, 'A fresh halal cut.'

So that was a bit of a setback. And unfortunately, if that situation happens to a young 16-year-old, they may not be able to respond in this manner. They might even never go back there or try again.

Q KL: Can you talk about the power that sport can play in fostering belonging, inclusion and welcome? Why did you choose sport as a vehicle?

NI: What I like about sport, especially football, is it's universal and it's inviting and it's contagious at the same time. After studying community services, I started seeing the opposite side of Australian society – the struggle side. When I came, I've seen the colour, I've seen the glimmer, I've seen the inclusion, I've seen the fun. So my passion and the thing that I love is sport. How can I translate that into making it a mechanism for supporting those who I like to work with, specifically the youth? Our very first program was in the city; kids would flock from all over the place. Half of them cannot speak English – but once everybody's on the pitch, they know what to do. Everything else doesn't need communication. It just happens. And from there grow friendships and relationships, confidence. So that's why I chose sport.

KL: Was the community services study the key moment that led to One Culture, or was it one of many? What was the catalyst?

NI: One of many. I love involvement, I love communities, I love events, So, what can I do? And then I realised, yep, it's community. I like to work with people. Studying community services set the foundation for me. I went and worked in child protection, in mental health, I worked in disability, I worked with new arrivals, refugees and asylum seekers, in an aged care facility. I wanted to see all aspects – this kind of involvement allowed me to see society for what it is. I'm glad I did that kind of study because had I done something different, then maybe something like One Culture wouldn't have eventuated.

KL: You're someone who's obviously deeply connected within the community. You're also connected and embedded in organisations and boards that you work with. How do you balance all of that alongside your personal life, your faith and everything you do?

NI: To be honest, it's very hard, and it's having a toll on me. I wouldn't do it another way, but it's not easy! One Culture is my day-to-day job, and it's not easy – it can be draining and demanding. Then after 5pm I'm with my family – we have dinner, we play a little bit, watch something, do something, take them out for a bike ride or whatever until it's time for them to sleep.

Some weeks are nice and easy; the phone is not ringing at all. And some other weeks, things are really hectic, like during Ramadan, when you yourself are exhausted, but on top of that, organising Eid prayers for the community. So it's really hard to keep the balance, but what I find is that if what I'm doing is related to my faith, like working with Muslim youth, the harder it is, the more the reward. I'm not torturing myself on purpose, but it just, again, gives you the stamina, gives you the dedication, and sometimes you feel like you are just drowning in blessings that you don't realise. So you really need to give back – every minute of it is really worth it.

I feel unwell if I'm sitting down doing nothing. I feel physically and mentally exhausted, but I feel good when I'm doing a lot of things.

KL: You've worked with Welcoming Australia in many ways while there are obviously so many demands on your time. Why do you say yes to us when we ask you to become a partner? What connects your work and values to ours?

NI: I believe we need you guys, especially at times like this, even for someone like me.

The impact that Welcoming Australia has, whether it's in sport or community or council, sometimes you would like to hear somebody random saying, hey, thank you for being here. We appreciate you. We get that from Welcoming Australia. You might think looking at me, that you don't really need anyone to welcome you – you're a citizen, you have rights in this country just like anybody. But the reality is we're not machines, we are humans. If you don't feel welcomed in any way, you feel like you're walking with a target on your back, just being who you are, just looking like you are, just dressing like who you are, especially if you're a woman, and you're very visibly Muslim or very visibly different.

Australia felt more welcoming 16 to 17 years ago than it does today. So that says to me – we are going backwards. And that's why I love working with you guys, because it's in your name, it's in your DNA, it's in your constitution, it's in your everyday mission. So you'd better sharpen your nails, sharpen your teeth, because if things keep going south, you guys have a much steeper hill to climb.

KL: Often when people think of One Culture, they think of just football and sport, but your work is now so much broader than that. How do you translate what happens on the football field into systems-level change?

NI: You know what's the hardest question I get asked? What do you do? Is it a sporting organisation? Is it a multicultural organisation? Is it a disability organisation? Is it a community organisation? Is it a non-profit, a charity, or a social enterprise? Is it all of them? Maybe I can say we are a multicultural, inclusive sports organisation.

Do we see a massive change between the beginning, early days and today? No, the answer is no. We are filling the little gaps, picking up the crumbs. We are picking up the people who are falling through the cracks. And our job is not to make them the next elite player; our job for them

is to keep them included before they can be led astray. That's basically it, especially with the youth, especially with the young ones. If you don't foster an environment that's positive for them, there are 1,000 negative environments that will attract them out there.

KL: You have consistently shown up over so many years. What keeps you inspired to keep showing up, keep innovating and keep making the good things happen?

NI: I think I put myself between two high walls. Number one: What we started and have built is too good to abandon. And on the other side, I could go and work for somebody, and that somebody could be an entity, could be the government. I'm never going to like it. Because here, we talk to people, we see people, we understand what's going on, we see where we can help, and we immediately get up and do it. There is no bureaucracy here.

But honestly, it's the sense of responsibility. Again, this has been polished and amplified by my deep sense of belonging to my faith. And the best of you, Prophet Muhammad said, the best of you is the most beneficial for the others. And ultimately, it's my two little girls – five and eight years old.

KL: Since starting One Culture, do you feel like the barriers to sport and inclusion have changed? How do you navigate those changes, or if they haven't changed, how do you continue to work to challenge those same barriers?

NI: They haven't changed, but the barriers have been acknowledged and they have been seen. Now the barriers are there for everyone to see, but there are so few people, organisations or sporting clubs that decide they are going to go beyond these barriers and make their places more inclusive.

But we are definitely at a better place now, because before you would ask somebody, and they would say, 'What do you even mean? What are you talking about? What world are you from?' But now people can acknowledge the barriers exist, and they'll say, 'Okay, okay, even though I don't like what you say, I acknowledge it.' It's another journey. It's going to be another number of years.

KL: Finally, what does success look like on a large scale for Australia – what does it take to build genuinely welcoming communities where people from all backgrounds thrive and belong?

NI: The likes of you and me and thousands of people across the country, we just have to keep going. You just have to continue doing what you're doing and be even more vocal than you are now.

Again, I'm not the kind of person who would put on a golden name tag and go, 'Hey, I'm the founder and the CEO.' I'm more of a humble person and I like it this way. But you know what? I'm going to get out there and say, 'This is how good our work is, this is the benefit. This is what we do. That's why we do what we're doing. And that's why this is beneficial for you as well.'

So we need to continue pushing back because if we let the disrespect, the exclusion, let it all seep in on us, we're gonna be in hot water. We don't want that, so we just gotta keep going. Our work has to be louder.

> "... here, we talk to people, we see people, we understand what's going on, we see where we can help, and we immediately get up and do it."
>
> Nader Ibrahim
> Co-founder of One Culture

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Welcoming Australia.

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