Submission to the ACT Government Consultation:

Multicultural Advisory Council - Terms of Reference

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About VolunteeringACT

Volunteering and Contact ACT Ltd (trading as VolunteeringACT) is the peak body for volunteering and provides community information services in the Canberra region. We also deliver programs for people experiencing disadvantage and isolation, people with disability, and people needing support for mental wellness. VolunteeringACT has a vision of an inclusive Canberra, and a mission to foster inclusion by enabling participation and connection.

VolunteeringACT values collaboration, diversity, equity, innovation, integrity, and participation. VolunteeringACT is a people driven, service-focused organisation that represents the interests of 189 members, advocates for and supports volunteers, and engages with the broader Canberra community. Through our activities, we improve inclusivity, enable sustainable volunteering, and create a more resilient Canberra community.

VolunteeringACT is part of the National Network of Volunteering Peak Bodies in Australia.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges the Ngunnawal people as the traditional custodians of the Canberra region. VolunteeringACT pays respect to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their vital ongoing contribution to our lands.

VolunteeringACT acknowledges volunteers of all genders and sexualities, with all abilities and from all cultures. Their skills, expertise, and time are critical to delivering services and programs, and in making Canberra a better place to live. We also acknowledge the contribution of the volunteer involving organisations that contribute to the health and happiness of our community.

This submission has been made as part of our commitment to ensuring the perspectives and expertise of volunteers, volunteer involving organisations and volunteer leaders informs development of public policy and contributes to achievement of positive social, economic, and environmental outcomes. The content has been informed by our experiences of engaging with and delivering services to Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) communities, consultation with representatives of our Newly Arrived Migrants Participatory Advisory Group (PAG), and ongoing engagement/consultation with organisations in our networks working directly with CALD communities.

Membership and Representation

What specific areas of expertise could be considered when selecting members for the Council?

- Excellent listening skills are really important for this type of role. Members must be able to engage positively and meaningfully with different cultural community groups, and really listen to what is being said in a respectful way and allow a safe space for people to feel comfortable to talk and share their experiences.
- Communication skills are also important, for members to be able to understand what is being said, frame those messages accurately and impart that information to others.
- It is important that members come from diverse professional backgrounds, but we feel lived experience should be valued, and not just as well as any formal qualifications they person may have.
- We recommend that they are people with experience/knowledge of advocacy and who also have the ability to advocate for a position that may not be something they 100% agree with personally, as they must represent the views of whole communities, and not just themselves.
- Sound cultural knowledge and understanding, including skills in cross-cultural negotiation and conflict resolution.
- Curiosity and good inquiry skills so that they can unpack topics and delve deeper.
- Self-awareness and the ability to reflect on their own practice/performance.
- As the role demands a strong ability to work in partnership and across other groups/structures, good relationship building, and teamwork skills will also be essential.
- Similar experience in working in this type of setting before or overseas could be beneficial and will allow them to be able to draw on that experience – aspects about being able to connect with community.
- Regardless of expertise, we feel members need to be people who will be cross-culturally accepted. This is particularly important in CALD communities where there may be many different ethnic groups within that community and the person must be someone who is open-minded and aware of this as a representative.

What processes should be in place to ensure marginal communities and new and emerging communities are represented on the Council or through community consultations?

- Being very clear about which countries are classified as marginalised / new and emerging communities. It is helpful to define these terms properly from the start and do this in consultation/agreement with others.
- Regarding emerging communities, this is a changing landscape, so the Council structure may need to be more flexible to accommodate this. For example, you could consider allocating one or two of the positions to a new and emerging community, with the understanding that as newer communities emerge, the representative may need to change more frequently year to year instead of the appointment of that role being for the usual length of time etc.
- Establish a process to ensure the communities you wish to engage are actually receiving the message, but that what you wish to know from them and how they can tell you is also understood. Information and methods for gathering it/asking questions needs to be available in multiple languages, but also in a way that understands the

many nuances and differences in communication styles/protocols within different cultural groups.
- Messages should be delivered through social media.
- Processes need to be respectful of the way the community communicates and engages with each other. Following their forms and processes of communicating and consulting. Respecting cultural protocols such as where face to face/word of mouth methods are preferred, yarning style conversations, in-person consultations, having a range of accessible methods to engage people.

Community Engagement - Proposals

What are the ways the Council can engage with the community to ensure your voice is heard?

- Use a range of methods to engage communities in an accessible manner – i.e. Having conversations, outreach to communities, speaking their language, in person chats.
- Use everyday language and being an active listener.
- Be respectful of the way the community communicates and engages with each other. Following their forms and processes of communicating and consulting. E.g respecting hierarchies like reaching out to Elders as first point of contact in First Nations community etc.
- Free, prior, informed consent – making sure community knows what's going on, why they're contributing, what they get out of it.
- Being aware of education and location – especially for smaller and more private communities, or new and emerging communities.
- Target groups – what does this mean? Why do we need target groups? Are they community groups who require more attention and time than others due to barriers?

What mechanisms should be in place to ensure the Council is approachable for all members of community?

- The simplest thing Council members can do at the start is to ask their community how they like to be engaged with – we recommend this is a requirement for all Council members to do this before any engagement timetable is planned out.
- Council members also need to go where people already are, and not just create/plan new events and mechanisms.
- The Council needs to be regularly engaging with key organisations that are running programs for people from those community groups, to allow for a more informal mechanism.
- Being very clear about the two-way flow of information the Council manages so communities know what is happening and why this is of importance to their particular community etc.

Specific Thoughts on Community Forums

- Community forums are one proposed way and although these can be useful, this type of event is not favoured by everyone and could also be a barrier for some. If these forums are to be used, the definition of a community forum should be clear, so everyone knows what to expect. For example, what is the actual format? will there be a panel with the

opportunity for questions? Will the forum focus on a specific community – if this is the case, would one forum per year be enough?

- There are many different strands of diversity within multicultural communities and there can be challenges when bringing all of these diversities together under one community forum – particularly when needing to stay focussed or narrow things down to a specific decision.
- The Council could take advantage of the groups that already exist in Canberra to create smaller community forums that target specific cultural groups/diversities and perhaps allow for more nuanced conversations.
- A possible format could be to run one large community forum per year with the focus being on a specific one topic such as education, employment etc. then there could be working groups as an offshoot of the main forum event, to work out any issues brought up at the forum.
- Although we would always recommend respecting the cultural norms/protocols of each community group – all the voices together in one big forum might make it hard for someone to speak up as those protocols in that forum format may it hard for them to speak up, if there are hierarchies in place etc.

Accountability and Transparency - Proposals

How can we ensure additional transparency from the Council? What other mechanisms would you like the Council to commit to?

- We recommend that the Council undertakes a reflexivity and positionality process as part of selection to help discover any hidden biases prospective members may hold and that the ability to regularly self-reflect and being comfortable with challenging your own unconscious bias is a key part of the role skill requirements.
- Follow through on feedback from the community by being action-focused and communicate in a timely manner on how any promises/actions are to be delivered on, and when (even if it is an estimate) It is important that people know their feedback is 'going somewhere'.
- Be open about the processes of how decisions are made and why they were made and share this information as an integral part of the decision-making process. For example, providing a clear summary of the outcomes/results of the process in a format that covers *you said, we did, OR you said, we didn't, but here is why* have proved useful in other ACT Government communications/feedback.
- Be honest and transparent about what can and can't be done from the beginning and if there are parameters to work within or any limiting factors, communicate these fully before any conversations with communities begin, to properly manage expectations (on both sides!).
- Use approaches that provide genuine empowerment of communities – for example, opportunities for self-determination, solutions that have roles for communities to play, implementation processes that require the sharing of power, accountability mechanisms that seek to engage/involve people throughout, not just as the beginning of the process via an initial consultation.
- Transparency is a two-way street. Empower interested parties to be proactive in reaching out and not just being passive, waiting for the opportunity for when a Council member may hold a consultation etc. Give them a way they can make contact at the point they have something to say, even if this occurs outside of a meeting schedule etc.

What are your suggestions for promoting the Council and ensuring people in the community know about the Act and the Council?

- It is important to consider where the summary of issues discussed/decisions made etc. will be published. People navigate to sources of information differently and not everyone has access to online platforms, so there needs to be a balance between online methods, written/paper form, visual and story-based methods, or even verbal updates that can be given as part of other important community meetings/events/gathering etc. People need a suite of options they can self-select from, that also cater to other accessibility needs including visual impairment, hearing impairment and/or other disabilities that may impact on processing and understanding information.
- There is a regular multicultural e-newsletter that has a wide readership and there may be other, smaller newsletters or similar publications that people regularly turn to for their information.
- Community radio could be another useful mechanism for information dissemination as many communities have dedicated programming aimed at their cultural information needs.
- There are numerous points across Canberra where people may seek information from, including ACT Libraries, Child and Family Centres, neighbourhood Community Centres and the Community Info Hub in the City Centre, operated by VolunteeringACT. There are also numerous information EXPOs that occur every year that may be good exposure for communicating about the Council.
- Make the Act and the work of the Council an ongoing conversation throughout the year - shouldn't be limited to once or twice a year for updates/progress reports etc.
- Previously the Council have run quarterly meetings, but this may not be enough. People can be invited to these to talk through issues, but this space also needs to be safe and welcoming to everyone. One of our group participants reported a previous experience of taking something to a multicultural advisory board and it was a very intimidating experience – if they do not feel welcome and respected when entering such a meeting format, this could be discouraging and cause some people to disengage from the advisory group model.

Authorisation

This submission has been authorised by the Chief Executive Officer of VolunteeringACT.

Jean Giese
Chief Executive Officer