



Policy brief

Hitting the mark: specialised responses in services and initiatives for a multicultural Australia

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Key messages

- Australia is now more diverse – ethnically, linguistically, culturally – than ever with the 2021 Census reporting that just under half of the population are migrants themselves or have a parent born overseas and 5.5 million people, 1 in 4 households, speak a language other than English in the home.¹
- Cultural, ethnic and linguistic background is often associated with disparities seen across a range of social and economic outcomes including health, education, housing and employment; pointing to wider causes rooted in structural inequalities. These inequalities for newcomers were clearly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic in Australia.²
- There are debates on how best to deliver services in the context of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of newcomers in ways that bolster belonging and integration. Access by newcomers to specialised multicultural and ethno-specific services has been linked to higher levels of social capital, belonging and civic engagement and stronger intercultural relations.³
- Delivering inclusive, accessible services that respond to the diverse lived experiences and identities of Australians is a core responsibility for mainstream, specialised services and place-based approaches alike.
- Australia’s settlement sector has been delivering specialised services and initiatives to refugees and migrants for decades and is internationally recognised for its expertise.
- Specialist providers are able to draw on skills and capabilities that are responsive to the particular needs of disadvantaged groups, can contribute strongly to co-design through their existing links and knowledge of community needs and preferences, and can deliver strong reach and outcomes to disadvantaged cohorts.
- Equally, evidence indicates the importance of inclusive and accessible mainstream services in the early years of residence in a new country and for sustaining this momentum over the longer-term.⁴
- A useful pathway to improve access and inclusion for mainstream services as they seek to respond to diversity, is skill and organisational development to ensure that they are culturally responsive to the needs and preferences of diverse communities.⁵
- That said, in some specialist contexts culturally responsive approaches are needed as in the case of migrants and refugees with disabilities who encounter systemic barriers in both mainstream service systems and in specialist disability services.⁶
- The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to digital modes of service delivery and highlighted the critical importance of digital access and literacy in all aspects of people’s lives. Research conducted by SSI and Western Sydney University⁷ found gaps in digital inclusion among refugees, highlighting the need for the digital transformation of government and other services to be anchored in policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers.
- Data on cultural diversity is poorly defined and poorly collected in Australia making it hard to ascertain differences in access and evaluate outcomes. Governments who have stewardship over publicly-funded services should improve the consistency of data collection on newcomers’ access to mainstream services to drive improvements in planning, design and delivery of mainstream services and specialised services.



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Recommendations

- 1** The Australian and state/territory governments should reinvigorate investment in multicultural and ethno-specific services and initiatives in response to the increasing cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity of newcomers.
- 2** The multicultural and ethno-specific non-government sector has a vital role in delivering specialised services to newcomers and ensuring that policy and program settings are fit-for-purpose, co-designed and responsive to specific needs and local contexts. Governments need to ensure the financial viability of these specialised organisations – small, medium and large – as they are an essential element of the social infrastructure to build a more inclusive multicultural Australia.
- 3** To strengthen its reputation as a fair country, the Australian and state/territory governments should strengthen access and equity policies to ensure that publicly-funded programs and services meet newcomers' needs and include transparent mechanisms for government departments and agencies to monitor and report progress.
- 4** Given the extent of government outsourcing of social services previously delivered by governments, it is vital that access and equity policy applies to all government-funded services, whether these are provided directly by government, private or non-profit organisations.
- 5** Australian and state/territory governments should adopt a culturally responsive framework to provide the scaffolding for reorienting policy and programs to achieve access and equity for newcomers. This should include investment in culturally responsive training for government agencies and service providers, including in regional areas, to enhance their capability to meet the needs of newcomers.
- 6** Australian and state/territory governments should strengthen cultural diversity and representation across the NFP sector by investing in multicultural community organisations and investing in emerging leaders in these organisations.
- 7** The Australian and state/territory governments should ensure that the digital transformation of government services is anchored in policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers. This should include building digital gateways (i.e., websites, apps) that are more intuitive – with less need for digital skills – and that minimise language barriers (i.e., in-language, plain English).
- 8** The Australian Government should improve the consistency of data that captures cultural and linguistic diversity of the population and work with state/territory governments to improve the collection of administrative data to paint a fuller picture of difference in access and outcomes among newcomers.



About SSI

SSI is a national not-for-profit organisation providing life-changing human and social services. With community at the heart of everything we do, our purpose is to help create a more inclusive society in which everyone can meaningfully contribute to social, cultural, civic and economic life. SSI was founded in Sydney in 2000 with the aim of helping newly arrived refugees settle in Australia. Over time, our expertise in working with people from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds served as the foundation for a gradual expansion into other social services and geographical areas.

In 2018, SSI merged with Queensland-based Access Community Services and opened in Victoria providing an extensive footprint across the eastern coast of Australia. Our network of 40 offices is based in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane, regional NSW, Queensland and Western Australia. Each year, SSI supports more than 53,000 people across almost 60 programs.

This policy paper is informed by SSI's broad experience in delivering specialised services to migrants and refugees. In their day-to-day work, our program leaders and staff witness both the strengths and challenges experienced by newcomers as they navigate a new chapter of their lives in Australia. Too often, these challenges are magnified by services that inadequately meet the needs and preferences of newcomers, perpetuating the structural inequalities they face when accessing the services and programs that we all rely on to participate fully in social, cultural, economic and civic life.

Why focus on specialised responses in services for newcomers in Australia?

We are more diverse than ever before

Australia is now more diverse – ethnically, linguistically, culturally – than ever before. The 2021 Census found that just under half of Australia’s residents are migrants themselves or have a parent born overseas (48 per cent).⁸ The number of people who use a language other than English in the home grew to more than 5.5 million people, 1 in 4 households, an increase of almost 800,000 people on the 2016 census.⁹

Australia adopted multiculturalism in the 1970s which, in contrast to the White Australia policy, sought to value and respond to cultural diversity and move away from assimilationist approaches that expected newcomers to disavow their cultural heritage and adopt ‘mainstream’ norms. One of the manifestations of multiculturalism was a gradual evolution towards specialised programs and services for multicultural communities, often delivered by multicultural or ethno-specific organisations, including specialised settlement programs for newly-arrived refugees.¹⁰

Differences in access and outcomes persist

Indicators of cultural, ethnic and linguistic background are often associated with disparities seen across a range of social and economic outcomes including health, education, housing and employment, pointing to wider causes rooted in structural inequalities. The impacts of structural inequalities on newcomers were clearly exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic here in Australia and elsewhere.

A comprehensive review of outcomes during the pandemic found that COVID-19-related deaths for migrants and refugees were higher across OECD countries.¹¹ Similarly

in Australia, the mortality rate of COVID-19 among people born overseas fluctuated across the main years of the pandemic – 2020, 2021 and 2022 – peaking in 2021 at 3.9 times higher than for people born in Australia.¹² Disparities in terms of higher rates of infection, hospitalisation and death and lower rates of vaccination and other preventive behaviours have been reported in multiple studies among people from ethnic minority backgrounds and speakers of minority languages in a range of countries like Australia.¹³

The OECD found an accumulation of risk factors including poorer housing, higher rates of job losses, and systemic discrimination contributing to these poorer outcomes.¹⁴ In other words, these COVID-19 disparities are due to systems’ capability and capacity, or lack thereof, to respond to needs of people of diverse cultural, ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Similarly, the Australian public health system’s response to cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity was called into serious question during the pandemic. An independent review of Australia’s response to the pandemic found that language barriers that were inadequately addressed at multiple levels contributed to poorer outcomes for newcomers¹⁵, resulting in public health messaging that was hard to read, difficult to understand and confusing to action.¹⁶ In essence, the pandemic provided a reminder of the significant limitations of mainstream responses during a crisis.

We can do better

Multiculturalism, which has maintained widespread community support, has been part of the fabric of Australia for more than 50 years, when the first steps to dismantle the White Australia policy were taken and

specialised migrant and refugee services were established alongside mainstream services. While Australia uses a mix of approaches the Multicultural Framework Review commissioned by the Australian Government noted that investment in specialised multicultural and ethno-specific responses has waned in recent decades.¹⁷ Further, the Review called for a reset of multiculturalism, noting that:

“the blithe assertion that Australia is the ‘most successful multicultural society in the world’ is no longer sufficient”¹⁸

The Review put forward a set of recommendations to ensure that multiculturalism fits Australia’s current context, embraces Australians’ multifaceted identities and responds to discrimination and disadvantage influenced by the intersections of age, gender, class, religious affiliation, language, ethnicity, sexual orientation or disability, which “impact ...[people’s] ... daily lives and, importantly, how they engage with the social services and support they seek.”¹⁹ Specialised services and responses play a critical role in maintaining and strengthening Australia’s multicultural society.

Alongside this Review, the Australian Government requested that the national community services sector create a Not-For-Profit Sector Development Blueprint detailing a roadmap of initiatives to ensure the sector is ‘future ready’. The Blueprint recognises the importance of multiculturalism and specialised services through its call on the Australian Government to strengthen cultural diversity and representation across the NFP sector by investing in multicultural community organisations to work with CALD communities to co-design policy and services from end to end; and investing in emerging leaders in these organisations.²⁰ The Blueprint is being considered by the Community Sector Ministerial Roundtable, whose role is to identify the key related issues where further government action is required, and to then work outside of meetings to progress these through the ordinary functions of government.²¹

Overarching policy principles

- Understanding and acknowledgement of First Nations peoples’ history and cultures is central to revitalising multiculturalism which, despite challenges, has served Australia well over the past 50 years.
- All Australians should be able to equitably access mainstream and specialised services, including those delivered via digital platforms, regardless of their cultural, ethnic, linguistic or religious background.
- Australian governments and other publicly-funded initiatives are responsible for ensuring all eligible Australians can access programs and services that are responsive to their needs, digital capabilities, and that deliver equitable outcomes.
- Achieving equitable access requires both culturally responsive mainstream services and place-based approaches, as well as specialised and tailored services.
- Ensuring equitable access also involves strengthening cultural diversity and representation across the Not-For-Profit sector by investing in multicultural community organisations to work with CALD communities to co-design policy and services from end to end; and investing in emerging leaders in these organisations.
- Providing accessible and inclusive services to migrants, refugees and people seeking asylum is critical to enable them to settle, rebuild their lives and maximise their social, economic, cultural and civic contributions.

Specialised multicultural services are well-placed to address inequalities and strengthen integration and belonging among multicultural Australians

The theory behind specialised multicultural services, belonging and integration

In Australia and elsewhere there are debates on how best to deliver services in the context of increasing cultural and linguistic diversity of newcomers in ways that bolster belonging and integration. There are two main schools of thought: one which seeks to use multicultural or ethno-specific initiatives tailored to the barriers that newcomers face e.g., language, lack of knowledge of service systems, etc.²² The other, favoured by governments in Germany, Sweden, and Denmark have sought to improve integration through the mainstreaming of services catering to all regardless of ethnic, cultural or linguistic backgrounds²³. A recent Australian multiyear study has tested the effects of multicultural and ethno-specific services on integration and belonging among newcomers.²⁴ It found that newcomers' access and engagement with multicultural and ethno-specific services was linked to: higher levels of social capital and participation in community life including volunteering; and that community-led initiatives promoted belonging and

integration.²⁵ Based on these findings, the study calls for equality of citizenship to not only be a policy principle but be enacted through:

"... social services programs that respond to the cultural, linguistic and religious specificities of ... migrants, their communities and the wider society at large."²⁶

Newcomers' access and engagement with multicultural and ethno-specific services was linked to: higher levels of social capital and participation in community life including volunteering

Australia's settlement sector brings a decades-long record of delivering specialised services and initiatives to refugees and migrants

The emergence of settlement services occurred alongside the adoption of multiculturalism as an overarching narrative in Australia's policy response to diversity, integration and social and economic participation.²⁷ At its heart, multiculturalism underpinned a move towards supporting refugees and migrants to integrate and participate in Australia, away from policy settings that expected assimilation by refugees and migrants to mainstream norms.

The expertise of Australia's settlement sector is recognised internationally²⁸, based on its experience delivering settlement programs funded by the Australia Government work to help refugee and migrants reach their full potential and fulfil their aspirations as they begin a new chapter of their lives in Australia. Settlement programs not only provide support to navigate service systems, they also provide the building blocks of integration, civic participation and acculturation to a new, active and productive life. They also deliver initiatives in local communities that connect people to the community, often with a special focus on priority population groups such as young people, older newcomers, or women. In addition, these programs are delivered by staff who reflect the newcomers they are supporting: two-thirds have a lived experience of migration or forced displacement, were born overseas and spoke a language other than English in the home as found in a recent national survey of the settlement services workforce.²⁹

The importance of the role of settlement services and multiculturalism more broadly, can be seen in SSI research. SSI has tracked newly arrived refugees' social connections, access to rights and fulfilment of responsibilities in *Foundations for Belonging* research in partnership with Western Sydney University. Over three phases of research, conducted in 2019, 2020 and 2021, the research findings demonstrate the strengths and agency of refugees during the COVID-19 pandemic. Refugees' positive feelings about their local community and neighbourhood remained strong and trust in government and the police continued despite stringent public health restrictions.³⁰ This is a testament to the work of SSI and other settlement providers and the pivotal role they played in ensuring that newly arrived refugees and migrants were supported throughout the pandemic.

Co-designed approaches are the gold standard in specialised responses

There has been a long-standing concern about the effectiveness of Federally-funded employment services for different cohorts of job seekers, including those from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. Specific challenges include having insufficient Australian work experience, limited English language proficiency, lack of understanding of rights and responsibilities and experiences of racism and discrimination.³¹ Specialist providers bring skills and capabilities that are responsive to the particular needs of disadvantaged groups; can contribute strongly to co-design through existing links to, and knowledge of, community needs and preferences, and their reach with local diverse communities.



SSI brings first-hand experience in co-designing and delivering specialised employment support through the Refugee Employment Support Program (RESP). The RESP, funded by the NSW Government from 2017 to 2024, supported refugees and people seeking asylum to obtain sustainable and skilled employment. The program worked with local employers, training bodies and other NGOs to connect eligible refugees and people seeking asylum with training, support and jobs. The program employed multicultural employment specialists to provide tailored support based on participants' skills, experience and goals. In five years, RESP has assisted up to 8,000 refugees and 2,000 people seeking asylum in western Sydney and the Illawarra, the areas where a majority of refugees have settled in NSW.³²

The independent evaluation of RESP found that overall, the program provided an innovative and successful response to the difficult challenges that refugees, and people seeking asylum face in finding employment and overcoming economic exclusion; a critical and necessary step towards successful settlement in Australia.³³ RESP achieved strong employment outcomes, with more than a quarter of all those who participated in RESP commencing employment during the program. More than half of RESP participants who completed a survey for the evaluation were employed, the majority in permanent jobs. In addition, it found that RESP offered a better experience for refugees and people seeking asylum than mainstream employment services, including Workforce Australia, and exceeded the overall program targets.³⁴

Peer-led, 'bottom-up' approaches are also critical in specialised multicultural responses

People with a disability from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds and their carers, experience a range of challenges including lack of knowledge about complex service systems and access points, insufficient information about services in their preferred language, different cultural understandings of disability, caring and advocacy, social isolation, and difficulties accessing employment and volunteering opportunities.

Evidence indicates the value of peer-led support³⁵ to increase wellbeing and quality of life outcomes for people with a disability, and carers. When members of a peer support network share personal characteristics (such as age, language or cultural background) or lived experiences (such as having a disability and/or caring for a person with a disability) the efficacy of intervention is enhanced, isolation among group members reduced, and group trust, empathy and connection boosted.³⁶

The Multicultural Peer Network (MPN) was a 3-year initiative funded by the Australian Government Department of Social Services that aimed to increase independence and access to the National Disability Insurance Scheme (NDIS). Emerging community leaders were recruited and trained to facilitate multicultural peer networks and discussion on topics such as volunteering, employment, self-advocacy, accessing the NDIS and building circles of support. In addition, these peers acted as ambassadors in their community, reaching out to a wide range of community members, helping to reduce stigma associated with disability and caring.

Through SSI, the program successfully recruited, trained and supported 71 emerging leaders to become peer facilitators, with presentations taking place in 14 different community languages, to almost 1,100 participants across almost 100 new peer networks.

The evaluation of the MPN found that peer facilitators were appropriate for ensuring accessibility, reach, and cultural appropriateness of topic content and delivery; and participants identified practical and emotional benefits.³⁷

Group participants reported:

- their knowledge and confidence in accessing the NDIS and mainstream services had improved;
- increased confidence, interest and ability to achieve their goals and advocate for their rights;
- increased confidence and motivation and increased connections in communities; and
- believed they were more valued by people around them as a result of their experiences in the program.³⁸

Publicly-funded services and initiatives should be accessible to all

Access and inclusion nurtures welcome and belonging

Australia's human and social services ecosystem includes mainstream or universal services available to the entire population, in areas such as health, education, employment, housing and justice, and specialised services which are targeted to specific priority populations, such as people with disability. Place-based approaches offer a third path to address disadvantage. Often deployed to address entrenched disadvantage in particular locations, place-based approaches facilitate better engagement, due to being seen as a 'bottom-up', community-driven and collaborative way of building thriving communities.

Delivering inclusive, accessible services that respond to the Australians' diverse lived experiences and identities is a core responsibility for mainstream, specialised services and place-based approaches alike. In the context of newcomers, levels of inclusion and experiences of access to services set the tone for interactions between newcomers and the broader community as they navigate life in a new country.

Evidence indicates the importance of inclusive and accessible mainstream services in the early years of residence in a new country and sustaining this momentum over the longer-term to bolster success in settlement.³⁹ For example, access to essential services or vocational education and training over the longer-term can play a significant role in assisting newcomers' integration.⁴⁰ Conversely, a lack of timely and effective access to services can compound disadvantage and disengagement.⁴¹ This

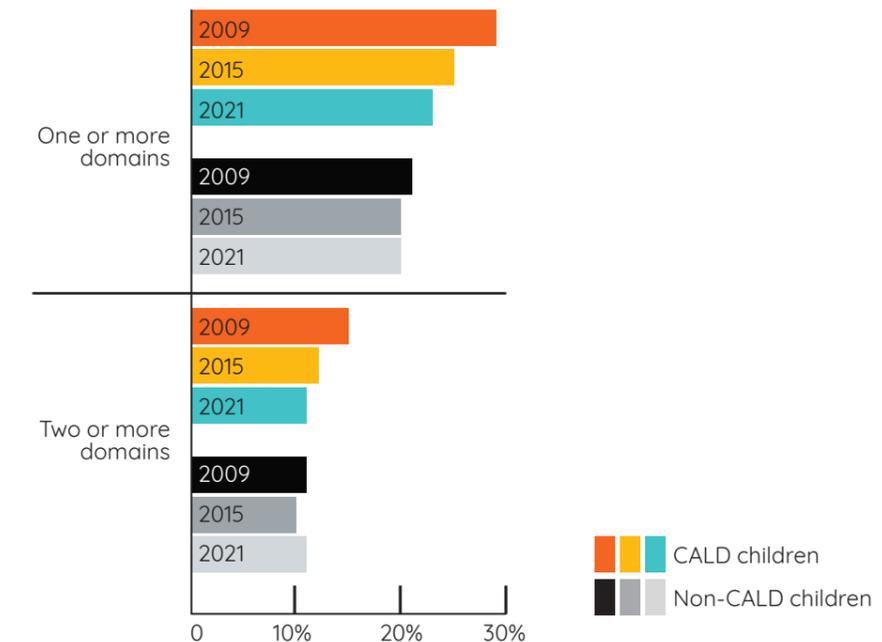
has flow-on impacts in terms of poorer outcomes, with people delaying help seeking until they are in crisis, which in the long term, creates higher costs to the health, education and justice systems and other government and community services.

Mainstream services can struggle to deliver access to all but there are pathways to access and inclusion

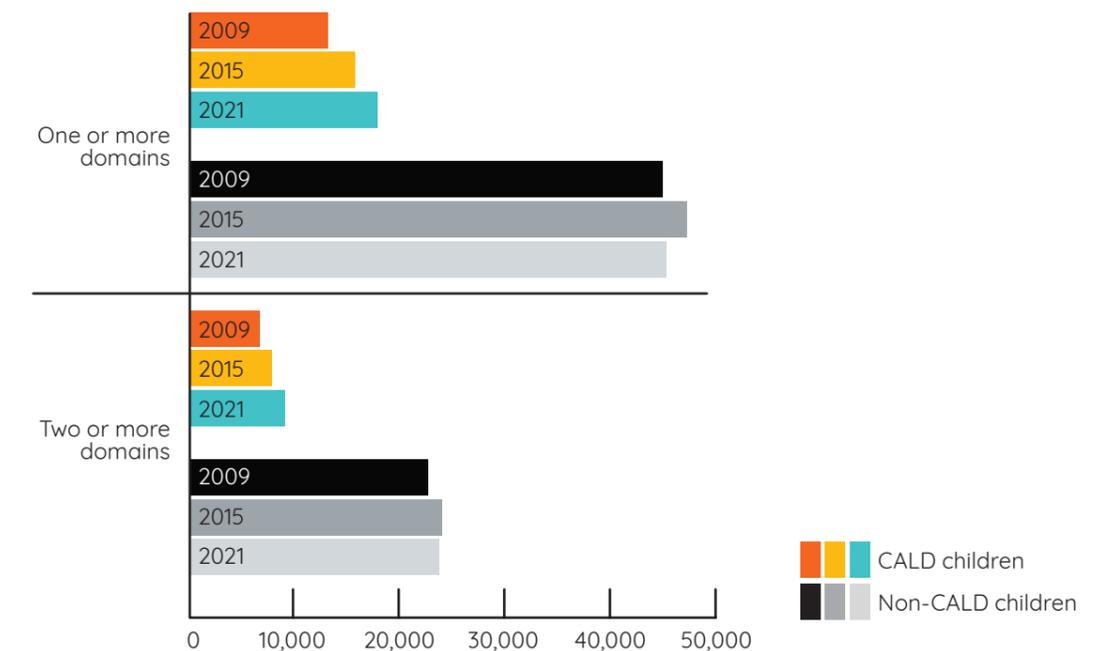
There is compelling evidence of the benefits of early childhood education such as preschool, day care and supported playgroups. Early childhood education sets children up to succeed in school and later life, generating a strong economic return on investment.⁴² The Australian Early Development Census, conducted every three years, shows that in 2021 children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds were more likely to be developmentally vulnerable at school entry than other children. The 2024 Australian Early Development Census shows that fewer children from language backgrounds other than English (LBOTE) are developmentally on-track, and increasing proportions of those having one or more developmental vulnerabilities.⁴³ Further, children from culturally diverse backgrounds were less likely to attend any type of early learning compared to other children.⁴⁴ Socio-economic disadvantage was found to be the largest driver of developmental vulnerability for all children along with English language proficiency.⁴⁵ Other common barriers for culturally diverse families include awareness and recognition of the value of early childhood learning; digital literacy

Trends in developmental vulnerability of children from CALD and non-CALD backgrounds across Australia

The proportion of children who are developmentally vulnerable on



The number of children who are developmentally vulnerable on



Source: Lam et al. (2024). Stronger Starts, Brighter Futures II

in navigating enrolment processes and Centrelink requirements; affordability issues; transport barriers; and limited access to culturally responsive early childhood service.⁴⁶

Place-based approaches are well positioned to address these intersecting barriers. *Stronger Places, Strong Peoples* is an example of a place-based initiative with a focus on early childhood, which is being implemented in 10 communities across Australia, including in Logan, Queensland, to address intersecting drivers of disadvantage using a collective impact model. SSI is a partner in Logan Together which was established in 2015. This long-standing, place-based initiative has documented a 3.4 per cent reduction between 2015 and 2021 in developmental vulnerability in one or more early childhood domains among children in Logan.⁴⁷

Another pathway mainstream services can use to improve access and inclusion in response to the needs and preferences of Australia's diverse communities, is skill development in culturally responsive service delivery.⁴⁸ Settlement providers such as SSI have deep knowledge and experience in working with diverse communities and are well placed to provide culturally responsive training. That said, one-off training is not sufficient. Improving access for diverse communities requires change at multiple levels alongside staff training and development, such as government policy; professional standards; and organisational policies and practice.⁴⁹ This system-wide approach to ensuring change responds to diversity is also recommended for specialised disability services in a recent report commissioned by the Disability Royal Commission.⁵⁰

Specialised services can also focus on improving multicultural access and equity

Lower levels of service use by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are not due to lower levels of need but rather due to difficulties in navigating and accessing services. For example, people with disabilities from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds can encounter systemic barriers in both mainstream service systems and in specialist disability services.⁵¹ While these systemic barriers are resistant to change, they are not fixed or permanent, and there are promising examples where persistent access and inclusion issues have been addressed as in the example of Ability Links NSW to engage 'hard-to-reach' people with disabilities.

Case study: Learning from the Ability Links NSW - a culturally responsive approach

Ability Links NSW (ALNSW) was established in 2014 as the NSW Government approach to engage people with disability, their families and carers prior to the national rollout of the NDIS. A related program, Early Links, supported children with disability. The target group for Ability Links and Early Links, staffed by Linkers, was people with disability aged 0 to 64 to address their goals and aspirations for inclusion in their local community and access to mainstream services.

- Linkers had three main roles:
- to work with people with disability, their families and carers to plan for their future;
 - to help people with disability become more confident, build on their strengths, and support them to achieve their goals by building new networks and navigating access to support and services in their community;
 - to work alongside communities and mainstream services, supporting them to become more welcoming and inclusive of people with disability.⁵²

The design of the program encouraged providers to employ Linkers that reflected local population demographics (including multicultural communities), which represented one of the ways to meet the tender requirement for responsive services to local population demographics. SSI successfully tendered for the program and was one of the largest providers of

ALNSW, delivering the program in highly culturally diverse locations across Western and South-Western Sydney. SSI worked to ensure that the Linkers we employed matched the demographics of where were delivering the program in terms of languages, cultures, ethnicities from local communities. A three-year statewide evaluation found that ALNSW was effective at reaching and responding to people with disability, mainly through being a soft-entry point for people who rarely engaged with services.⁵³

SSI commissioned an independent evaluation to benchmark our delivery of Ability Links against the statewide outcomes. It found that the profile of SSI's ALNSW participants was similar to the NSW statewide profile in terms of age, gender and type of disability.⁵⁴ The major difference was in SSI's reach and engagement with people with disability from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.⁵⁵ Sixty-four per cent of SSI's participants' outcomes were among culturally diverse people with disability, compared to less than 17 per cent for all other providers of ALNSW and SSI achieved strong results for culturally and linguistically diverse participants across all program outcome types.⁵⁶

SSI's strong performance was attributed in the evaluation to SSI Linkers being bilingual and having strong local connections which meant they were better-placed to reach culturally diverse participants and better-placed to work with multicultural participants on their aspirations and goals.⁵⁷

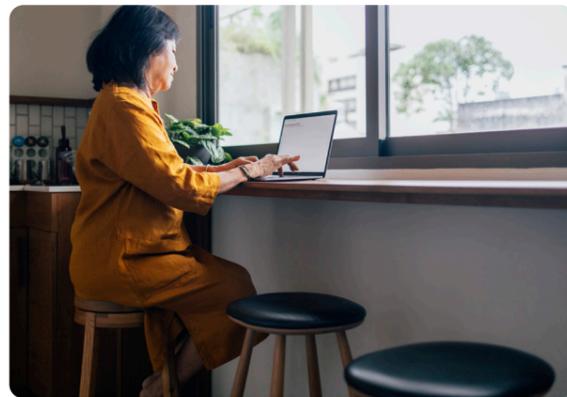
Reach and engagement by cultural background



Source: ARTD Consultants. (2018) Summary of Evaluation of SSI's Ability Links NSW

Digital inclusion is essential for everyone to access and benefit from the digital transformation of services

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to digital modes of service delivery and highlighted the critical importance of digital access and literacy in all aspects of people's lives. Evidence indicates that newcomers are adept at using digital technology to maintain social and family ties which was invaluable during the pandemic at a time of travel and border restrictions.⁵⁸ However, research conducted by SSI and Western Sydney University with newly arrived refugees found that difficulties in using technology is one of the most common barriers, alongside language difficulties, to accessing government mainstream services.⁵⁹ The research also revealed a gap in skills and confidence in using digital technology, particularly for refugee women and older age groups.⁶⁰ This highlights the need to ensure that the digital transformation of government and other services is anchored by policy that promotes equitable access by newcomers. This requires investment in building diverse communities' digital literacy and ensuring that the design of digital gateways used to deliver government services are more intuitive — i.e., require simple digital skills — and minimise language barriers (i.e., in-language, plain English).⁶¹



Poor and inconsistent data on newcomers' service use and outcomes masks inequalities

Poorly defined and poorly collected data on cultural diversity in Australia makes it hard to ascertain differences in access and outcomes among diverse communities. More consistent and complete data enables identifying and planning for systemic changes that would address inequalities. The National Disability Insurance Agency's (NDIA) regular reporting is an example of monitoring and accountability that identified inequality for culturally diverse participants with disability. Ten years after establishment, the uptake of the NDIS by people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds continues to be much lower than the rest of the Australian population, despite having similar rates of profound or severe disability.⁶² The NDIA projected that by 2019, around 20% of participants would be from culturally diverse backgrounds⁶³ however, in September 2025, the proportion of culturally diverse participants receiving an NDIS plan was only 8.7 per cent⁶⁴. In response the NDIS co-designed a new comprehensive CALD Strategy and Action Plan 2024-28, with a series of actions to improve access to, and outcomes for, cultural and linguistically diverse participants.⁶⁵

Governments who have stewardship over publicly-funded services should improve the consistency of data collection on newcomers' access to mainstream services to drive improvements in planning, design and delivery of mainstream services and specialised services. This should include disaggregated data for different population groups (e.g., by language background, gender, LGBTQIA+) and jurisdictions (e.g., national, State/Territory and LGAs) to inform investment in specialised services, where needed. While data issues were canvassed in the Multicultural Framework Review⁶⁶ and articulated in depth by peak bodies such as FECCA⁶⁷, it is still unclear what actions will be taken to address these ongoing issues. Specialised multicultural services can play a role in advising how data collection can be improved, give their extensive experience in service delivery to multicultural communities.

More consistent and complete data enables identifying and planning for systemic changes that would address inequalities.

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