

**Mount Alexander
Refugee Welcome Zone Action Plan
2018-2021**

Introduction

In 2014, Mount Alexander Shire Council (Council) endorsed a Statement of Commitment to being a Refugee Welcome Zone.

Refugee Welcome Zones are an initiative of the Refugee Council of Australia. They are defined as:

'A Local Government area that has made a commitment in spirit to welcoming refugees into the community, upholding the human rights of refugees, demonstrating compassion for refugees, and enhancing cultural and religious diversity in the community'.

The Mount Alexander Refugee Welcome Zone Action Plan 2018-2021 has been developed in partnership with Mount Alexander Shire Council, Rural Australians for Refugees – Castlemaine and Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services.

The purpose of the Action Plan is to guide the provision of a welcoming environment for refugees that may choose to settle in Mount Alexander Shire. It also identifies ways to ensure the necessary supports and services are established in preparation for new arrivals to the shire.

The Action Plan identifies 17 actions that support Council's commitment to being a welcoming Shire for refugees. Actions will be delivered in partnerships by Council, relevant service providers and local community groups.

Development of the Refugee Welcome Zone Action Plan 2018-2021

In August 2016, a forum was held in partnership with Council, Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services (LCMS) and Rural Australians for Refugees - Castlemaine (RAR).

The *Mount Alexander Refugee Forum – 'Are we Ready?'* was attended by over 25 representatives from local service providers in the employment, housing, health and education sectors, refugee support groups and community members. It provided the opportunity to map what services are available and/or required to support refugees both locally and regionally as a Refugee Welcome Zone. It also explored how local service providers and community organisations can collaborate to provide the necessary supports and services.

The outcomes of the forum provided the framework for the Action Plan.

In December 2016, Council facilitated a consultation session with local asylum seekers, representatives from LCMS and RAR. This provided a process to identify the specific needs and challenges faced by asylum seekers in a local context, and to ensure they were captured in the Action Plan.

In June 2017, during Refugee Week, a second forum was held to further develop the draft actions of the action plan. The forum was attended by over 20 representatives from local service providers, refugee support groups and community members.

The outcomes of the forum were further refined and developed over a number of meetings by a working group formed by representatives from Council, LCMS and RAR.

National & State Context

Policy regarding the intake and settlement of refugees and asylum seekers in Australia falls under the Federal Department of Immigration and Border Protection. It is a complex, dynamic and politically sensitive area of policy, and subject to frequent changes both in response to political direction and global events.

There are a range of visas that are issued to people seeking asylum in Australia and the conditions of these visas vary widely in terms of access to services such as employment, housing, English Language tuition and settlement support.

In December 2014, the Australian Government announced a new visa subclass, the Safe Haven Enterprise Visa (SHEV). These visas are granted to eligible asylum seekers living in Australia who arrived before July 2013 and have fulfilled all necessary health, identity and security checks. There are 9,605 people eligible for a SHEV living in Victoria, most of whom are in metropolitan Melbourne.

SHEVs are for five years and SHEV holders must study or work in a regional area for three and a half of those five years to be eligible to apply for other substantive visas. This however does not include the Permanent Protection Visa (the main type of visa for asylum seekers fleeing persecution). Study includes primary and secondary education and applies to any of the family members on the visa application.

In September 2015 the Australian Government announced that it would offer permanent protection to 12,000 Syrian refugees, under the Humanitarian Settlement Program. Since this announcement, approximately 8,000 people have arrived in Australia under this program between July 2015 and December 2016. Locations across Australia have been identified for the potential settlement of refugees and include a mix of metropolitan and regional locations, in all states and territories with established settlement services to support the new arrivals.

In March 2018, the Australian Standard for Welcoming Cities was launched by the Welcoming Cities Network - a network of cities, shires, towns and municipalities across the world that are committed to welcoming and inclusion.

The Standard establishes a framework for local councils to;

- Benchmark their cultural diversity and inclusion policies and practices across the organisation;
- Identify where and how further efforts could be directed; and
- Assess progress over time.

The Standard applies to all local councils across Australia. The extent to which local councils measure their activity against the Standard will be based on their understanding of their community needs.

Local Context

In June 2015, the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) wrote to all rural and regional councils to request confirmation of their preference to opt in to being an eligible postcode for settlement under the Safe Haven Enterprise Visa Program.

It has been identified that the most likely group of asylum seekers/refugees settling in the regional areas would be those who are on Bridging Visas or Temporary Protection Visas, and are currently living in metropolitan areas. As such, they are likely to have already been through some adjustment to living in Australia, and may not need such intensive support as newly arrived refugees.

Although Mount Alexander Shire Council has not yet nominated postcodes under the SHEV Program, refugees and asylum seekers may choose to move to the Shire after their initial settlement period for employment or community connection reasons, or choose to seek employment in the Shire but live elsewhere.

For example, City of Greater Bendigo has nominated postcodes under the SHEV Program, and has already received a small number of SHEV holders along with existing community members moving on to SHEV visas. LCMS report that some of these SHEV holders are currently employed in Mount Alexander Shire, however, as the Shire has not nominated any postcode, the work undertaken by SHEV holders is not eligible to be counted as part of the SHEV requirements.

Action Plan

The Mount Alexander Refugee Welcome Zone Action Plan 2018-2021 compliments and strengthens the support Council is currently providing to local refugees, asylum seekers and service providers. This includes:

- A partnership with LCMS for the provision of an outreach service in Castlemaine through in-kind support of a venue, promotion and technical support.
- Financial support through the Community Grants Program for community events and activities that support and celebrate refugees.
- Participation in Regional RAR meetings.
- Membership on the Central Victorian Refugee Support Network.
- A partnership agreement with RAR Castlemaine for in-kind support of a venue for meetings.
- In-kind support for Refugee Week events and activities.

The Action Plan has been informed by:

- The outcomes of the 2016 and 2017 forums attended by community members and service providers
- Consultation with local refugees and asylum seekers
- Consultation with key stakeholders
- Case studies and desktop research

It presents a collaborative approach to connecting refugees to employment, education, housing and health services, with the aim of developing a community that is welcoming, supportive and socially inclusive. The actions are grouped into four key themes:

- Partnerships
- Policy
- Information and Resources
- Activities

As the number of asylum seekers and refugees settled in Mount Alexander Shire are currently considered low (in comparison to other regional areas), only some of the actions can commence immediately and others are only relevant if a significant number settled in the area. As such, each action has been nominated as either a High, Medium or Low priority in which to be implemented.

The plan outlines the key stakeholders responsible for delivering each action, which agency will take the lead, and what role Council will undertake in delivering each action. These roles have been defined as either;

Lead: Council adopts full responsibility for delivery of the action, due to the action being either internal or at a policy level.

Facilitate: Undertaking a process involving other stakeholders, which will be driven by Council.

Support: Add value to activities that are initiated by, and the responsibility of, other agencies. This may include promotion, in-kind support or providing advice.

Advocate: Using Councils standing in the community to exert influence on external agencies to undertake an action.

Theme 1: Partnerships					
Ref	Action	Key stakeholders	Lead agency	Councils role	Priority level
1.1	Establish a local settlement committee to build employment and support networks that will support Council's commitment to being a Welcome to Refugee Zone.	RAR LCMS Council	RAR	Support	Medium
1.2	Participate in networks with other Councils to address refugees and asylum seekers issues.	Council	Council	Support	High
1.3	Identify training opportunities to build capacity of service providers (incl. employment agencies, real estate agencies) and volunteers engaging with refugees, to ensure culturally sensitive and appropriate services.	LCMS RAR Australian Red Cross Council	LCMS	Facilitate	Medium
1.4	Raise awareness of refugee and asylum seeker issues with the local community.	LCMS RAR Australian Red Cross Council	RAR	Support	Medium
1.5	Develop a structured volunteer support network that builds capacity and provides ongoing support to volunteers working with asylum seekers and refugees.	RAR Australian Red Cross Council	RAR	Support	Medium

Theme 2: Policy					
Ref	Action	Key stakeholders	Lead agency	Councils role	Priority level
2.1	Continue the commitment to, and promotion of, being a Refugee Welcome Zone.	Council RAR LCMS	Council	Lead	High
2.2	Nominate postcodes within Mount Alexander Shire for inclusion in the SHEV scheme.	Council	Council	Lead	High
2.3	Align future cultural diversity and inclusion policies and practices across the organisation with Councils commitment to being a Refugee Welcome Zone and current State and Federal Government directions.	Council RAR LCMS	Council	Lead	Medium

Theme 3: Information and resources					
Ref	Action	Key stakeholders	Lead agency	Councils role	Priority level
3.1	Include a category for refugee services in the Mount Alexander online community directory.	Council	Council	Lead	Low
3.2	Develop an online group to support volunteers working with refugees and asylum seekers.	RAR Council	RAR	Support	Low
3.3	Encourage local service providers to register with the National Translating and Interpreting Service (TIS) and train staff in its use, and explore translating key documents into predominant community used languages	Council LCMS	Council	Facilitate Advocate	High
3.4	Identify external funding opportunities to support refugee services and programs.	Council RAR LCMS	LCMS	Support	Medium

Theme 4: Activities					
Ref	Action	Key stakeholders	Lead agency	Councils role	Priority level
4.1	Establish a Refugee Welcome Zone Working Group to monitor and evaluate the implementation of the Refugee Welcome Zone Action Plan.	Council RAR LCMS	Council	Facilitate	High
4.2	Develop and deliver events that will initiate community discussions of the life experiences of refugees and asylum seekers (incl. Refugee Week).	RAR Australian Red Cross LCMS	RAR	Support	Medium
4.3	Develop a stronger media presence to raise awareness and promote a positive profile of refugees and asylum seekers in our community.	Council RAR LCMS	RAR	Support	Medium
4.5	Identify and promote opportunities for the voices of local refugees and asylum seekers to be heard.	Council RAR LCMS	LCMS	Support	Medium
4.6	Develop and support the establishment of support networks and services for refugees and asylum seekers who have moved to the area.	Council RAR LCMS	LCMS RAR	Support	High

Implementation

The implementation of the Mount Alexander Refugee Welcome Zone Action Plan 2018-2021 will be supported by the following;

- The establishment of a Refugee Welcome Zone Working Group with representation from relevant stakeholder groups (i.e. Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services, Rural Australians for Refugees- Castlemaine, Australian Red Cross and Mount Alexander Shire Council).
- Regular meetings with the Working Group to monitor and evaluate the implementation of actions, reporting on the identified outcomes and review timelines as required.
- An annual review process conducted to allow for actions to remain responsive to new and emerging priorities as needed.

At the completion of the Action Plan a final evaluation report will be developed to include the learnings and outcomes which may inform the development of future policies and plans.

Appendix A – Please note information contained in these tables have been taken directly from the notes of the Forum held in 2016 therefore there may be some grammatical inaccuracies.

Outcomes from the Mount Alexander Refugee Forum – Are We Ready?

EDUCATION	
Existing services/providers	Service provided
Schools (16 primary and 1 secondary)	Education to 5-18year olds
Kindergartens	Early learning 3-5 years
Castlemaine Continuing Education	Basic adult education in a range of areas Family learning and engagement activities
Neighbourhood Centres/ Community House	Runs community education and support services
Mentoring programs	
Library	
U3A	Offers a range of courses for older residents
Previous East Africa friendship group	There was a group that supported the Sudanese refugees that settled in Castlemaine previously. Offered language support, driving lessons, form filling etc. A good source of knowledge about how to run a support group.
Bendigo Kangan Institute	Could provide English Language Classes in Castlemaine if sufficient enrolments (18-20)
Bendigo Health	Offers homework clubs at 2 primary schools
Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services	Offers a Mums and Bubs English class
Future Directions	Key Stakeholders
Engagement with schools	Local Primary and Secondary Schools – through Mount Alexander Principals network (primary only)
Programs to integrate refugees into wider community	Rural Australian for Refugees Community groups
Information sessions for refugees on arrival into Mount Alexander Shire (i.e. bushfire, snakes)	Council Local emergency services
Education to mitigate against negative attitudes to refugees in community – use media to illustrate the contribution refugees make (e.g. video about Nhill, video about Syrian refugees)	Rural Australians for Refugees LCMS Council
Playscape tool	Rural Australians for Refugees
List of employment agencies and apprenticeships	Employment Agencies TAFE Continuing Education
Friends and mentor groups	Groups that worked with Sudanese community Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services Rural Australians for Refugees
Home tutoring	
Community Vegie Gardens on spare land	

HEALTH	
Existing services/ providers	Service provided
General Practitioners	General health services
Castlemaine Health	Medical, surgical, midwifery, allied health, rehabilitation, aged care
Castlemaine District Community Health	Primary Health Care and community services, including counselling, youth services, family services, mental health.
Alternative Therapists	Range of private alternative therapists available including homeopathy, acupuncture, Chinese medicine, naturopathy, osteopathy
Fitness groups/Walking groups	Contribute to physical and mental wellbeing
Volunteer groups	Social interaction, mental wellbeing
Castlemaine Community House/ Maldon Neighbourhood Centre/Castlemaine Continuing Education	Community engagement/development programs. Community lunches.
Bendigo Community Health	(Federally) Funded service provider of refugee services to Loddon region: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Includes culturally sensitive counselling service - Refugee health nurse - Settlement services
Future Directions	Key Stakeholders
Capacity Building for service providers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Identifying refugee issues, eg trauma, grief, FGM - Responding appropriately – culturally respectful - Co-ordination of services 	Castlemaine Health Castlemaine District Community Health Maldon Hospital Local GP's
Working with GP's re specific support (ie: translators, female doctors)	Local GP's Translating services
Develop a register of available services including mainstream and complimentary medicines	All local health providers
Celebration events of refugees – welcome, social inclusion	
Utilise community spaces for capacity building activities services	Continuing Education BRIT Council Churches

EMPLOYMENT	
Existing services/ providers	Service provided
Employment Agencies	Linking jobseekers with employment
Volunteer placements/work placements	
Centrelink	Job seeking support, work for the dole
Large volunteer networks	
Large employers	Don/KR (already employing refugee visa holders) Castlemaine Health Prisons x 3 Council
Seasonal Labour – fruit picking/vineyards	
Farm land available for refugee enterprises	
Future Directions	Key Stakeholders
Information sharing networks between LCMS, local business, prospective workers and government services	Loddon Campaspe Multicultural Services Don KR Orchardists
Develop local community networks to support existing services offered by LCMS	LCMS Community Groups
Identify services that can assist in addressing barriers to employment: Language, Health, Visa status, skills/qualifications, discrimination, limited opportunity, homelessness	TAFE Health Providers Continuing Education Community House Housing organisations

HOUSING	
Existing services/ providers	Service provided
Real Estate Agents	Have been helpful in the past in finding housing for refugees
Church groups	Own housing stock
Castlemaine Housing Service (formerly CADARG)	For those experiencing or at risk of homelessness; assist with public housing applications, bond applications, provide emergency accommodation, transitional housing options, and financial assistance and advocacy to enter the private rental market and also to sustain current tenancies.
Private rentals	Castlemaine currently experiencing an excess of rental properties
Social Housing	Available through Department of Health and Human Services
Housing	
Future Directions	Key Stakeholders
Refugee Zoned Housing	
Council to develop understanding of current rental market	Castlemaine Housing Service
Council to understand what leverage it has to get affordable land from large developments	Mount Alexander Shire Council Property Developers
Alternative housing solutions. - eg: tiny houses, caravans parked in driveways, house sharing	
Understand existing services, eg rent assistance, access to public housing, bond loans, Community House No Interest Loans	Department of Health and Human Services Centrelink