



# Multilingual Australia's Submission to the Multicultural Framework Review (draft)

March 2023

Multilingual Australia (MA) is pleased to submit our submission to The Department of Home Affairs' Multicultural Framework Review (The Review).

MA is a not-for-profit organisation that has been dedicated to supporting families from diverse linguistic backgrounds since 2002. Formerly known as Bilingual Families Perth, our mission is to identify and address the needs of children, parents, and grandparents from non-English speaking backgrounds who want to maintain and use languages other than English at home.

Our vision is a language-friendly Australia. We help people connect, learn, and maintain their languages by helping families overcome barriers that may prevent them from using their native languages, providing opportunities and resources and fostering strong relationships. MA advocates also for multilingualism in the broader community by raising awareness about the benefits of multilingualism and linguistic diversity. A more inclusive and diverse Australia is one that values and celebrates linguistic diversity.

## Addressing The Review's Terms of Reference

This submission is based on findings from a MA community roundtable held in March 2023 in Western Australia (WA) with multilingual community members, supporting existing knowledge gained since our founding in 2002. The insights from the roundtable highlighted the importance of maintaining and promoting linguistic diversity across Australia. The roundtable participants informed us that language is a crucial part of their identity and cultural heritage, and its preservation is important for maintaining connections to their sense of identity within both their cultural and broader community.

Given the linguistic diversity of Australia's multicultural communities, MA recommends the inclusion of a multilingual approach to The Review which goes beyond conversations around "translation and interpreting services" (or TIS). We would like to see more consultations with individuals and organisations who understand the linguistic diversity of Australia's multicultural communities and the potential barriers that language can present in accessing and participating in Australian society.

MA's continuous engagement with multilingual families finds that a failure to consider both existing and potential barriers to supporting multilingual families results in a lack of access and participation of multicultural families in Australian society. We are concerned that The Review's final recommendations identify existing and potential systemic barriers preventing people from multilingual communities from participating in Australian society.





This may also limit the effectiveness of future federal diversity, equity and inclusion strategies that effect all multicultural communities regardless if they are multilingual or not.

In summary, MA's submission urges the Government to consider the linguistic diversity of Australia's multicultural communities and to include a multilingual approach in the review to ensure that any new plan or recommendations address the needs and experiences of individuals and communities from diverse linguistic backgrounds. MA often uses the term, "putting 'L' back into CaLD".

### **Linking languages policies to social cohesion**

Australia's social cohesion and multicultural policies need a much stronger focus on multilingualism to be effective. Over 400 languages are spoken in Australian homes every day. After English, the most common languages spoken at home are Mandarin, Arabic, Vietnamese, Cantonese, Punjabi, Greek, Italian, Tagalog, Hindi and Spanish. Yet despite the clear role that languages play in the lives of many migrants and their children, Australia has never implemented a National Policy on Languages.

We believe the "L" in CaLD – culturally and linguistically diverse – has been under-resourced for many years. It is the view of MA that weaker engagement with multilingual communities leads to weaker engagement with all multicultural communities during crisis management such as health communication during the Covid19 pandemic, Home Affairs' community education for 'foreign interference' and in managing national labour shortages which affect our economy.

It is crucial that Australia shifts towards a society where languages are seen as assets, and migrants feel valued for speaking other languages. The current "speak English only" mentality, biases against accents and linguistic discrimination are major obstacles that must be addressed and overcome.

### **Policy Goals: Putting 'L' back into CaLD**

Despite Australia's linguistic diversity being a significant aspect of our multicultural society, the draft terms of reference for The Review lack explicit mention of multilingualism. Its terms of reference focus on advancing a multicultural Australia, supporting a cohesive and inclusive multicultural society, and meeting the current and future needs of multicultural Australia in one language only - English. Indeed, a sole focus on English language skills are linked to concepts of 'Australian Values', which complicates messages of cultural, ethnic, religious inclusion.

Further, the terms of reference do not explicitly consider language as a critical component of multiculturalism and how institutional arrangements and policy settings can support and preserve linguistic diversity.





Given that over 5.5 million Australians speak a language other than English at home, the lack of explicit mention of multilingualism in terms of reference may hinder the effectiveness of the review's recommendations in addressing the needs and experiences of individuals and communities from diverse linguistic backgrounds. Additionally, the terms of reference do not mention consultation with individuals or organisations who may require or provide services in languages other than English, indicating a potential lack of consideration for the linguistic barriers that multicultural communities may face in accessing government services and programs.

For The Review to develop a multilingual approach to policy and community engagement in Australia, it must include language preservation and promotion. Community consultations shaped by individuals or organisations who may require - or currently provide - services in languages other than English, would support linguistic diversity in Australia.

## Recommendations

Based on the roundtable discussion and the issues with the current draft terms of reference, Multilingual Australia recommends that the Department of Home Affairs consider the following recommendations to ensure a multilingual approach is included in the Review. By incorporating these recommendations, the Review can ensure that its recommendations are effective and consider the importance of linguistic diversity in Australia's multicultural society.

**Recommendation 1:** MA recommends including consultation with individuals and organisations who provide services to support families, individuals and communities to maintain their heritage languages at home. This will present opportunities to identify and remove 'accent bias' and 'language racism' for language-friendly legislative and regulatory frameworks to better support multilingual - and therefore multicultural - Australia.

**Recommendation 2:** Broaden the definition of multicultural: The draft currently uses a narrow definition of multiculturalism, focusing primarily on cultural aspects. It is recommended that the definition be expanded to encompass language and religion as integral parts of multiculturalism. This would ensure a more accurate and holistic representation of Australia's diverse population.





**Recommendation 3:** Address language diversity: The draft should acknowledge the importance of language diversity in Australia, including the 429 different languages, 183 indigenous languages, and 16,000 AUSLAN users. Additionally, the data collection framework should be improved to better capture the 22% of Australians speaking more than one language. It is a gross underestimate as the current data collection framework only asks about “Languages other than English spoken at home”, compare to countries like Germany that uses other matrix, making their bilingual population over 67%.

**Recommendation 4:** Emphasize the social and economic benefits of multilingualism: The draft should highlight the benefits of a multilingual society, such as enhanced intercultural communication, increased economic opportunities, and better utilisation of the bilingual workforce. Acknowledging these benefits will further underscore the need for a more inclusive multicultural framework. The draft mentions the Scanlon Foundation Research Institute’s 2022 Mapping Social Cohesion Report which highlighted Australians support for multiculturalism however it failed to acknowledge the ongoing battle of maintaining a heritage languages in Australia.

**Recommendation 5:** Address issues faced by CaLD communities during COVID-19: The draft should explicitly mention the challenges faced by culturally and linguistically diverse communities during the pandemic, particularly regarding intercultural communication. It should also address the ongoing issues related to underutilisation of language services and the need for creating language-friendly environments that encourage the use of these services.

**Recommendation 6:** Include multilingual representation in the review panel and reference group: To ensure that diverse perspectives are considered, it is recommended to include representatives from **Multilingual Australia** in the review panel and reference group. This will promote a more inclusive and well-informed review process.





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MA thank you for the opportunity to make this submission to The Multicultural Framework Review (Draft) 2023. If you have any questions please contact Multilingual Australia Chairperson Henrietta Podgorska on mobile: 0421028190 or email: [chair@multilingualaustalia.org.au](mailto:chair@multilingualaustalia.org.au)

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## Reference:

2022 Mapping Social Cohesion Report: retrieved from:

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